

## The Male Au Pair: "Doing Masculinity" by Performing Housework and Providing Childcare

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## **Abstract**

Male au pairs responding to the “call for more men” in private and professional childcare have gained some popularity in recent years. Au pairs, both male and female, are positioned in hybrid work settings in that they not only perform housework and provide childcare, but living with families also assume roles of family members. Drawing on the concept of “doing gender,” the article compares how the position of male and female au pairs is constructed by allocating specific duties to them, and how men’s suitability for au pairing is legitimized. It is shown that, because a gendered division of family work continues to be the prerequisite for “doing gender,” male au pairs perform only housework that is compatible with hegemonic masculinity, and that this is inherent in their main duty of functioning as male role models to aid in the socialization of the families’ children when the children’s fathers fail to fulfill this role.

## 1. Introduction

There has been a call for “more men” in private and professional childcare to meet children’s need for care by men, and to make gender relations in the reproductive sphere more equal (Gregory and Miller 2011). This call has also been heard in the area of au pairing. For decades, au pair work was performed exclusively by young women, but in recent years, young men have started to participate in au pairs programs as well.

Originally intended to facilitate cultural exchange, au pairing allows young people to live in another country for one year, during which time they take on a share of their host family’s childcare and housework responsibilities. The relationship between the host family and the au pair is highly unregulated in that it is not legally considered a work relationship. The au pair’s working time and duties are defined by the host family according to its needs, and because au pairs live with a family and perform duties which are inscribed in family roles, they are in an ambiguous position—somewhere between a work relationship and a family relationship. Au pairs thus are a special case, which allows us to study what aspects of family work can be delegated to a non-family member—in this case, to an au pair—and what qualities and competencies are ascribed to this individual that in the eyes of the host family make him or her suitable for performing these duties.

It has been noted in the literature that men do not participate in family work to the same degree as women participate in waged work, with the result that employment of domestic and care workers, who in most cases are women, perpetuate the logic of gender division (Rerrich 2006). The main objective of this article is to locate male au pairs within this gender division of family work. To overcome the difficulties in obtaining data on the still relatively recent phenomenon of male au pairs, this explorative study draws on a combination of print and Internet sources, such as newspapers, magazines, blogs, Internet forums and au pair agency websites, and interviews conducted with au pair agency staff and three male au pairs. These sources are analyzed to reconstruct meaning structures within discourses about male au pairing. The article uses the “doing gender” approach to investigate how the position of male au pairs within families is constructed as that of male role models who are expected to fill a gap in the socialization of male children who live in a female-dominated environment. In addition, the article examines what duties are assigned to male au pairs as part of their role model performance of hegemonic masculinity, and how this relates to gender equality or inequality within family work, showing that male au pairs, like male childcare workers and involved fathers, are asked to perform different duties than female au pairs.

## 2. Theoretical Approaches to “Doing Gender” in Relation to Performing Housework and Providing Childcare

Family work—that is, housework and childcare—is inextricably intertwined with the production of gender relations. Historically highly feminized, family work organizes gender relations and channels the socialization of children into gender roles. Doing family work is regarded as a core sphere of “doing gender”, a concept which was most notably developed by West and Zimmerman (1987) and which is based on the differentiation between sex and gender, with sex being understood as a biological difference between females and males, and with social norms determining how individuals “do gender” by defining attitudes and activities which are considered appropriate for the sexes. In other words, “[d]oing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 42). A central element of the gender order is what Connell (1995) calls “hegemonic masculinity”; that is, men’s ability to dominate, which is related to physical attributes such as strength, activeness, and the power to injure others, as well as a strong sex drive. According to Franklin (1984, 5), this ability to dominate also manifests itself in mental attributes such as self-confidence, independence, assertiveness, aggressiveness, and emotional indifference. As a result of this hegemonic masculinity, along with commonly held notions of femininity such as physical vulnerability, high emotionality, and attentiveness to the needs of others, performing care work within families, and working in care-related occupations in general, is regarded as an explicitly feminine activity (Robinson et al. 1980, 234) and as women’s “natural” domain. The gender division of family work is widely regarded as a result of doing gender (see, e.g., Ferree 1990; South and Spitze 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987; Hochschild 1989). The family role of wife and mother is performed in the forms of rich and healthy meals, a clean and nicely decorated house, and washed and ironed clothes. Although men are increasingly expected to take on a share of the housework to contribute to gender equality, they do not spend as much time doing housework as women, and women generally spend more time performing less attractive duties than men (Bianchi et al. 2000; Sullivan 2004; Anxo et al. 2007). In addition to helping with housework, men also increasingly provide care for their children. In the area of childcare, notions of “new” or “involved” fatherhood have developed. According to Johansson and Klinth (2008) and Gregory and Miller (2011), the public discourse about fathers’ involvement in providing care for their children is highly normative in that care and affective relationships to their own children are constructed as an element of preferable masculinity. However, this new gender model does not necessarily ensure full

gender equality; rather, the “new” fathers are responsible for playing, doing sports and engaging in outdoor activities with their children, while women continue to be in charge of the core housework duties (Johansson and Klinth 2008, 60).

Men are expected to provide childcare not just to contribute to gender equality, but also because it has been widely believed that children will be negatively affected if their social environments are dominated by females. The criticism of childcare being dominated by women dates back as far as the 1960s; women, it was believed, affect children’s socialization by promoting the development of supposedly female behaviors and traits (see, e.g., Fagot and Patterson 1969; Etaugh, Collins, and Gerson 1975). This led to a call for more male workers in childcare and education. A popular argument in this connection is that the increasing number of divorces and the resulting loss of contact between children and their fathers leads to a lack of male parental figures (Gregory and Miller 2011, 589), which must be compensated for by recruiting more men for professional childcare. The proportion of men involved in professional childcare appears to be on the increase, but this development does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of gender norms and roles of reproductive labor. It has been argued that the employment of a male teacher is justified by “the merit of his sex” (Tolbert 1968, 41), which means that suitability for providing childcare is essentially connected to the care provider’s sex, with biological difference being assumed to be reflected in a difference in behavior (Christie 1998, 105). It is also believed that female and male care providers exhibit different styles of caring, playing, and instructing (Jensen 1996, 21), and that male teachers should act as role models for male children (Skelton 2002, 78) and provide them with “positive masculine images” (ibid., 90).

Unlike the children’s fathers, and women in general, men who are not related to the children are scrutinized to assess whether they are suitable for providing childcare because power to injure and an absence of “natural” care skills are believed to be typical aspects of masculinity. It is thus assumed that men, unlike women, pose a risk to the well-being of children and, because of men’s relatively stronger sex drive, children are also at a greater risk of being sexually abused by male care workers (Owen 2003). One marker of the persisting gendering of childcare is that male professional childcare providers have to explain why they are interested in this particular line of work, and demonstrate their suitability, which is not required of women.

### **3. Data Collection and Methodology**

Conducting research on male au pairs is a challenging undertaking due to the difficulty of obtaining data. The German Federal Employment Agency, the German Federal Statistical Office, and the German Institute for Employment Research do not collect statistical infor-

mation on male au pairs, and only a few of the several German au pair agencies we asked to provide data on the male au pairs placed by them were willing to provide such data. Some of these agencies stated that they do not recruit male au pairs as a matter of principle, and those agencies that did respond to our request estimated that between 5% and 10% of au pairs were male. Given this lack of reliable data, we cannot say with certainty whether or not the number of male au pairs in Germany has actually increased in recent years. What we can say, however, is that the subject of male au pairs has gained popularity in the media. We analyzed a variety of sources<sup>1</sup> to illustrate particular aspects of the discourse about male au pairs who live with German families, including:<sup>2</sup>

1) Printed and online newspapers and magazines:

- “An Au Pair Man Is a Rare Thing”<sup>3</sup> (Westdeutsche Zeitung 2014),
- “Male Au Pairs: Mike, the Supernanny” (Stuttgarter Nachrichten 2012),
- “Guys as Nannies: Help me, Super-Manny” (Spiegel Online 2010).

2) Internet forums:

- “Au Pair for Housework: Experiences Anyone?” (2012) on the “med1: Gesundheit im Internet” forum [Health on the Internet],
- “Experience with Au Pairs” (2011) on the “Freundeskreis netter Leute mit schlaunen Kids” forum [Circle of Nice People with Clever Kids],
- “A Male Au Pair: Yes or No” (2011) on the “Allein-Erziehend.net, Forum für alleinerziehende Mütter und Väter” forum [Forum for Single Mothers and Fathers]
- “Nanny vs. Au Pair and Pay: Maaaaaany Answers, Please” (2004) and “The Au Pair: Almost a New Family Member” on the “Rund ums Baby” forum [All Things Baby].

3) Blogs and Websites:

- “Why Not Invite an Au pair Boy?” (2013) on the “Kulturist” blog [Culturist],
- “Male Nannies in Germany” (2012) on *betreut.de* [Looked After, Cared For],

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<sup>1</sup> My research assistant and I searched the German sources separately, using a variety of related terms, including *männliches Au-pair* [male au pair], *Au-pair + Junge* [au pair + boy], *Au-pair + Mann* [au pair + man], *Manny*, *male nanny*, and *bro pair*, as well as combinations of *Au-pair* and *Junge* [boy], *Jungs* [boys], *junger Mann* [young man], *Mann* [man], *männlich* [male], *boy*, *boys*, *guy*, and *guys*. Browsing results of my assistant and myself were coincident.

<sup>2</sup> Full details are given in the References.

<sup>3</sup> Except where expressly indicated otherwise, I have translated the German titles of the sources and the passages cited in the text.



- “Au Pairs in Everyday Family Life” (2003) on the “Familienhandbuch” blog [Family Handbook].

4) Au Pair Agency Websites:

- “The Host Family Child Florian from Berlin” (no date) on AuPairCare.de,
- “Host Family Child Sinje: Growing up with Many Au Pairs” (no date) on AuPair-World.net.

The analysis is supplemented by interviews with four au pair agency staff members: Mrs. Meier<sup>4</sup> (director of a commercial agency), Mr. Hoheimer and Mr. Schmidt (volunteers at a non-profit agency), and Mr. Schuster (director of a commercial agency). In addition, three male au pairs were interviewed who were working in Germany at the time of the interview or had worked there earlier: Filip from Slovakia, Taras from Ukraine, and Alexander from Russia.

The analysis of this material is aimed at displaying what patterns of interpretation (*Deutungsmuster*, cf. Oevermann 1973) are used to discuss male au pairs in newspapers and magazines, blogs, Internet forums, narratives in expert and biographical interviews, and other sources. It will be shown that, aside from differences in data type, the phenomenon of male au pair is constructed with coherent patterns of interpretation.

#### 4. It’s in the Name: Inequality, as Reflected in the Different Terms Used for Male and Female Au Pairs

A closer look at the different terms used to denote female and male au pairs reveals that they are placed in different work settings and that their gender relates to different sets of duties. Not only did the term *au pair boy*—seemingly the obvious equivalent to *au pair girl*—never catch on; the work performed by male au pairs has a different name than, and is different in kind from that performed by female au pairs. The English term *manny* (i.e., *male nanny*) has been used by German media. The subtitle of “Guys as Nannies,” an article in the online magazine *Spiegel Online* on “male au pairs” and “young men” who work in a “traditional girls’ job” was “Help me, Super-Manny.” Similarly, the title of an article published on the website *betreut.de* was “Manny, the Male Nanny,” and the newspaper *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* published an article entitled “Mike, the Supernanny,” which stated that “Young men may not be better suited, but they are definitely not less well suited than girls.” By using terms which as-

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<sup>4</sup> The names of these four individuals are fictitious to preserve anonymity.

sociate male au pairs with nannies or babysitters, these publications make it clear that the main duty of male au pairs is to provide childcare, and that performing housework—another major area of au pair work, plays but a minor role or no role at all. It is also crucial to note that male au pairs are granted the status of an adult (“young men”), whereas female au pairs are regarded in the same sections of these texts as juveniles (“girls”), thus denying that female au pairs are independent adult women. Conversely, by referring to male au pairs as “young men,” the publications cited above reinforce these individuals’ status of majority, on the basis of which they provide specific services to their host families.

While the language used in journalistic articles is probably standardized and edited, online discussion forums provide insights into written forms of colloquial language. While the term *guys* (German: *Jungs*) was frequently used in the sources analyzed for this study, along with *young men*, very rarely were male au pairs referred to as *boys*; female au pairs, on the other hand, were exclusively referred to as *girls*. The terms used for male au pairs indicate that they are regarded as responsible and independent adults, but the implicit reference to their being adults may also be used to imply a general risk of sexual abuse. In the online discussion on “Au Pair for Housework: Experiences Anyone?” the original poster wrote that she had contacted an au pair agency and that an “au pair boy (man) is interested in our family” (20-Jul-2012, 11:28pm). One user answered, “I don’t think I would leave a man alone with my kids” (21-Jul-2012, 12:25am). This posting illustrates that male au pairs may play a subordinate role in their host family, but they are still grown-up men who perform “hegemonic masculinity” (see above), as a result of which the host family’s children are at a risk of becoming victims of violence, injury, or sexual abuse, an aspect that is never mentioned in connection with female au pairs.

## 5. Doing Gender Equality in Family Work by Hiring a Male Au Pair

In the discourses analyzed for this study, the fact that some host families have started to hire male au pairs is presented as an indicator of social change and of changing gender relations. The increasing involvement of men in family work is regarded as a positive development, primarily because it shows the children of the host family that men too can do housework, and that hiring a male au pair “has a positive side effect: the sons learn that it is not uncool for men to cook or do the ironing” (Stuttgarter Nachrichten 2012). Thus, the performance of gender equality, which is to be achieved by men’s participation in family work, is outsourced to an employee of the family.

In connection with the discussion of “involved fathers”, male au pairs are presented as exhibiting a rare but preferable form of masculinity which does not conform to the traditional male gender role. It is assumed that the majority of men still tend to display “traditional masculinity”

to avoid having to help with family work, and that only a certain kind of men are interested in, and suitable for, au pair work. One of our interviewees, Mrs. Meier, the director of an au pair agency, stated that many families are influenced by “traditional” gender roles and “have reservations” about hiring a male au pair because they think that men are simply not able to perform this kind of work. These families also believe that many au pairs are from countries with “traditional cultures in which men don’t really do housework [...] and don’t take orders from a woman” (Mrs. Meier). In the online discussion on “Nanny vs. Au Pair and Pay: Maaaaaaany Answers, Please” (2004), one poster wrote that she would never consider “having a young Muslim in my house” (user “henni” on 4-Feb-2004). Men’s participation in family work is thus used as an indicator of gender equality and social progress. Because many au pairs are from countries which are regarded as less developed in terms of gender equality and social progress, a man’s suitability for au pair work is judged on the basis of individual dispositions which allow certain men to act in ways that do not conform to traditional notions of masculinity. However, it would appear that this is limited to providing childcare, to the exclusion of housework. This impression is reinforced by the fact that all of the au pair agency staff members we interviewed stated that they advised prospective host families not to delegate too much housework to male au pairs because male au pairs, unlike female ones, might refuse to do housework and to take orders from female employers. Even if a male au pair is hired, and if hiring him is regarded as a marker of gender equality, a male au pair will know that his female employer continues to delegate work to him and monitor his work, even if she does most of the housework herself or delegates it to a female employee.

Suitability for the job is one of the most important questions raised in newspaper and magazine articles and blog posts. The interviews with the agency staff also revealed that placing men with families takes much longer than placing female au pairs because trying to find families who may be interested in male au pairs and “persuading” them of the candidate’s qualities is much more time-consuming. Mr. Schuster, the managing director of another au pair agency, stated in his interview that he only accepts male candidates if he personally believes that the applicant is suitable for au pair work; to be eligible, an applicant must provide written proof of some form of childcare training and have a pleasing personality.

The discourse about males’ suitability is based on attributions which include general categorizations related to individuals’ sex, assumptions about their gender socialization, and assumptions about their personality. In combination, these patterns of interpretation imply that male au pairs are superior to female ones, which is expressed in such terms as *supermanny*. The sex category of maleness is used in the media discourses to assert, in a common-sense logic, that men have a stronger personality, as reflected in attributes such as:

- being independent, uncomplicated, and tough (Stuttgarter Nachrichten 2012),
- emotional stability, greater commitment to doing work, and a lower level of “bitchiness” (Spiegel 2010),
- being uncomplicated, being homesick less often, having less of a need to be in touch with other au pairs (Westdeutsche Zeitung 2014).

Agency director Meier also stated, “They are easier to handle than girls of this age because girls are often preoccupied with themselves and have their own problems to deal with.” In other words, young men, by virtue of their sex and the character traits associated with it, are actually more suitable for au pair work and integrate into their host family more easily, meaning that they are generally more valuable and superior workers owing to their hegemonic masculine mental strength.

Culture-specific constructions of masculinity and femininity are used to explain that some men—unlike the “normal” majority of men, who are reluctant to do family work—are interested in, and therefore are suitable for, au pair work: because au pairs often come from more “traditional” countries, their decision to become an au pair is often met with negative reactions from their social environment. One contributor to a discussion on “Male Nannies in Germany” (2012) on *betreut.de* wrote that male au pairs “disrupt the traditional male role: males who are confronted with disparaging comments in their environment have a thick skin and are emotionally stable. Actually, it is a sign of inner strength. Also, a man who has to stand his ground for his vocation is appropriately invested in his work” (user “Richter” on 19-Oct-2012). This means that since men in au pair–sending countries who display any of the dominant forms of masculinity do not get involved in housework and childcare, the very fact that some men from these countries decide to work as au pairs—that is, in a job that runs counter to the prevailing norms of masculinity—proves that these men have a genuine interest in providing childcare and are therefore suitable. The prospective host families offer them contexts in which they can display a form of masculinity which does not conform to traditional male gender roles, in a way that would be stigmatized in their supposedly more traditional context of origin.

However, in spite of the belief that men who decide to become au pairs must be devoted to childcare, doubts about their sincerity remain. For this reason, individuals who post in the relevant Internet forums also occasionally discuss ways of assessing male applicants’ suitability for au pair work, while suitability of female au pairs is rarely, if ever, discussed. Thus, when male applicants show interest in providing childcare, they are met with suspicion because being interested in caring for a child does not conform with the established norms of “normal” masculinity. The two most commonly cited reasons why male applicants’ suitability

is called into question are that some male applicants may lie about being interested in providing childcare because they are looking for an opportunity to immigrate and therefore will not be devoted child care providers, and that some applicants may seek access to the child or the children of a host family to sexually abuse them.

Meeting male applicants in person is generally regarded as a way of assessing their suitability for au pair work. In the case of the male au pairs interviewed for this study, this was done in different ways. Alexander met with the agency director in person, who then recruited him on a trip to Russia; Filip was hired for a probationary period of one month; and Taras met his prospective host family in Poland, who were on vacation there and who paid for his travel expenses. Some posters in Internet forums also suggested that prospective host families should talk to applicants on the telephone, hire them on probation for a few months, and invite male applicants who already are in Germany, to meet the family in person. One contributor to a discussion on “Nanny vs. Au Pair and Pay: Maaaaaany Answers, Please” (2004) wrote that a male candidate can be hired if he comes across as pleasant during the face-to-face interview, if he gets along well with the children, and if the children like him. In this and other discussions on related issues, posters also emphasized that, because meeting applicants face-to-face is not always possible, they should provide proof of their suitability for providing childcare by means of certificates that indicate that they have experience as childcare workers, something that appears to be of much less importance when it comes to placing female au pairs with families. Thus, men have to be trained to become childcare workers, while women “naturally” hold relevant skills.

## 6. How Male Au Pairs ‘Do Masculinity’

A few years ago, a German newspaper quoted the director of an au pair agency as saying that “A host mother who mostly needs support in the kitchen and with the housework is usually well advised to host an au pair girl. Many couples with sons find that male au pairs are best for them” (Stuttgarter Nachrichten 2012). What this says is that, because of their gender, male au pairs may not really be as suitable for performing housework as female au pairs, but they are well suited for providing childcare for boys. This raises two questions: What do the specific work settings for male au pairs look like? And, how is work assigned to male au pairs in relation to their gender?

To answer the first question, we will take a look at the work settings of the three male au pairs interviewed for this study, Filip, Taras, and Alexander. At the time of the interviews, Filip was working for a single mother of two boys, aged 4 and 6 years; Taras was working for a couple with an 11-year-old son; and Alexander was working for a couple with a 15-year-old daughter and two sons, aged 12 and 8 years. The fathers of the latter two families were pro-

fessors who worked a lot and spent little time at home. The first two families had cleaners who took care of the housework, and Alexander helped his female employer with the housework. The au pair staff interviewed for this study stated that, as in Filip's case, male au pairs are usually hired by single mothers with sons who have passed the toddler stage. Thus, it might be argued that in such work settings, male au pairs assume the role of the male adult in the family. This assumption is supported by agency director Meier's statement that when she tries to place a male candidate with a couple, it is usually the male partner who refuses to hire a male au pair because the male partner is afraid that a male au pair might threaten his role within the family. In order to understand the position male au pairs have in families, we should take a look at the duties that are assigned to male au pairs. The duties performed by the interviewees included:

- taking the sons to daycare, to school and to leisure activities by car or bicycle (Filip, Taras),
- providing care for the sons in the afternoons, such as by serving them pre-cooked meals and supervising their homework (Filip, Taras, Alexander),
- playing with the sons in the afternoons and engaging in outdoor activities, such as playing football (Filip, Taras, Alexander),
- staying at home in the evenings when the parents went out and the sons were asleep (Filip, Taras).

In the media sources reviewed for this study, two main reasons related to the qualities of male gendered care were given for placing male au pairs with families with sons: 1) male au pairs share interests with the boys for whom they provide care, and 2) hiring a male au pair to provide care for boys is a form of compensation for the boys' being raised in a female-dominated environment.

If having interests similar to those of the boys is regarded as a special quality, this means that childcare qualifications are gendered and essentialized. According to this line of reasoning, male au pairs are particularly suitable for providing care for boys because of their "natural" disposition to enjoy nature and wildlife and to engage in physical activities. Typically, a clear distinction is made between the needs of babies and toddlers, which must be satisfied by a female au pair, and the needs of boys who have passed these stages, the satisfaction of which can be delegated to male au pairs. When it comes to providing care for older children, male au pairs are considered suitable only for providing care for sons, while providing care for small children and for daughters of all ages remains an exclusively feminine domain. Whereas the work of female au pairs involves physical care and nurturing practices (e.g., bathing, changing diapers, and feeding), male au pairs are hired to provide care for boys who have reached a certain level of autonomy. Thus, those who argue that by employing a male au pair parents can show their children that childcare can be provided by men as well as by

women fail to acknowledge that childcare is implicitly gendered, in that male au pairing does not involve the core element of motherly care, namely, intimate contact to the children.

One contributor to a discussion on “Experience with Au Pairs”, a German mother of two sons whose husband is often not home because he travels a lot on business, explains why she wants to employ a male au pair rather than a female one:

The kids are now beyond the typ. “childcare age”—that’s an advantage because we don’t need a “nanny,” but rather some kind of companion. We’ve already decided that we—if we’re gonna do it (and we’re quite sure that we are, unless we get tons of bad experiences like theft, drugs, alcohol, impudent or massively irresponsible behavior, beat kids, etc. and the like...)—that we don’t want a girl, but someone who gets along well with boys, understands them and is keen on rascals—who could do that better than a “he”? Maybe the difference to others is that we don’t need an au pair—neither as a maid nor as a nanny. I can allot my working time quite freely. It would just be about helping with the housework and not toiling—and what’s particularly important is that “he” likes to spend time with the boys—who think this really is a great idea, by the way. They’re always keen on learning everything about foreign cultures—preferably first-hand. The more “foreign” the better! (user “starkejungs” on 4-Jul-2011, 4:55pm)

The reason for posting is to ask other families who have hired male au pairs in the past about their experiences and thus to make sure that none of them have had any negative experiences with deviant behavior, violence, crime, and the like. In doing so, she refers to the men’s hegemonic masculine power to injure, which can only be avoided by employing a female au pair, who does not have other essential hegemonic masculine skills. The poster focuses on the specific suitability of a male au pair in comparison with that of a female au pair, emphasizing male au pairs’ ability to “understand” her sons and their interest in spending time with her “rascals.” Her referring to gender shows that she assumes that male au pairs and sons are interested in the same activities and that this will lead to the development of a pseudo-familial relationship comparable to the relationship between older and younger brothers or between a father and his sons, or that the time spent together will result in some kind of pseudo-friendship. Many sources, including “The Host Family Child Florian from Berlin”, a personal account published on the website of the agency AuPairCare, state that playing with a male au pair “is much more fun” for boys. The implicit message is that families who want to delegate all their housework and childcare duties to an au pair, must hire a female one, but the special quality of male au pairs is that owing to their hegemonic masculinity and foreignness, they can provide entertainment for male children.

According to the second line of reasoning found in the media sources reviewed for this study—that hiring a male au pair to provide care for boys is a form of compensation for the boys’ being raised in a female-dominated environment—a male au pair is put in the position of a male adult role model because the father of the children is not there to occupy this position in the family.

As we have seen, male au pairs mainly provide childcare, but Mr. Hohmeier and Mr. Schmidt, the two volunteers we interviewed for this study, also presented an example which reveals the gender division between male au pairs and female employers in the area of housework. They told us that once there was a male au pair who did repairs around the house instead of performing other types of housework, which was appreciated by his female employee.

According to an article on an au pair named Mike, which was published in the newspaper *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, Mike supported his female employer by carrying heavy things when they went shopping together. In this example, the housework of the male au pair includes helping the female employer with specific duties that require physical power, but he is not solely responsible for specific areas of housework, which are often delegated to female au pairs. By doing gendered family work, male au pairs function as role models of masculinity in the socialization of the boys for whom they provide care. Mike did all the things with the 8- and 12-year-old sons of his host family “which otherwise would have had to wait until daddy came home in the evening: scuffling and tussling, for example, or playing football” (Stuttgarter Nachrichten 2012).

Taking on different sets of family work–related duties than the female employer allows male au pairs to maintain hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating physical strength and activity, which is the condition for performing the male adult role in the socialization of children. Duties related to the role of the mother are still performed by her rather than being delegated to the male au pair. That doing masculinity is one of the duties of male au pairs, if not their main duty, becomes apparent in the narrative of the Slovakian au pair Filip, who was working for a single mother when he was interviewed. Filip stated that he felt pressured to become a “male role model” for his employer’s sons, which he simply was unable to do:

And I was put under pressure, she always wanted me to somehow play the father [...] to be a role model, a role model in many respects, yes. She always thought me a bad role model in certain respects because I could never be *that* perfect [...] she always wanted to tell me how to behave and how to do things.

When asked to give an example, he recalled that one day his employer asked him to show her sons how “to handle a knife” and how to build a tree house—things he simply could not do. This example suggests that male au pairs are put into a position where they not only have to babysit their employers’ sons, they are also expected to provide care work which involves a performance of hegemonic masculinity (and no other type of masculinity), which is then to be imitated by the boys as part of their gender socialization. While working as an au pair, our interviewee Filip was not expected to act as a role model of gender equality (such as by doing all types of housework and childcare duties); rather, he was expected to perform a modified version of hegemonic masculinity which involves participation in childcare. This



shows that sex-related categorizations are so inseparably bound to the understanding of children's socialization that female individuals—i.e., the host mother or female au pairs—are not expected to engage in activities traditionally regarded as “male”, such as building a tree house.

## 7. Conclusion

As has been shown, the phenomenon of male au pairs is discussed with regard to two lines of reasoning, which are integrated into larger discourses about gender equality: that men are involved in performing housework and childcare duties to establish gender equality, and to counterbalance the potential negative effects on boys of growing up in female-dominated social environments because the father is away from home much of the time. Doing gender and doing family work are interconnected in two ways, in that “doing gender equality” requires men to participate in family work, and the childcare provided by men socializes children's concepts of masculinity. Both elements can be found in the male au pair: outsourcing family work to a male individual who is not a family member is constructed as a form of gender equality that compensates for the father's absence. Paradoxically, the gender division is maintained as male au pairs perform very little housework because they are hired primarily to care for the boys of their host family. Contrary to the general assumption that men in general, and men from supposedly more traditional cultures in particular, are not interested in providing childcare, men's suitability for au pair work is believed to be an individual disposition which stems from a personal desire to provide childcare despite the fact that such men who provide childcare are stigmatized in their context of origin. The host family is thus regarded as a sphere for male au pairs to act out their preferred form of masculinity by working as a childcare provider.

However, the role au pairs play within families is not limited to providing specific services; male au pairs are also expected to assume the roles of male family members. By involving male au pairs in the provision of childcare and expecting them to act as role models of hegemonic masculinity, hosts essentialize sex categorization as a condition of providing gendered care. Male au pairs are expected to produce a specific gender identity regardless of possible differences in terms of generation, social and cultural background, personal disposition, and so on, in order to fill the gap left by the father's absence or inability to perform certain duties that are delegated to him.

However, male au pairs' “doing masculinity” does nothing to dissolve the gender division of family work because the core activities of family work reflect the gender differences in the socialization of children. Au pair work which allows for the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity involves activities that are related to physical strength or physical activity, such as tak-

ing children to school, playing outdoor games and doing sports with them, doing repairs around the house, and helping the female employer carry heavy shopping bags. As a result, a specific niche is constructed for male au pairs, in which housework largely is performed by the female employer or by other employees (e.g., a cleaner), while the male au pairs are responsible for providing non-intimate care for male children who have passed the toddler stage. Since the male adult role within a family is very different to the mother's role (regardless of whether the male adult role is assumed by a male au pair or the father of the family), the fact that male au pairs are very popular for the care of boys is nothing less than evidence of the continuing gender division of domestic work and childcare.

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