

**Paul Sargent**

San Diego State University, U.S.A.

## Reluctant Role Models: Men Teachers and the Reproduction of Hegemonic Masculinity

**Abstract** In-depth interviews with men teachers and other key personnel in early childhood education (ECE) revealed that the men are attempting to perform a type of subordinate masculinity that could challenge traditional gender relations. However, their attempts are thwarted by the gender regime embedded in the occupational structure, particularly the demand that they perform as “male role models” for the boys in their classes. This means that they are prescribed to perform in stereotypical ways and to purposely model traditional masculinity to boys, thereby inculcating hegemonic norms of masculinity.

**Keywords** Masculinities; Men Teachers; Male Role Models; Boys

**Paul Sargent**, Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of the Center for Qualitative Research at San Diego State University. His research typically focused on the social construction of gender, particularly the construction of masculinities. The author of *Real Men or Real Teachers: Contradictions in the Lives of Men Elementary School Teachers*; “Sociology in the Academy: A Study in Contradictions?” (with Charles F. Hohm), *The American Sociologist*; “The Gendering of Men in Early Childhood Education,” *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*; “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Men Caught in the Gender Bind of Early Childhood Education,” *Journal of Men’s Studies*; and “A Qualitative Comparison of the Effectiveness of Private and Public Refugee Resettlement Programs: The San Diego Case” (with Charles F. Hohm and Robert J. Moser), *Sociological Perspectives*. His research projects included a video recorded ethnography of a children’s center, to determine if there were differences between the ways adults relate to girls and the ways they relate to boys, and a content analysis of *CSI*, a television crime series, to evaluate the program’s representation of male and female victims.

### In Memoriam

We would like to express our deep sorrow over the death of Dr. Paul W. Sargent, Associate Professor of the Sociology Department at San Diego State University, who passed away on February 20, 2013. He will be remembered for his academic accomplishments and commitment to research and teaching.

It is a great honor for us to publish his article in *Qualitative Sociology Review*.

Editorial Board  
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The question of what constitutes “men’s work” and “women’s work” has been the focus of much feminist scholarship over the last thirty years (see, for example, Bradley 1989; Williams 1989; Reskin and Roos 1990; Dunn 1996). At the forefront of this body of work, and the central concern of most scholars, is the set of difficulties faced by women who cross over, or attempt to cross over, into occupational areas traditionally seen as men’s work. This focus is clearly justified considering the fact that most extrinsic rewards, such as high pay, advancement, and prestige, are associated with men’s work, thus contributing to women’s lower social status relative to men.

To a lesser degree, there has been some interest in the lives of men who cross over into women’s work. The literature on this issue is a mixed bag. There are those who argue that men who enter occupations such as nursing, social work, and early childhood education do so assuming, *a priori*, that they will succeed in terms of priority hiring, faster promotions, closer relations with administrators, and freedom from any forms of harassment (Williams 1992). Others contend that men may not intentionally seek these perquisites, but simply by virtue of their status as men, will receive them anyway (Uhlmann and Cohen 2005). Both arguments share the notion that even in women’s work, men can use their access to patriarchal power to their advantage, including the potential to masculinize the workplace to their advantage.

There also exists a small, but growing, body of evidence suggesting that men who enter occupations such as early childhood education (ECE) and nursing meet with the same kinds of resistance and disfavor that women encounter when trying

to access traditionally male occupations and must find ways to maneuver through the gender environment (Sargent 2005). This qualitative study adds to the latter body of work by presenting the results of in-depth interviews with several groups of personnel in ECE.

### A Typology of Masculinities

Men and women are not homogeneous in the ways they present or perform (*do*) their gender. Instead, their performance is affected by the demands of the larger gender order and by the gender context of their immediate social landscape (Maccoby 1998; Messner 2000).

“Doing gender” has become a central analytic concept for feminists since it was widely presented to the scholarly community by West and Zimmerman in their 1987 article by the same name. They borrowed the ethnomethodological basis of the concept from Garfinkel (1967), but then recontextualized it to make it more applicable to a wider set of constructionist approaches to gender. In their narrative, they provide an alternative to the perspectives that framed gender as either a “role,” an essential condition, or a psychological given. Instead, we see that gender is an accomplishment and each of us is accountable to others for properly demonstrating our masculinity or femininity by wearing the correct vestments, behaving appropriately, and engaging in gender-affirming activities, including having an appropriate occupation.

There is not a single set of accomplishments associated with being masculine, but several. Connell (1995) identified four ways in which men engage

with existing gender relations within a social milieu. He termed these four performances of masculinity hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinate. Hegemonic masculine practices are those that serve to normalize and naturalize men's dominance and women's subordination. Complicit masculinities are those that do not embody hegemonic processes *per se* but benefit from the ways in which hegemonic masculinities construct the gender order and local gender regimes in hierarchical fashion. Marginalized masculinities represent the adaptation of masculinities to such issues as race and class. Finally, subordinate masculinities are those behaviors and presentations of self that could threaten the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity. Gay men, effeminate men, and men who eschew competition or traditional definitions of success are examples frequently cited. To this list we can add men who care for children (Donaldson 1993; Sargent 2001). These men are vulnerable to being abused and ridiculed by others, both men and women.

Underlying and supporting the maintenance of gender hierarchies is the enforcement of "rules of compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980). This means that homophobic ideas and practices provide the ideological foundation for the constant policing of heterosexual and homosexual masculinities (Connell 1992; Epstein 1997). Homophobia acts to normalize dominant gender ideologies and performances by creating fears of being seen as "different." Boys and men who reject or challenge hegemonic forms of masculine behaviors often live under a constant threat of emotional or physical violence (Pascoe 2007). In this study of men's lives in ECE, an important question that can be asked of the data is: What forms of masculinity are men in

ECE doing and is their doing of gender a function of the men's desires or of cultural and institutional imperatives?

### Method

My goal from the outset of this study was to speak with men teachers and caregivers about the very personal business of being men in a predominantly women's occupation (Oakley 1981). I wanted to pose questions to men that are more often posed to women regarding their experiences entering and remaining in a gender-atypical work environment (Cohen 1991). In addition, I wanted to ask other significant actors in ECE to tell me about their experiences with men working in the field. Weiss called this forming a "panel of knowledgeable informants" (1995:73) and the narratives of these other participants were used to support the men's accounts, thus adding credibility to the study.

### Participants

Thus far, I have interviewed 54 men working in ECE, 20 women who work in ECE alongside men, 10 elementary school principals, 6 pre-school or childcare center directors, and 8 faculty members in colleges of education. All participants were located in the western United States in California, Oregon, or Washington. Approximately one-half of the schools/centers are located in urban areas; the remainder, are equally distributed between suburban and rural locations.

### Procedure

The data were gathered through in-depth interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded and

transcribed. I began with open-ended questions such as:

- "Tell me about getting into teaching." [men teachers]
- "Tell me about your experiences as the only man at your school." [men teachers]
- "Can you relate to me some of the things you have heard regarding the employment of men in early childhood education?" [all participants]
- "Describe for me some of the experiences you have had with men in your classroom (or program)." [faculty in colleges of education, principals and supervisors, women teachers]

Subsequent questions flowed from my list of prompts designed to elicit rich detail. Other questions concerned problems the participants had encountered in the course of their own work lives (Harper 1994). By asking the participants to "teach" me about their lives, I was making use of their normal communicative style (Briggs 1986).

The analysis of the interview data was an ongoing process and coding often took place during the transcription process itself. For the most part, codes were generated inductively, but some were taken from the existing literature (e.g., Hansot and Tyack 1988; Bradley 1989; 1993; Allan 1993; 1994), what Miles and Huberman would call a "start list" (1984:37). The first step was "open coding" (Strauss and Corbin 1990), which basically consists of combing the transcripts and noting segments of participants' narratives that seem in any way relevant to the research question at the heart of the project. As it became clear that some of the themes were beginning to be repeated, I proceeded to the next

step in coding, focused coding, which consists of imposing the emerging themes back on the data in a more deductive style. That is, looking for further evidence of the existence of data that can be subsumed under each major code.

In general, the analysis followed the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) with some of the particular techniques coming from Spradley's (1979) Developmental Research Sequence, which made the process lend itself well to computer-aided analysis. All of the major themes I present in this research were confirmed to be in customary use in terms of being frequent, widespread, and collective (Becker and Geer 1960).

### Results and Discussion

The analysis of the participants' narratives yielded several persistent themes. First, ECE is indeed a gendered occupation. All social actors within the milieu are expected to behave in gender-typical ways and gender deviance is met with disapproval and negative sanctions (Leidner 1991; Ackler 1992). Second, there is a division of labor that assigns men tasks such as lifting, hauling, repairing, and discipline (Williams 1992) while, preventing them from close, nurturing interaction with children (Sargent 2001). Third, men must operate under conditions of extreme scrutiny and suspicion. There is a prevailing fear that the men might be gay or pedophiles and these two concepts are erroneously conflated. In addition, men are generally seen as being less than competent in areas concerning the care of children. These themes are treated in detail elsewhere (Allan 1994; King 1995; Sargent 2001) and will be only tangentially cited here when appropriate.

The theme that I detail in this paper is one that emerged during the initial analysis of the interview data, but has taken on fresh meaning recently because of a public debate that has erupted regarding the status of boys in school. In 2001, Christina Hoff Sommers published her controversial work, *The War Against Boys*, in which she boldly refuted prevailing claims that boys were the advantaged sex in the classroom. Her contention was that the classroom environment had become anti-boy through the imposition of theories and practices designed to assist girls in gaining ground. In the ensuing years, the battle over which sex is more likely to thrive in school has gathered participants from all around the ideological compass.

There are those who argue that boys are doing just fine relative to girls. AAUW recently published another in a series of working papers focusing on gender equity in education. In their latest publication (2008), the authors argued that any performance gaps seen in schools are more likely associated with race and class than with sex category. They also argue that on most indicators of educational success (graduation rates, test scores, etc.) girls and boys are fairly equal when demographic categories are taken into consideration and that both girls and boys continue to show improvement on the majority of indicators. Kimmel (2006) asserts that many of those who side with the “boys are in crisis” argument are actually using this position to further an all-out attack on feminism and feminists.

Some of those who contend that boys really are struggling in school argue that the routines of school are feminized to the point that boys’ so-

cialization prevents them from fitting and thriving (Pollack 1998). Others contend that boys’ brains are hardwired in ways that hinder their learning in any but highly structured, competitive environments (Gurian 2009). Whether boys’ struggles are considered a function of culture or biology, the same solution is typically suggested: hire more men. Putting men into the classroom is not a new idea, of course. For over a hundred years, there has been a call for more men teachers, primarily to control the behavior of boys and the current debate simply adds one more dimension.

From the interviews I conducted, it becomes clear that it is not simply a cry for more men that is being sounded, but, more specifically, a call for men who will serve as male role models for the boys in their classes – an expectation that is fraught with contradictions for both the men teachers and the children in their care, particularly the boys.

In interviews with men teachers, and other significant actors in ECE, the topic of male role model (MRM) arose in every interview. It were the participants themselves, never I, who brought the term into the conversation. From reading popular and scholarly literature, I had anticipated that the concept of role model would arise, but was surprised at the complex and contentious nature of the concept. There is not a single image of the MRM, but several, and these are often ambiguous and contradictory. These contradictory meanings, and the expectations they represent, create for the men a classic double bind: “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (Frye 1983:2).

### Men as “Male Role Models”

The themes associated with the concept of MRM that emerged from the interviews can be organized into three categories. First, participants talked about being aware of a generalized discourse describing a desire for hiring more men. Second, a few participants addressed, albeit after prompting, the possible benefits for girls that might arise from men teachers’ presence. Third, the majority of respondents suggested that men teachers affect the lives of boys and this happens in two ways. Indirectly, it is assumed that men will inject more discipline into the classroom, exert more control over the boys, and thus create a less chaotic learning environment. A more direct contribution arising from the presence of men is the provision of a model of masculinity that can be, ostensibly, emulated by the boys.

### Hiring Men

All of the participants in my study were aware of the lack of men in ECE and made it very clear that they assumed this to be the reason behind my research. One of the first points most of them wanted to establish was that they considered a male presence to be, in some way, of value to the schools and to the children. However, only a few had any specific ideas regarding the actual benefits that might arise from men working in the occupation. As I stated earlier, my opening question was very general and of the form that Spradley (1979) would classify as a “grand tour question.” This kind of question allows the respondents great freedom in constructing their initial responses and very quickly establishes for the interviewer some insights into the context that the participants will

likely be constructing and employing as they respond to further probes.

There seemed to be general agreement that hiring men was a good idea, but the reasons given to support this were vague at best. Sometimes the reason for hiring men was presented as a concept that “everyone knows is true” without any supporting commentary.

An interesting pattern that recurs throughout the interviews is the frequency with which participants talked about the fact that they have (or should have) *one* man among their staff. The following examples support this. [In every case, the emphasis is mine.]

Katherine (elementary school principal): Most schools want to have *a* man on staff. They will go to great lengths to hire *one*.

Jennifer (Head Start Director): Our parents are always so excited to see Gary. It’s wonderful to have *a* man working here.

Sylvia (a college of education faculty member): I’m always happy when I can place a male student at a site that has *a* male teacher.

Barbara (elementary teacher): I have friends in other schools and they think we’re so lucky to have *a* man.

There are several overlapping issues here. Participants seem to be saying that once the school has one man working there some objective has been achieved. Using Kanter’s (1977) theory and model of tokenism, this theme can be interpreted a number of ways. The classic application of Kanter’s theory is that the smaller the proportion of

“tokens,” the less likely it is that they will have any power or agency in terms of effecting change on the workplace (Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin 1978) or, more importantly for this study, of enacting an authentic self (Nelson 1993). Kanter also argued that having a member of the under-represented group can allow the dominant group to consider their organization “gender-neutral,” thus allowing for trivialization of any minority complaints that might arise. Of course, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because the minority group learn quickly that complaints are not well received. Yoder (1991) argued that while Kanter’s theory appears to be a rationale for hiring more tokens up to the extent at which a true gender-neutral workplace emerges, there is danger of a dominant backlash occurring once the majority of workers feel threatened by the changing composition.

But, how many tokens does it take to trigger a dominant backlash? And, are numbers really the salient issue? According to Turco (2010), this is dependent on the extent to which gender-specific characteristics are embedded in the workplace. As I point out in this research, cultural symbols (Reskin 1991), both positive, such as “motherhood,” and negative, like “pedophile,” are so intrinsic to the culture of ECE that perhaps even one man in the facility may be enough to evoke fears and suspicion in the incumbents.

### Forms of the Male Role Model

Every participant in this study introduced the concept of the MRM into our conversation without being prompted to do so. The term is clearly a permanent fixture in the discourse regarding

the issue of men in ECE. When asked to describe the concept of MRM that they themselves had introduced into the conversation, however, the participants typically asked me for my definition.

MRM is apparently in common use, but not in ways that would indicate there has been any degree of analysis of its meaning. People can readily incorporate the term into daily discourse without having to stop to think critically about what they are saying, much like the way that the use of stereotypes allows us to quickly communicate a set of ideas, knowing that the other person gets the essence of what we’re saying, and move on.

The respondents’ narrative would move along smoothly until I would ask for some clarification of the term. Then the conversation would take a turn similar to this exchange with Norman (second-grade teacher):

Me: How does being a male role model positively contribute to the children’s school experience?

Norman: Depends on what you mean by male role model.

Me: Well, I’m simply interested in the definition you had in mind when you said that it’s good for children to be around male role models.

Norman: Oh, I guess I just meant being around men.

Me: OK. That’s fine. I’m interested in anything about men that you suspect is likely to contribute to the children’s learning experience.

Norman: Well, as I said, just being around a man for a change is probably good in some way.

Even a direct request for a definition resulted in confusion.

Me: Tell me what you mean by male role model.

Katherine (elementary school principal): I’m not sure what you’re asking.

Me: Earlier, you said that it’s good for children to have a male role model and I’d just like to hear your description of this.

Katherine: I suppose I just mean all the things a male brings to the job.

Me: Can you give me some examples?

Katherine: You know, just the masculine perspective, the male side of things.

Once I reminded them that this was *their* phrase, they began to frame their responses in terms of what they perceived parents want for their sons and, sometimes, daughters. Two distinct forms of MRM emerged from the participants’ narratives: one for girls and one for boys.

### Modeling for Girls

For the girls in their classrooms, the participants unanimously declared that mothers wanted their daughters to be exposed to a “new man” (non-traditional) who would not behave in stereotypical masculine ways.

Dave (third-grade teacher): They need to see that men are not the kind of people that will leave their families, um, that will beat their kids, that will withhold their child support, that will get drunk on Friday nights, or whatever.

Barbara (kindergarten teacher): I would say it’s abundantly clear that moms want their girls to have a male teacher who’s warm and expressive, not cold and instrumental.

Frank (second-grade teacher): I hope I rub off on the boys and I hope I leave the girls with a positive image of men.

Me: Can you describe that positive image for me?

Frank: Just someone who’s nurturing, caring...open to being demonstrative with his feelings.

Not all participants were convinced that men could provide for the emotional needs of girls. Jan, a childcare center director, told me:

Girls may not thrive as well emotionally in men’s classrooms. They have, after all, grown up almost exclusively in the care of mom, or some other woman.

Nurturing children is not just seen as something women can do better, it is perceived as a talent that men lack. In fact, many seem to feel that men might do more harm than good in their interactions with children. Jennifer, who directs a local Head Start program, talked enthusiastically about having *a* man working in her center.

Jennifer: He’s great. I love having him around. I think the kids are a little intimidated by him...his size, his big voice. We have to be careful the kids don’t get too frightened, of course, but he’s great at getting them to settle down. We just have to keep the more vulnerable kids away from him, I suppose.

Me: More vulnerable?

Jennifer: Maybe vulnerable isn’t the right word for it. I mean the kids who seem to be in the most need of nurturing, the most sensitive. Someone like Greg is not exactly the type you want handling girls.

Greg, to whom Jennifer is referring, is about five feet seven inches tall, weighs about one hundred forty pounds, and speaks with a musical lilt in a voice that is hardly audible over the cries and other sounds of the classroom. Compared to the other teachers, he is only slightly larger than most

and certainly does not have a “big” voice. However, this narrative demonstrates how members of an underrepresented group are evaluated in ways that accentuate their difference from the majority. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) includes this phenomenon within her model of “tokenism.” This is important in day-to-day functions, as in the case of Barry, a first-grade teacher:

I had the strangest thing happen to me. I had a little girl who was getting picked on until she broke down and cried. I took her aside and wiped her tears and talked to her for a while until she felt better. Later in the day, one of the other teachers came in and asked me about the girl. When I told her what happened, she told me she had better take the girl out and talk to her to make sure she was okay. I was *really* insulted by that. She wouldn't have gone into a female teacher's classroom and taken the girl out. I wish I had told her to mind her own business, but I'd be in trouble.

Several participants echoed sentiments similar to these and one must wonder why girls, and not boys, are the ones who would be negatively affected by the change in caretaker gender. Boys, after all, have also grown up in the care of women and, arguably, would be as unaccustomed to adult male caregivers as girls are. Instead, boys are thought to potentially benefit from exposure to men and the presence of masculinity in the classroom. When describing the parents' position on boys' needs, the men recounted that parents, almost exclusively mothers, asserted that their sons were in need of exposure to traditional masculinity. Ostensibly, this was to compensate for a lack of male presence in the household. Some were single mothers and others pointed out that dad is a workaholic who is rarely present because of occupational obligations. The fathers with whom the participants did

interact were, according to all participants, very concerned with making sure that their sons were mentored in the ways of traditional (hegemonic) masculinity. However, there was no evidence provided that the fathers were any more insistent on this point than the mothers. More importantly, no participant ever provided me with an example of parents indicating they hoped their son would be exposed to the “new man,” so often cited for daughters, nor did any express a desire for a traditional male for their daughters.

### Modeling for boys

Javier, a third-grade teacher, echoed what became a common theme in these interviews. He, like many other men in my study, was far more likely to have cultivated artistic, expressive, or contemplative behaviors over his lifetime rather than athletic ones. However, it was the latter, along with other stereotypical masculine traits, that appear to be preferred by parents and colleagues. The gender composition of both these reference groups – parents and colleagues – is dramatically skewed toward women.

Javier (third-grade teacher): I've had so many parents, especially single moms, come in and tell me how happy they are that their son is going to have a male teacher. I asked one woman why that made her so happy and she told me she was becoming concerned because her son was getting into art and poetry a little too much. God, I love poetry and try to get all my students hooked on it. I didn't know what to say to her.

Gene (pre-school teacher): When I was interviewed for the job, they told me that they felt every school should have *a* [emphasis mine] man on staff to provide boys with a male role model, but then I found out that they, the parents, really want a guy who looks and acts like a guy *should act*.

Keith (first-grade teacher): You know, it begs the question, like well, what is their standard. 'Cause it's all, you know, in the eye of the beholder. What is their standard of masculinity? What is masculine to them? If it's the testosterone, beer drinking, football playing, bowling night on Wednesday, and poker night on Friday, you know, smoking the cigars men, that ain't me, you know. [Laughs]

It was not just the men teachers who addressed this. Sarah, an elementary school principal, seemed to be saying that the request for a traditional male is quite common.

I get that a lot. Parents come right out and tell me they want their son in a man's room. Then they go on to explain that they don't just want any man, but one who will act like a “real man.”

Jan (childcare center director): Oh, there's no question, but that parents generally prefer a man who “acts like a man.”

Me: When you say, “acts like a man...”

Jan: Well, I hate to say it, but a lot of people seem to harbor a deep fear of their sons being exposed to a gay teacher. I guess they feel if the guy's macho, then he can't be gay.

The various responses reveal that there are significant contradictions in the lives of men in ECE. This is further brought to light when comparing the men's sense of who they are with the persons they are expected to be at work. Most of the men do not see themselves as being macho, particularly athletic or competitive, or capable of imposing discipline. However, they present themselves as possessing all of these characteristics as they live up to the expectations embedded in the gendered ECE workplace. For example, as Dave tells us, the prevailing image of men teachers as disciplinar-

ians may not resonate well with the men's self-definitions.

You know, so, they say, oh, he needs a good role model, or he needs a strong hand, or something like that. Thinking that since I'm male, I'm going to have a stronger hand, which is not necessarily true.

George, a second-grade teacher, describes how he has to deal with the contradictions between his behavior as a father and as a teacher:

It's hard, you know, I'm very close to my own children, physically, and love just doing things around the house with them, working on little projects, making snacks, the stuff that kids love doing. Then I come to work and get asked to take the rambunctious kids out to play while the other teachers stay inside and work on the projects I love doing.

Being asked to live up to these gendered expectations, thereby turning descriptive stereotypes (the ways things are believed to be) into prescriptive ones (the ways things are supposed to be), may be the result of what Gutek (1985) terms “sex role spillover,” when gender stereotypes leak into the workplace culture. Clearly, these attributes are most closely associated with traditional, patriarchal forms of masculinity, what Connell (1987) has labeled hegemonic masculinity. It is provocative that these descriptions of boys' needs, which are in stark contrast with stated girls' needs, position boys as “other” in the cultural environment of the school. Participants feel that boys need some extra attention and, in general, agree with the assessment that boys lack genuine models of masculinity (Chodorow 1978), grow up without a living omnipresent example of masculinity, and must seek examples in the exterior social environment. Girls are

surrounded by adult women, both at home and at school, and have intimate contact with a contemporary form of femininity on a regular basis.

At about the halfway point in my project, I began asking participants to also describe the kinds of women role models they felt would make the greatest contribution in the lives of girls. Some named specific women, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, astronaut Sally Ride, Dr. Dot Richardson (Olympic Gold Medal Softball winner and orthopedic surgeon), and media star and mogul Oprah Winfrey. What do all these women have in common? They are living lives that are outside the confines of traditional, emphasized femininity (Connell 1987). This contrasts dramatically with the above list of traits for the MRM, which reinforces traditional masculine stereotypes. Even more striking is the fact that no participants ever named a public personality to help them communicate their vision of a proper male role model. In his extensive work on hegemonic masculinity, Connell has made it clear that, while we may have a definition of hegemonic masculinity in the abstract, it is “not the usual form of masculinity at all” (1990:83). In other words, it is difficult to identify an actual person who personifies the current form of hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) masculinity. So, again, we are left with a rather ethereal concept that has limited usefulness in terms of promoting change.

To be at all useful, a more complete understanding of the concept of “male role model” must be found. Herbert Blumer emphasizes this when he argues that “...vague concepts deter the identification of appropriate empirical instances, and obscure the detection of what is relevant in the empirical instances that are chosen. Thus, they block connec-

tion between theory and its empirical world and prevent their effective interplay” (1954:5). There is no formal definition of MRM. Instead, there is a collage of prescriptions and proscriptions that add up to a tacitly understood concept – something everyone seems to acknowledge exists but cannot explain with any clarity or certainty. Second, the male role model as it is generally, albeit tacitly, apprehended has little potential to be of any benefit to boys because it reinforces traditional forms of masculinity that are not found to be conducive to academic successes (Brown, Chesney-Lind, and Stein 2006; Juelskjær 2008). This tangle of contradictions makes it unlikely that any benefits will be forthcoming for boys (or girls).

Sid, a first-grade teacher, summed up the contentious relationship men have with the concept of male role model:

When I started out in teaching, I prided myself on the fact that I was going to be a role model for kids. Now, it's my greatest nightmare. It's an albatross around my neck.

### Doing Masculinity in ECE

The participants in this study described the social organization of ECE as one in which the gender regime is closely aligned with the gender order of society. This finding would be only marginally remarkable if not for the unique status of the men employed in the occupation. Many scholars (e.g., Williams 1992; Allan 1993) who have studied men in ECE have concluded that the men teachers maintain access to patriarchal power and privilege in order to either structure the work environment to their benefit or to rapidly move out of the more feminized areas of ECE and move into more stereotypically

“masculine” positions, such as administration. According to Connell (1987), this would be an example of men doing a “complicit” form of masculinity. Complicit forms of masculinity are those that directly benefit from the systematic, society-wide subjugation of women, without actively participating in women's subordination. Complicit masculinities structure the local gender regime in ways that support and reproduce the wider gender order and that produce a local hierarchy that privileges whatever masculinities the incumbent men display.

The data provided by the participants in the present study cast considerable doubt on the notion of “complicity.” Instead, I contend that men in ECE are attempting to present a “subordinate,” or alternative, form of masculinity, but are constrained by powerful negative sanctions embedded in the culture of ECE. The behaviors presented by the men are artifacts of the gendered organization, not tools of the men as they attempt to organize their work life. Donaldson (1993:656) has argued that the true test of hegemonic masculinity is not its ability to subordinate only women, but the ability to control other men. In ECE, this is accomplished in large part through the metaphor of the MRM, which pervades the culture at both the institutional and interpersonal levels.

James King (1995) suggested that we might be openly recruiting men into teaching while simultaneously covertly sabotaging them through scrutinizing those who “act funny.” This scrutiny contributes to the men's adoption of “safe” behaviors around the children. Unfortunately, these same behaviors may also cause men to be seen as deficient in their potential to attend to the children's needs. This becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy”

(Merton 1948) as the men retreat into behavior patterns that are stereotypically masculine and clearly contradictory to our perception of motherly behavior, the oft-cited standard for quality of student-teacher interaction in ECE. When men behave in “feminine” ways, they come under scrutiny as possibly being gay. Yet, the particular social scene in which men operate is so feminized that “masculine” behaviors also draw attention. Strain is found in the ambiguities and ambivalence surrounding men who do not display stereotypically masculine behaviors or desires (Connell 1992). There is ample evidence that, starting at an early age, boys are more powerfully sanctioned for doing feminine things (i.e., acting like a sissy) than girls are for doing masculine things (i.e., being a tomboy) (Thorne 1993; Buchbinder 1994; Halberstam 1998). Later in life, men who do not fit the mold of hegemonic masculinity, are looked upon with suspicion or are even considered dangerous (Messner 1987; Connell 1992; Buchbinder 1994). Paradoxically, men who try to conduct their lives in non-sexist, atypical ways may find themselves under suspicion from both hegemonic men and many women (Kaufman 1993; 1994). Being different exacts a price for men and makes our lives very complicated and unsettling. A man who is not quite “one of the boys,” because of his social position, his sexual orientation, his taste in clothes, or his lack of leadership quality, aggression, or drive, may be looked upon as a “failed male” (Thorne 1993:115-116) and treated with suspicion. It is this suspicion that makes the rules of masculinity visible (Connell 1987; Williams 1993; Buchbinder 1994), and this visibility is particularly enhanced when men are specifically asked to behave in stereotypical ways as a condition of employment, as in the case of hiring men as male role models.

## Conclusion

In this article I have presented some findings from a series of interviews with persons associated with Early Childhood Education (ECE). The focus on men in ECE is in keeping with a tradition of examining the lives of individuals who have “crossed over” into gender-atypical occupations, where gender prescriptions and proscriptions are made most visible.

The conclusion reached is that ECE is indeed gendered in terms of the symbols in frequent use, the differential structural location of women and men, the internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the organization's gendered structure, and the interactions among individuals (Acker 1992:252-253). This is not a particularly new or surprising conclusion, but it becomes salient when we try to determine the type of masculinity that men are constrained to perform (Butler 1990) within the gender regime of ECE. Instead of the men performing a complicit masculinity through which they would enjoy some of the perquisites and privileges of hegemonic men, they are attempting to live subordinate masculinities in order to challenge traditional gender relations. This takes on its most ambiguous and, therefore, troublesome form in the expectation that men will provide boys with needed male role models. This is problematic

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for men because the content of such a model is not clearly understood and seems to call for the men to provide one kind of model for boys while simultaneously providing a contradictory model for girls in the same classroom. In addition, the calls for men to behave in stereotypically masculine ways contribute to men's lack of fit in Early Childhood Education, where traditional feminine characteristics are highly valued. Finally, boys, who are the intended beneficiaries of the proposed increase in the number of men in ECE, may actually be dealt a disservice by an influx of more traditional masculinity into their school environment. Traditional masculinity has been shown to have a strong anti-intellectual component.

A direction for future research, that is strongly suggested by this project, is a careful comparison of the kind of role modeling that is being suggested for boys to the kinds that have been recommended for girls over the last several decades. One obvious contrast is that models for girls have been described in non-traditional (counter-stereotypical) terms, while those for boys continue to reinforce traditional (stereotypical) dimensions. Is it possible that, for girls, emphases on counter-stereotypical models, such as astronauts, scientists, and surgeons, are also producing a pedagogy that is more proactive and thus, has the latent effect of making teachers more engaged with girls than they are with boys? That would be a logical extension of this study.

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