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Mothering or smothering? Pastoral power and discourses of protection in Scottish school-age-childcare

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ABSTRACT

Childcare has historically been constructed as ‘women’s work’, undertaken predominately by unpaid caregivers such as mothers (Huppatz, K. [2023. *Gender, work and social theory: The critical consequences of the cultural turn*. London: Bloomsbury Academic]). Caring responsibilities have been discursively constructed with perceived expectations of *being the good mother* (Paechter, C. [1998. *Educating the other: Gender, power and schooling*. London: Falmer Press].) and a pastoral charge to protect the child (Brydon, S. [2009. “Men at the heart of mothering: Finding mother in Finding Nemo.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 18 (2): 131–146]). In this paper, I consider how pastoral power constructed through discourses of protection is reflected in both policy and expectations of *good mothering*, informing safeguarding behaviours known as *maternal gatekeeping* (Doucet, A. [2006. *Do men mother?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press]; Gaunt, R. [2008. “Maternal gatekeeping: Antecedents and consequences.” *Journal of Family Issues* 29 (3): 373–395]). This interpretative paper is guided by theoretical principles of feminism and poststructuralism and employs a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) as a lens to analyse powers reflected in everyday behaviours. The findings arguably indicate how protective maternal behaviours drawn from private spaces unknowingly may create gendered barriers to the recruitment and retention of men within childcare professions, informed by childcaring expectations historically placed unequally on women (Evans, M. [2017. *The persistence of gender inequality*. Cambridge: Polity Press]).

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Introduction

Many feminists, amongst others, have continued to express concerns about equity and diversity within childcare professions, often citing dominant gender norms as the reason not only for lower pay and professional status (Osgood 2012) but also for the lack of men within the profession (Rohrmann and Brody 2015; Scottish Government 2019). The aim of this paper is to reflect on gendered discourses that arguably impact

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diversity during childcare recruitment and retention processes. Drawing from a larger study on recruitment and retention on care professions (Anderson 2021), narratives from women employed as Scottish school-age-childcare (SAC) practitioners, consider how the women interviewed, whilst proactively calling for more men to work in childcare (Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson 2019), may unknowingly contribute to barriers, which deter men from taking up professions working with children. These barriers appear to be temporal, constructed as protective subjectivities developed over time (Gaunt 2008). Through practitioner engagement with Government professionalization policies (Scottish Government 2016; SSSC 2017), in addition to socially constructed *mothering* practices expected in the home (Goodwin and Huppatz 2010), protective behaviours impinge on professional life (Doucet 2006). The discursive positioning of childcare workforce competency is constructed by professional agencies to prioritize protection as a normalized facet of caring responsibilities, not only reinforcing *the good mother* subjectivities in personal lives (Goodwin and Huppatz 2010) but also legitimizing its requirement in professional *good practice* (Osgood 2012).

Paechter (1998) suggests that *good mother* discourses are often informed by social reproduction, children historically watching their mothers engaged in caring performances. Broader discourses constructing the image of the *good parent* are often conflated with constructions of the *good mother* and other maternal discourses that subjugate women (Tsouroufli 2020). This historically places expectations on women to continually meet discursively gendered caring responsibilities (Osgood 2012). *Mothering*, in keeping with poststructuralist principles of multiple truths, is not confined to a gender-specific term where dominant discourses are attached to the body and female reproduction (Chodorow 1978).

In this paper, 'mothering' is constructed as a set of learned skills, which are socially reproduced through familial relationships (Huppatz 2012, 2023), embedded through professional practices designed to deliver protective factors required to meet children's developmental needs (Scottish Government 2016). These skills can arguably be constructed as performances of requisite skills for childcaring and thus deliverable by any gender (Gillies 2008). Protection of the child is discursively constructed within dominant cultural and social discourses of the *good mother* (Walden 2018) but also within the *right skills* expected and legislated for in government policies designed to upskill and professionalize the childcare workforce (Siraj 2015; SSSC 2017). Protection is also associated with risk, which in childcare professions, practitioners are trained to mediate through surveillance and assessment strategies (Scottish Government 2016). These, in turn, construct a dual normalization, framed within both professionalization discourses and notions of *the right skills* (Osgood 2012). Conversely, discourses constructing *the good father* consign men to a supporting role (Lewington, Lee, and Sebar 2021), often presented as a disciplining parent rather than a protector (Xu, Schweisfurth, and Read 2022).

However, Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson (2019) and Rohrmann, Brody, and Plaisir (2021) suggest that discourses framing risk present men as potential paedophile threats to children, leading to fear or mistrust in men. Further, these discourses of possible risk are constructed through an accumulation of associations based on normative gendered caring performances, suggesting men who want to work in childcare runs contrary to hegemonic masculine ways of being in Western societies (Rohrmann, Brody, and Plaisir 2021). Studies with men employed in traditionally perceived feminine professions (Hedlin,

Åberg, and Johansson 2019; Rohrmann, Brody, and Plaisir 2021) suggest that their performances of care are constructed as ‘unnatural’ behaviours, and that these curtail men’s ability to demonstrate authentic caring behaviours whilst performing professional everyday childcare tasks. Whereas women practitioners undertaking naturally occurring childcaring duties, for instance, those involving intimate care do not incur the same suspicions (Sullivan, Sak, and Thorpe 2021).

In addition to discourses of potential harm to children, men may feel alienated from childcare professions because they may face discrimination when their skills for the profession are evaluated, predominately by women senior practitioners (Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson 2019). Competencies in childcare are discursively constructed through normative mothering characterizations such as being emotionally responsive and nurturing toward children (Sczesny, Nater, and Haines 2022). Wright and Brownhill (2019) further argue that male applications may even be inadvertently assessed and diminished by women, due to a desire to ‘protect the culture’, with preconceived ideas about men’s suitability for the profession. Protective factors are generally constructed as a pastoral or caring responsibility, which spans between private and professional subjectivities through accumulated skills drawn from discourses on *mothering* (Doucet 2006).

The aim of this feminist poststructural paper is to present how constructions of expected pastoral responsibilities influence protective discourses and professional ways of being in the arguably gendered profession of childcare. It argues that Foucauldian power dynamics in policies and societal expectations drive protective discourses, creating tensions for women in professional childcare employment, who must display being *the good mother* in private spaces (Walden 2018), whilst also being accountable for the perceived *right skills* professionally (Osgood 2012). Further, protective discourses constructed through performativity, professional regulations and societal expectations arguably reinforce maternal behaviours known as gatekeeping (Doucet 2006; Gaunt 2008). The analysis highlights how the women interviewed made sense of their own care experiences in relation to recruitment and retention and their perspectives on why men maybe *othered* or alienated from childcare professions. The paper concludes on how pastoral power and legislative drivers influence gatekeeping behaviours promoted by maternal primacy, where women childcare practitioners are coerced into a position of perpetuating gendered performances of mothering (Doucet 2006). These normalized protective pastoral behaviours may form gendered barriers, albeit unknowing, during recruitment and retention phases of employment through the continued and unequal pressures on women complying to expected socially and historically driven mothering performances (Huppatz 2023).

Background on Scottish childcare settings

School-age-childcare (SAC) is one of the Scottish-regulated social care professions tasked with meeting children’s wellbeing needs (Scottish Government 2017). Practitioners working with children must be suitably qualified and registered with a government-legislated body, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) (Scottish Government 2016). In addition, all registrants must adhere to codes of conduct on expected behaviours and performance (SSSC 2016). Further to comply with registration requirements, practitioners must demonstrate ongoing fitness to practice, with child protection embedded as one

of seven core learning elements (SSSC, [online a](#)). Fitness to practice is gauged on a set of government led-standards inspected through the Care Inspectorate (Scottish Government 2017). For instance, as part of an evaluation tool to track the wellbeing and protection needs of a child, practitioners are required to maintain a chronology of significant events in a child's life (Scottish Government 2012). These 'chronologies are key in the chain of ensuring needs/risks, including protection from harm' are met (Care Inspectorate 2017, 3).

Currently, there is a childcare recruitment crisis and the need to encourage diversity within potential applicants requires addressing in future employment strategies. The Care Inspectorate (Care Inspectorate 2020, 33) noted that during 2018, there were staff vacancies in 38% of all care positions in Scotland, amounting to a 2647 deficit in staff, and this number had remained consistent in the previous two years. These figures were recorded before the Covid-19 Pandemic and by October 2021, statistics suggest that pressures on professions, predominantly staffed by women, have increased exponentially (Abid 2021). The policies and standards followed by SAC settings in Scotland also apply to early years and childcare (EYC) settings, and other social care professions with key responsibilities for children (Scottish Government 2017). The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC, [online b](#)) indicates that in 2022, the number of staff registered to work in the daycare of children, in Scotland which includes both EYC and SAC workforces, was 42,190, with men representing only 3.9% of the total childcare workforce.

Wingrave (2018) states that the figure is indicative of the demographics found not only in Scottish childcare settings but indeed in allied caring professions, such as healthcare and teaching. In Scandinavian countries such as Norway, the figure of men employed in childcare rises to 9% of the workforce, the highest figure in Western settings (Wright and Brownhill 2019). Norway cites government policies and increased efforts to promote childcare as a career within schools as an influencing factor for higher workforce numbers (Nordic Council of Ministers 2019). Whilst the SSSC (2023) state attrition is around 17% of the childcare workforce in each year, these figures do not present a breakdown by gender.

Pastoral power and discourses of protection in childcare settings

Feminist ethics of care are imbued with the inherent experiences of women, including mothering and caring (Bruce and Powell 2024). Whilst there are many studies on women in relation to ethics of care (see Kitty 1999; Noddings 1984), the focus of this paper presents contexts of gendered power emanating from government and society, which arguably influence both women's and men's ways of caring. Foucault's works do not specifically address women's issues; however, Moore and Gagné (2022, 176) argue that ethics of care are 'constrained by power dynamics', particularly when desired ways of caring come into tension with policy mandates and compliances. Pastoral power as constructed by Foucault is a secular historical concern for the welfare of others, through the salvation of 'souls' (Foucault 2009). Contemporary feminists have aligned notions of pastoral power on salvation and redemption with discourses of conduct and reaching a moral subjectivity (Baldwin 2021), conditioned by expectations of self-sacrifice for the greater good (Poblete Núñez 2020). Moral virtues are unequally placed on women, who are not only responsible for their own salvation but also for generations

to come through discourses of motherhood (Baldwin 2021). Cruickshanks (1993) argues in governing the self, emotional responses are internally driven to comply with idealized norms expected within society. As a result, mothers particularly modify behaviours as dominant norms are internalized into demonstrating the 'good parent', which requires balancing expectations between family and professional caring (McDowell 2008).

In broader terms for childcaring professions, pastoral power is levied on women through childcare regulation policies and expectations placed on them to meet government set standards (Baldwin 2021), for example, as discourses of protection ensuring the wellbeing of children (Care Inspectorate 2017, 2023a). Measurements of wellbeing are often framed by discourses of deficit; for instance, in child protection, families unable to provide necessary measures to keep children safe (Björkhagen Turesson 2020). The blame for failed protection often falls disproportionately onto mothers, because men are often constructed as perpetrators of violence in the home (Saltmarsh, Tualaulelei, and Ayre 2021). As a result of perceived deficits, the responsibility to provide security and 'good parenting' is legally taken from the private sphere and given to those with public- or corporate-accredited parenting skills as a pastoral responsibility to save the child from harm, aiming for a better future outcomes (Goodall 2021).

For women in caring vocations, sacrifice is a gendered burden, perpetuated by continued lower pay and conditions, despite expectations placed on them through professional codes of conduct to embody pastoral and moral values within the dominant culture (Poblete Núñez 2020). In addition to being gendered, care is generally constructed as suitable employment for certain demographics in Western societies, white, working-class women who are perceived as willing to accept lower paid professions (Osgood 2005).

Following Baldwin (2021) pastoral power ensuring the salvation of children is imposed on accredited childcare practitioners as an expected protection standard, acting as the corporate parent administering government legislation (Scottish Government 2018). Protection from harm is suggested in the guiding social care recruitment document (Care Inspectorate 2023b), issued by the inspection body (Care Inspectorate – CI) and endorsed by the registration body (Scottish Social Services Council-SSSC), which incorporates the word 'safer' into its title. In addition, the policy document determines employers should follow a shared vision that vulnerable children should be 'kept safe' by people with the 'correct skills' (Care Inspectorate 2023b, 6). Further, the recent draft quality framework for ELC and SAC (Care Inspectorate 2023a, 22) considers that 'very good practice' is reflected in staff competency to 'recognize their professional accountability in ensuring children's safety and wellbeing'. However, the assessment of competency does not appear to be limited to professional practice.

When parents work towards SVQ qualifications, there is scope to assess their experience of parenting and related skills towards the accreditation of their competence. (Scottish Government 1998, 2.34)

There is a Foucauldian concept of discipline (Foucault 2014), blurring private and professional domains, reinforcing safeguarding within expected dominant discourses of conduct (Björkhagen Turesson 2020). It is interesting to note that the Scottish Government safeguarding guidance also dictates future discourses, engaging childcare settings to proactively ensure protection, 'reflect(s) emerging issues within society' (Care Inspectorate 2023a, 22). This suggests childcare practitioners must always be surveillant and

potentially 'on guard' for future potential threats of harm to children which is a feature of gatekeeping behaviours (Doucet 2006) as discussed in the next section.

Mothering discourses and maternal gatekeeping

Feminists argue *mothering* is often constructed as a binary discourse based on biological differences between men and women and the reproductive body (Connell 2005). As such *mothering* is often regarded as a feminine responsibility which troubles both fatherhood, and masculine constructs of parenting (Pearce and Moraes 2021). Perceptions of what constitutes *good mothering* are subjective, often classed and raced (Goodwin and Huppertz 2010) and can lead to caregivers striving for an impossible perfectionism, often to their own detriment, as they try to live up to discursive societal and government expectations of mothering (Henderson, Harmon, and Houser 2010).

Professional childcare is also classed and culturally constructed as a 'suitable' job predominantly for white women (Osgood 2005), with the soft skills required for caring often conflated with those of mothering, devaluing the expertise required to perform it and legitimizing lower pay and status (Moreau 2019). In professional childcare settings Walden (2018) points to 'mothering skills' being institutionalized into a *right fit* based on characteristics that are indicative of discourses on the *good mother*, which include the traditional gendered behaviours associated with caring roles such as empathy and nurturing (Andrew et al. 2023). Men are also constrained by discourses of hegemonic masculinities that 'other' them for childcaring responsibilities (Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson 2019; Robb 2019), discursively constructing images of 'real men' employed in traditional labour opportunities with a societal expectation to be the family breadwinner for financial gain.

Maternal gatekeeping is a term mainly confined to the privacy of childrearing at home, with mothers restricting a father's involvement with their children (Wang and Schoppe-Sullivan 2021). Mothers are often influenced by socially constructed standards of parenting, subsequently forming protective barriers against those whose parenting skills, they consider substandard (Doucet 2006; Wang and Schoppe-Sullivan 2021). Gaunt (2008) states that maternal gatekeeping and competent *others* are an historical accumulation of gender-assigned discourses that promote women having the right attributes, skills and behaviours to appropriately raise and nurture children. However, whilst gatekeeping is often constructed as a binary concept, that of opening or closing the gate to the primary involvement of male carers in childrearing (Wang and Schoppe-Sullivan 2021), in essence it is multi-faceted, with 'the gate' having varying levels of openness or closure. How a mother evaluates the risk factors of a father's competence in childcare, drawn from normative discourses of traditionally gender-assigned roles, can be a determinant of the level of openness or closedness of the gatekeeping behaviour (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2015).

Gatekeeping is a term that can also be applied to protective behaviours that occur within professional spaces where, Osgood (2012) suggests, normative performances of childcaring are scrutinized for expected standards of care. In addition, gatekeeping behaviours are exhibited not only by women, with Miller (2018, 26) suggesting men adopt paternal gatekeeping practices as a form of 'self-blocking' or 'resistance' to the gendering of professional care roles where men are perceived as othered. This resistance might

arguably form a protection to the discourses that continue to present men either as a harmful threat to children or lacking the required competence for caring. Eidevald and colleagues (2018) argue that the gendering of care in society has created a mistrust of men who desire to work with children in a professional capacity and which is subsequently alienating men from entering childcare professions.

The shortage of men in Scottish childcare is mirrored in many other countries (see Rohrmann and Brody 2015; Xu, Schweisfurth, and Read 2022). In England, studies highlighting men's perspectives on the challenges of the profession, those interviewed were disillusioned that their childcaring skills and competences were minimized by senior colleagues who were predominately women, relegated to the 'fun guy' practitioner (Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson 2019). Those interviewed also believed they were expected to perform to discourses of dominant masculinities reflecting traditional perceptions of 'real men' as authoritarian figures (Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson 2019, 97) or the disciplining *parent* (Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2019). Men in one study argued that competences of *good parenting* should be embodied in involvement and attentiveness in childcare relationships rather than emotive and other soft skills associated with feminine perceptions of good caring (Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2019). The literature has indicated how pastoral power has influenced maternal primacy and with the men's perspectives of the *right skills* or competencies how, these have manifested themselves in discourses of protection. However societal fears of men within childcare settings are a more complex issue, and in this next section, I analyse how the narratives from women SAC practitioners illuminate further gendered barriers to recruitment and retention in the profession.

With a theoretical focus on feminist poststructural ethics of care and presenting authentic experiences of women (Bruce and Powell 2024), discourses of mothering and the Foucauldian notion of pastoral power, the following narratives extrapolate conflicted experiences in endeavouring to meet the demands of both societal and professional expectations of *mothering*, which holds women accountable for the protection of children in their care.

Methodology and methods

Feminist studies look to counter and make visible dominant discourses on gendered ways of being, and the powers shaping behaviours (Dupuis et al. 2022). Feminist poststructuralists also consider there is no one truth in meaning making within research, and research participants subjectively construct their narratives and the meanings underpinning their lived experiences of caring and professional responsibilities (Al-Ababneh 2020). Each narrative is a reflection of that individual experience, and although there appear to be commonalities, how these are presented are ultimately guided by the researchers own ontological and philosophical research interpretations (Krauss 2005).

Ethical approval was sought from the University of Glasgow ethics committee (University of Glasgow, 400180021) and participants were recruited by invitation through the Scottish Out-of-School-Care Network (SOSCN), a Scottish networking group for SAC. The selection criteria for the study were limited to those registered practitioners who had engaged in professional upskilling for their practitioner role. Each participant was given a paper-copy consent form outlining the proposed research aims on recruitment

challenges in arguably gendered childcare professions, which was signed and returned before the research interviews took place. All practitioners were given pseudonyms to ensure data confidentiality. The original intention was to use a biographical life-grid as a qualitative temporal tool to ascertain how caring responsibilities had evolved through the practitioner's life course (Lalanda Nico 2016). However, during the pilot interview, this tool was found to be inflexible, stilted naturally flowing narratives with the practitioner focussing on timescales rather than the richness of reflections found in their caring experience. The grid is mainly used to 'reduce recall bias', which eliminates the chances of memories being recalled out of sequence (Berney 2003) and was not in keeping with feminist studies which can be imbued with emotional contexts as narratives unfold and often the events described do not emerge chronologically (Freeman 2019). In lieu of the life-grid, biographical narratives were employed as a more reflexive research method, supporting naturally occurring conversations on the lived caring experiences of the practitioners' (Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin 2013). Conversations were guided by research questions that included perceptions of socially constructed aspects of caring as highlighted by Paechter (1998) and the gendered nature of childcare and mothering similar to studies such as Goodwin and Huppertz (2010) and Osgood (2012). The narratives were analysed following Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), to reveal discourses of power influencing constructions of caring experiences (Fadyl, Nicholls, and McPherson 2013). In the findings, data emerged where the women revealed to themselves when or even how they became a subject of professional practices and how perceived constraints of disciplinary power caused personal and professional tensions (Villadsen 2020).

The analysis is now presented on how contexts of the gendered nature of childcare are arguably entwined with discourses on pastoral power and protection, highlighting how behaviours alluding to maternal gatekeeping may arise in professional practice in response to perceived threat or associated risks.

Analysis of maternal gatekeeping and protection in private spaces

The five practitioners interviewed were all mothers and had a minimum of fifteen years' experience in SAC. Each identified as white Scottish working-class women, reflecting the statistical demographics employed in SAC (SSSC, [online b](#)). Three held a degree qualification (D), whilst two held a required practitioner qualification (PQ) and their identities are coded with these, along with their age.

Initially all practitioners in the study discussed their caring responsibilities whilst growing up.

Caring has always been my responsibility, being the eldest of five children, that was expected of me. (Maisie, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 59)

This was the typical response from all but one of the practitioners to experiences of familial caring, learned as a social reproduction of parenting, watching their mothers care for them and others (Paechter 1998).

The practitioners reflected on their responsibilities of caring for children in their private lives, their experience being a platform for their professional involvement in SAC. Miller (2018, 27) states of maternal gatekeeping that 'most women who are mothers will recognize in their actions, practices that constitute gatekeeping'. In my experience, this is

retrospective and often requires what Dahlstedt and Fejes (2014) term 'self-scrutiny' to make sense of the complexity of behaviours that we use when performing what we consider to be 'good mothering'.

One of the practitioners in the study recanted how her whole life revolved around her children and their needs, which resulted in her husband feeling alienated in their relationship. It was only in retrospect, while discussing her experiences of childcaring, that she realized:

I think maybe did I put too much into my children, but that's the way I am. (Glenys, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 53)

Miller (2018) argues that gatekeeping behaviours often stem from a desire to protect 'maternal identity'. Identity or in poststructural terms what is known as subjectivity, is how we form a sense of self (Foucault 1982). This construction of identity drawn from the power of discourses on expected norms affects ways of being. Glenys is discussing that by giving her all to her children as their prime carer, she was being true to herself as part of her maternal subjectivity. Even when some childcaring responsibilities are relinquished to others, elements of maternal protection are apparent, albeit at a distance, as evidence of 'good mothering,' ensuring that chosen childcare alternatives are 'good enough.' Goodwin and Huppertz (2010) argue women are unfairly subjected to continuous scrutiny on expected standards of mothering performances.

I used to watch them and observe them with the kids so when I started, I let them know that I could see them and hear them which was more the point. So, I suppose it was my understanding, and they should be nurturing them and looking after them. (Mary-Annie, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 49)

Women also feel subjected to blame cultures (Henderson, Harmon, and Houser 2010) when their own idealized expectations, drawn from discourses of *the good mother*, are self-scrutinized. Iris discussed, in self-realisation, that she recognized her protective behaviours (and are indicative of maternal gatekeeping behaviours), are important to her own maternal subjectivities and that they may be questioned by others as irrational behaviour.

it's my role and it's made that way, isn't it?'. My boys, I am still like they are mine; they are precious, and I am not ready to ease up on that yet because the crazy thing is I need to, totally irrational, I know. (Iris, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, aged 28)

Iris also highlights discourses that reinforce what is known as 'maternal primacy' (Miller 2018), often constructed through perceived biological sex differences and the ability to bear children, with the assumption that women are more naturally suited to childcaring than men (Chodorow 1978). Glenys also draws on maternal discourses to illustrate her understanding of who she believes is best suited to perform childcare, but this may also show how social reproduction maintains the mothering gender divide through maternal primacy as suggested by Paechter (1998):

I think it's just like you think well that's a women's job. Do you know what I mean. That's a woman's job, that's not a man's job. And I think basically that's what people think. Probably just society, the way you have been brought up. (Glenys, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 53)

Whilst none of the practitioners stated directly that an important part of their maternal subjectivity is to protect children, their narratives imply it. This level of protection

appears to be drawn from differing discourses, such as those on maternal primacy, *the good mother* subjectivity, and pastoral power, mother as a protector against the perceived threat. Huppertz (2012) notes that women adapt their dispositions to frame gendered expectations within gendered job roles. There are elements of gatekeeping behaviours showed in the way they reproduce the mothering role as their sole responsibility, which as Wang and Schoppe-Sullivan (2021), suggest inadvertently acts as a barrier or even a deterrent to others including men's accessing childcaring responsibilities.

Men as 'othered' in childcare spaces

Whilst the women practitioners highlighted private spaces that discursively draw on maternal discourses of protection as part of their own expectations of *the good mother*, their reflections on men with regards to childcare draw on other aspects that 'other' men from childcaring responsibilities. Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson (2019) and Robb (2019) suggest that discourses on hegemonic masculinities discursively construct how men are expected to perform in society, including monetary responsibility for families and entering traditional careers drawing on masculine traits of assertiveness (Robb 2019). Four of the practitioners highlighted finance and career pathways supporting Hedlin, Åberg, and Johansson (2019) and Robb's (2019) studies of rationales for men's lack of engagement in childcare professions. For example:

Men should be on full time wages because they are the ones you know that are meant to support the family. My experience of having male staff whose family have thought this wasn't a career path, they wanted them to have what is classed as a proper job. (Mary-Annie, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 49)

Men need higher salary, hours, I think it's not the salary but the hours. In general, I think they want full-time. I think it is quite sexist, but I think it's a reality. (Maisie, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 59)

Discussions on the traits that both embody feminine and masculine constructs of caring differed and were expressed by the women practitioners as comparisons of their expected behaviours and competencies in SAC settings. The women did highlight, similarly to Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos (2019), constructions of *good fathering* as being attentive and involved with children's play through embodied masculine performances of childcare.

With one of the staff, he liked computers and games so he would be in there doing it with the children. The men that we have had, looked to be doing and playing with the children. (Maisie, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 59)

Forest kindergarten (what I do) is good for men for sure, because it's risky, because it looks like the macho image of a man. (Delia, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 55)

Recruitment and maternal gatekeeping in professional spaces

In professional SAC settings practitioners often have responsibilities for recruitment. If women do indeed recognize that the caring traits that men embody are 'othered' from traditional discourses aligned to maternal primacy and feminine traits of caring, including

emotional and soft skills, how are these reflected on or reproduced when considering potential applicants and suitability for employment?

(I) like the advantage of taking an older person who is mature, who has a sensible head on them'. I call it the 'mummy effect', you know the ones that are mums. Men can quite easily shut the door and leave, whereas I'll go home and stew on everything. That responsibility doesn't go away; you learn that as a mum. For the women it's all one, it's that circle, it's your whole life. (For men), they can say this is my football time, this is my time out with the boys. (Iris, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, aged 28)

Empathy is an important, 'thinking about you as a child, or your own children, and how you would feel if it was your own child. (Maisie, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 59).

We bring up boys in the West of Scotland up to be 'macho'. This other guy (working for us) comes from a military background and is very regimented and he will say things that you have to double-take and you look at him. (Delia, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 55)

It appears that the women practitioners arguably look to socially reproduce skills associated with caring, learned and valued as mothers in private spaces as discussed by Paechter (1998). This protection influenced by discourses of maternal primacy and what makes a *good mother* has unknowingly transferred from private spaces into professional spaces as part of decision-making during recruitment process.

Closed or open-gatekeeping in professional school-age-childcare?

During appraisals of staff competency, there appeared an awareness of that the practitioners were subject to pastoral power. As registered workers complying to a set of guidance's and codes of conduct, certain protective behaviours were expected from them, including the personal accountability for children's safety (Care Inspectorate 2023a).

I think standards are necessary for safety. I think if you are an organisation who does what you are supposed to do. (Mary-Annie, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 49)

I think you have to be very careful. I could lose my job; I could be stripped of everything. (Glenys, Anglo-Scottish, PQ, age 53)

So, define quality? Is it quality that the children feel safe and secure, and they are stimulated, and they know that there is someone there to nurture them. (Iris, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, aged 28)

Not only pastoral power but also, legislative power was discursively shaping both practice in professional settings and parents' expectations of safety for children.

We have wrapped them up in the care sector for so many years and then all the legislation, parents have gone overboard to overprotect them and now we are bringing up a group of kids who aren't able to cope with life. We were told to do that, Care Inspectorate and National legislation. (Delia, Anglo-Scottish, DQ, age 55)

Reflecting on whether behaviour is an example of open or closed gatekeeping might indicate to practitioners how they professionally draw on discourses of performativity and protection during the selection and ongoing assessment processes of staffing. Awareness can support agency, to not only to rise above external scrutiny and critical assessments of their practice but can also ultimately protect their *good mother* subjectivities.

Mothering or smothering? Opening the gate

The aim of this paper was to consider how discourses of pastoral power arising from maternal primacy and mothering expectations have arguably informed protective behaviours in professional spaces. These behaviours may unintentionally *smother* attempts to include or retain more men within the childcare workforce. This paper has argued for a new positioning of maternal gatekeeping behaviours within professional settings beyond the normalized private spaces of mothering. Systemic changes at fundamental levels of policy and practice are required by both government and professional agencies to deconstruct long-held associations of caring as a feminized profession. Whilst there does appear to be a genuine desire by many, to encourage more diversity in the workplace, there are still deep-seated beliefs that are socially driven presenting barriers to meaningful change.

Arguably, men and women's constructions of threats to children did not appear to be drawn from the same discourses in relation to working within professional childcare settings. As suggested in studies by Eidevald, Bergström, and Westberg Bergström (2018), men appear to discursively construct threats to children as being aligned to potential paedophilia behaviours. In addition, pressures lowering self-esteem through heteronormative expectations of men in full-time well-paid work and childcaring being 'unnatural' for traditional male roles, leads to an alienation of employment within childcare professions. Discourses that continue to promote and maintain constructions of men as potential threats to children could establish closed gatekeeping behaviours, where men may not put themselves forward for childcaring professions as self-preservation. This appears indicative of the small number of men found in professional childcaring positions, not only locally but also internationally. The competences that men value as *good fathering* may demonstrate a resistance to hegemonic maternal discourses and may also allude to men 'othering' themselves from the expectations placed on feminine perceived competencies and traits that are constructed as more suited to childcaring.

Women's constructions of threats, however, appeared twofold. Firstly, protective maternal gatekeeping behaviours reflected desires to extend maternal primacy from private spaces into professional spaces, drawn on discourses of expectations of the 'good mother'. There was an awareness that arguably disempowered women, who felt constrained by constant surveillance on their performances to be *good enough* through regulated practice and the expectations of meeting pastoral responsibilities for children. Consideration needs to be given to how Government policies, guidance, and competencies in the statutory sectors of healthcare, education and social care reflect Foucauldian discourses of pastoral power through surveillance and protection which are having long reaching effects on the way women consider relationships with both children and partners.

Breaking down barriers for men's involvement in childcaring needs a higher profile in family hubs and education as part of the integrated children's services planning to decrease 'othering' of childcare subjectivities. Further, whilst Government policies and regulatory bodies practice guidance (SSSC and CI) continues to reflect maternal primacy, competences and skills bases need to be more broadly articulated from early education onwards rather than drawing on the assumption of soft skills and emotional literacy associated with discourses of women having natural advantages in childrearing based on the perceived biological differences between men and women.

Financial equity whilst not a central issue in this study is a key factor in perceptions that undermine professions mainly staffed by women, and which women practitioners also believe alienate men from professional childcare. However, it could also be argued that women are agentically expressing their views on the gendered inequity that exists in status and lower compensation for what they recognize is a highly skilled occupation.

Finally, women childcare practitioners can enact agency through resisting rhetoric within social expectations and government policies reflecting discourses of maternal primacy and gender inequity that dominates childcare professions. Whilst constructions of maternal primacy are strongly embedded, resistance, in the form of maternal gate-opening, can reframe expectations dictated by pastoral powers that subjugate women, compelling them to demonstrate *good mothering* through constant surveillance of protective behaviours. Wider practitioner research on gatekeeping behaviours may illuminate further discourses that impact on recruitment and retention in childcare professions.

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