

# Chapter 5

## Rumbling and Tumbling in School: Jokes, Masculinity and Homosocial Relations



Thomas Johansson  and Ylva Odenbring 

This chapter draws on a meta-analysis of data from two different research projects conducted in two lower secondary schools in Sweden. The chapter explores teenage boys' narratives of existing joking cultures and lad cultures in the everyday life of school. Using the concepts of vertical and horizontal homosociality, the study demonstrates that there are aspects of both power and emotional bonding present in the processes of homosociality in boys' peer relations. The results indicate that calling each other names and fighting for 'fun' may be considered harmless and viewed as connecting features of social life in school settings. On the other hand, the results indicates that there sometimes is a very thin line between what is considered fun and what may be regarded as harassment. Not all boys support the joking and lad cultures in their school, and some boys actually indicate that they are against such behaviour and express awareness about the seriousness behind the violent acts. This, we argue, shows the complexity of homosocial relations in school.

### Introduction

In the classic ethnographic study *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Paul Willis (1977) demonstrated how jokes and acts of harassment were part of young boys' peer culture and social relationships in the everyday life of school. By using jokes, sarcasm and mischief, the boys transformed the legitimate school culture into something reprehensible. Group solidarity and male identity were created at the cost of respect for teachers, female students and students

---

T. Johansson (✉) · Y. Odenbring  
University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden  
e-mail: [thomas.johansson@ped.gu.se](mailto:thomas.johansson@ped.gu.se); [ylva.odenbring@gu.se](mailto:ylva.odenbring@gu.se)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature  
Switzerland AG 2021

Y. Odenbring, T. Johansson (eds.), *Violence, Victimisation and Young People*,  
Young People and Learning Processes in School and Everyday Life 4,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75319-1\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75319-1_5)

with immigrant background. Although there have been some significant changes in the lad culture since Willis conducted his study in the UK during the 1970s, more recent research indicates that some homosocial mechanisms and masculine behaviour still remain in contemporary schools.

Contemporary research on the relation between joking and having fun and harassment in schools shows, on the one hand, how students joke around and use jokes as a source of communication (cf. Lund, 2015; Mills & Carwile, 2009). On the other hand, there are researchers who suggest that 'just having fun' and verbal insults among students have become a part of a masculine, sexist and violent school culture (Lahelma, 2002, Chap. 2 this volume; Pesola McEachern, 2014; Odenbring & Johansson, 2019). Several previous studies have revealed the highly complex and contradictory picture of the relation between teasing, 'having fun' and bullying in schools (Lund, 2015; Mills & Carwile, 2009; Ritchie, 2014). Research stressing the positive, creative and reflexive aspects of joking cultures in schools often argues that joking is an asset and part of creative learning processes (Lund, 2015). Research also suggests that teasing has often been separated from bullying and regarded as a developmentally appropriate and highly acceptable form of interaction (Mills & Carwile, 2009).

Yet, contemporary research also indicates that there is a thin line between what are considered serious insults and acts of playfulness (Varjas et al., 2008). Students do not necessarily regard 'just joking around' and fighting between consenting individuals as bullying (Henriksen & Bengtsson, 2018; Varjas et al., 2008). As long as these behaviours do not turn into physical fights, the situations are often identified and described as playful acts between peers (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Mills & Carwile, 2009). Everyday violence in school is often trivialized and experienced as 'nothing unusual' by students and becomes an intrinsic part of daily life. At the same time, researchers argue the experiences of accumulated violence may result in young people becoming desensitized to it (Henriksen & Bengtsson, 2018).

Several studies suggest that teasing and mocking are part of the social process of becoming a man (McCann et al., 2010; Sulkowski et al., 2014; Varjas et al., 2008). Being able to joke and laugh about abuse or violence is part of 'toughening up' and becoming a 'hard' man. The boys who fail this 'manhood test' remain in the sphere of being unmanly. In many schools, the students also accept a certain level of homophobic jokes and racist generalizations as part of the existing joking culture (Raby, 2004). These more negative aspects of teasing and joking are connected in particular to masculinity and boys' homosocial relations. Similarly, Pesola McEachern's (2014) study in an all-boys Catholic school shows how boys calling each other 'gay' was synonymous with being labelled feminine. Using degrading words such as 'gay' or 'homo' as well as talking in a degrading way about women was a strong part of the masculine culture at this school. Being subject to homophobic name-calling, some of the boys sought to remove all doubt about their sexuality by emphasizing their heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, Pesola McEachern (2014) concludes.

Although we find these prior studies on teasing and jokes in schools interesting, we will argue that there is a need for a more critical and gender-aware investigation

of this area. In this connection the aim of the current chapter is to explore teenage boys' narratives of existing joking cultures and lad cultures in the everyday life of lower secondary school. It is our ambition to highlight different dynamics and aspects involved in jokes and acts of fighting and wrestling among male students and to explore different types of joking cultures and lad cultures in school. The chapter draws on a meta-analysis of data from two different research projects supported by grants from the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority (grant number 02794/2017) and the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (grant number 2017-00071), conducted in two lower secondary schools, named Station Master School and Amber School respectively, located in different rural areas in Sweden. Methodologically, the chapter draws on interviews with students in the ninth grade, which is the last year of lower secondary school. All interviews were conducted by the second author. In the chapter we use a qualitative approach with a mixture of focus group interviews and individual interviews. Interviews have the advantage of revealing interesting results as well as highlighting students' voices regarding their experiences in school. Initially, the data from the individual projects were conducted and analysed separately. The analytic process of the current chapter is based on a collective process through which we have jointly read through the transcripts and analysed the data. To ensure confidentiality, all names of participants as well as the names of the schools in this chapter have been anonymized (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

## Homosociality

The concept of *homosociality* is often used to define the construction of social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. The concept is also frequently applied to explain how men, through their friendships and intimate social relations with other men, maintain and defend the gender order and patriarchy (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 1976; Sedgewick, 1985). This common and somewhat overexploited use of the concept referring to how men uphold patriarchy simplifies and reduces homosociality to showing how men bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions. Although the concept of homosociality maintains homogeneous gender categorizations, focusing on single-sex groups and often referring to hierarchical gender relations in which men strengthen hegemonic gender ideals, it is also possible to open up the concept and look more closely at the dual aspects of homosociality. This has already been done in research on *fratriarchal spaces*, for example in the military, where men simultaneously uphold close as well as hierarchal and antagonistic relations with their peers (see, for example, Higate, 2012; Remy, 1990). Here we will instead try to develop the concept of homosociality.

By making a distinction between the *vertical* and *horizontal* practice of homosociality, we can develop a more dynamic view of it (Haywood, Johansson, Herz,

Hammarén, & Ottemo). Taking a vertical view of homosociality emphasizes its relation to a hegemonic gender order as well as how homosocial relations uphold and maintain ‘traditional’ hegemonic male and female social positions. However, the development and conceptualization of bromances and horizontal homosociality – new forms of more inclusive intimacies between men – point to variation and transition, and consequently a reconfiguration of hegemony including tendencies towards an eventual transformation of intimacy and gender and power relations. In the absence of societal policing of gender and sexual orientation, men would be able to have friendships with other men regardless of sexual orientation (Chen, 2012). Sexual orientation would not be the principal basis for friendship. Rigid boundaries between friendships and romantic relationships would not be necessary, and the potential for fluidity in men’s relationships would increase. Using the concept of horizontal homosociality, we argue that there is a need to also look at redefinitions of hegemonic masculinity and to bring forward more nuanced pictures of men’s and boys’ homosocial behaviour.

In the present chapter, we will take a closer look at how young boys approach each other in terms of name-calling and fights for ‘fun’. Using the concept of homosociality as a tool to decode and interpret the different practices related to fights for ‘fun’, we aim to get a better grasp on the thin line between fun and harassment. Homosocial relations are necessary, and they are an intrinsic part of friendship socialization at schools. However, it is also necessary to maintain a focus on power and the possibility that these relations can turn into more vertical and hierarchical power relations and, in addition, into oppressive practices in school settings. Sorting out the vertical from the horizontal aspects of homosociality can be a tricky business. Often these interrelations are tightly interwoven. The ambition here is to use this conceptual tool to discern oppressive practices from teasing and fighting for ‘fun’ as a social competence and skill.

## **Jokes, Fights and Male Bonding**

Before we present the results of this chapter, we will give a brief background about the two rural schools, Station Master School and Amber School, in which the research projects have been conducted. Station Master School is a public compulsory school located in Granby, a rural village of 1600 inhabitants. The school is the only lower secondary school in the catchment area, and it enrolls students from the village of Granby as well as from surrounding villages. The interviews at Station Master School were conducted from November 2017 until May 2018.

Amber School is a public school located in the village of Granberget, which has approximately 3000 inhabitants. The school is the only lower secondary school in Granberget municipality, and its catchment area covers the entire municipality, which includes Granberget village as well as the surrounding smaller villages. The interviews were conducted in February 2019. Similar to other rural areas in Sweden, Granby and Granberget communities have a lower educational level and lower

average incomes compared to the national average (Statistikmyndigheten, 2019). Also, the proportion of inhabitants with immigrant background in both communities is lower than the national average of 20%.

The results will be presented and unpacked according to the two main themes that have been identified in the thematic analysis of the data (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017): 1) Jokes – just for ‘fun’ or a serious game? and 2) Physical fights for ‘fun’. The main aim of the chapter is not to contextualize the results in relation to the different school contexts, but rather to explore and critically discuss different kinds of verbal jokes and physical acts done for ‘fun’. In the concluding section we will discuss and highlight the main results of this chapter, and in the final section of this chapter we will critically discuss joking and lad cultures in school and how this might impact boys’ everyday life and well-being in school.

### *Jokes – Just for ‘Fun’ or a Serious Game?*

The daily teasing that goes on in school settings can be seen as a form of *homosocial relations*. Although constant teasing can be interpreted as harassment, the young boys themselves have a different view on this. They constantly call each other things, using different verbal insults. The students at Amber School referred to a joking culture where the students called each other different forms of degrading words on a daily basis, and this phenomenon was particularly common among the boys, as revealed during one of the focus group interviews.

Interviewer: Would you say it is part of your school culture, that you joke around and express quite harsh words to each other, but it is only meant as a joke?

Simon: Yes, particularly in our class. We boys call each other almost anything.

Interviewer: What do you call each other? Can you give an example?

Simon: When we play table tennis during the breaks you can hear someone tell someone else, ‘you suck’, but no one is offended.

Karl: You just laugh at each other, but you can also say much worse words.

Interviewer: What kinds of words are those? Is it only boys who express words like that?

Simon: Girls also use bad words sometimes, but they do it more quietly.

Interviewer: Is everyone taking part in playing table tennis?

Simon: It’s mostly only us guys.

Interviewer: What other things do you call each other?

Karl: People say things like ‘fucking idiot’, ‘I’m going to kill you’, but you know it is just a joke and then we start to fight for fun. (Focus group interview, Amber School)

Calling each other things like ‘fucking idiot’ or saying ‘you suck’ could be seen as a part of the boys’ peer culture at Amber School. The boys express that they know that this is part of the existing joking culture and they also express that this is why they are not offended and just laugh about it. Not showing weakness and vulnerability could here be understood as a way for the boys to construct their masculinity and show the rest of the boys in the peer group that they are strong and manly enough to be able to take the joke (cf. Pascoe, 2005). Another form of joke and verbal insults

that the students referred to was homophobic name-calling. The students referred to this as part of everyday jokes at school.

Interviewer: What about homophobic name-calling? Do you call each other gay, for example?

Ossian: Yes, you do that in the boys' group, but no one is offended or feels humiliated, you're just joking around because you are such close friends. When you say it, you don't mean it. But sure, there might be someone who actually is offended. You hear 'gay' a lot in school, I hear it every day.

Interviewer: What's the feeling when someone says that?

Ossian: People have called me that, mostly Oskar or another one of my closest friends, so I'm not offended. I'm usually not offended if people call me that or call me something else. (Individual interview, Amber School)

The students refer to the word 'gay' as something they use more or less on a daily basis, indicating this is something they do for 'fun' and part of the boys' peer culture. Similar to the boys' joking culture at Amber School, boys' joking culture at Station Master School was described in terms of various forms of verbal insults and homophobic name-calling. Also, at this school jokes and teasing were recurrent behaviours among the boys.

Interviewer: What kind of name-calling and bad words do you call each other?

André: Gay.

Oskar: Well, a little bit of everything.

Per: All kinds of name-calling.

Oskar: It's a little bit of everything, but it's mostly between boys.

Interviewer: Okay, so are all boys called gay or just certain boys?

André: It's just for fun.

Oskar: You know who you can or can't call that.

Interviewer: But why do you use this kind of name-calling?

André: It's just like random talk, you know.

Oskar: In one peer group, you might have your own jargon, you have a certain jargon, and in another group they have another jargon. It all depends on the people in that group and stuff like that. (Focus group interview, Station Master School)

The boys' talk and calling each other 'gay' at Station Master School and Amber School, respectively, could here be understood as a part of the existing hegemony and creating horizontal homosocial bonds (cf. Haywood et al., 2017). Pascoe (2005) argues that 'fag' (in this chapter, 'gay' and 'fag' are used synonymously) is not necessarily attached only to homosexual boys. This form of talk and joking culture also serve as a way for heterosexual boys to discipline themselves and each other. When heterosexual boys call another boy a fag or gay, it is a way to tell him that he is not a 'real man'. Depending on whom the epithet 'fag' is directed to, this may or may not have a sexual meaning, but it always has a gendered meaning. This means that any boy can be subject to being called a 'fag' (or as in this chapter, gay) by other boys, Pascoe stresses. Pascoe argues that this means that 'fag talk' is not static, but rather fluid: 'Becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity' (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330). As for the boys at Station Master School and Amber School, the use of 'gay talk' could be

interpreted as part of disciplining heterosexual boys and maintaining hegemonic masculinity. Our data also reveal that students use sexist language and call each other sexist words when they are angry and upset.

Axel: When you are angry with someone, you say to that person 'you're a little cunt'.

Interviewer: Okay do you call both boys and girls that?

Axel: Yes.

Interviewer: Hmm, what else do you call each other?

Axel: Gay.

Interviewer: Gay, okay?

Axel: You can say 'you're fucking gay' and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Is that between boys?

Axel: Normally yes. /.../ But when you're angry you just shout things at someone.

Vincent: It could be anyone. (Focus group interview, Station Master School)

The sexist expression 'cunt' has a similar function as the use of calling each other gay, to discipline each other but also to diminish each other. Also, as suggested by previous research, this form of harassment is also aimed at girls and women to harass and degrade them (Lahelma, 2002; Odenbring & Johansson, 2019). Although homophobic name-calling is clearly part of everyday life and is expressed and framed as a joke between boys in both schools, there are also students who are highly aware of the detrimental effects this form of name-calling might have. When these students are interviewed, they not only question this behaviour but they also discuss it critically. One of the students who reflected on and questioned this behaviour was Gabriel at Station Master School.

Interviewer: You talked about the existing homophobia in school and the name-calling and calling each other gay?

Gabriel: Mmm, yeah, that it's bad to be a homosexual.

Interviewer: Okay, how is that expressed?

Gabriel: How is that expressed?

Interviewer: Yes, how do students talk about it, why is it considered something bad?

Gabriel: I don't know why, but I think I've seen through this pretty well, they just say things without knowing why they're actually saying it. /.../ Because when you ask them why they said what they said they have no answer. They just say it, without thinking about what they're saying. /.../ I just think they don't understand what they're actually saying. (Individual interview, Station Master School)

The homophobia and homophobic name-calling at Station Master School that Gabriel refers to and reflects upon is framed from a perspective where homosexuality is understood as something bad and subordinate to heterosexuality. Similarly, students at Amber School critically reflected on the existing joking culture and homophobic name-calling. Hugo was one of the students who questioned this behaviour and also raised the underlying seriousness about the degrading name-calling.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on jokes? I mean, sometimes there might be a quite thin line between what is considered a joke and what is not in what is said, isn't there?

Hugo: You definitely know when there is some truth behind some of the jokes.

Interviewer: Would you say there is a blunt joking culture among the students at this school?

Do you have to be able take the joke, [including] homophobic jokes, so to speak?

Hugo: Oh yes, there is quite a lot of homophobia here, that's the case everywhere actually. Sometimes they definitely cross the line. I also say bad things to my friends sometimes, but then you know you actually don't mean it. But, yes, sometimes the joke is too much and they cross the line. (Individual interview, Amber School)

Again, we can see that there is a very thin line between what is and is not considered a joke if the joke can be understood as an actual insult. As suggested by previous researchers, the line between what is considered 'just a joke' and sex-based harassment is often thin or even non-existent because it constitutes a way of maintaining gender hierarchies and building hierarchies between different groups of boys and masculinities (Connell, 1995; Lahelma, 2002, Chap. 2 this volume). The fact that some of the boys actually question the jokes and the joking culture shows the complexity of this behaviour. We argue that this behaviour also has to be understood in the light of how it can be used to humiliate boys who are positioned as subordinated, among them, sexual and racial minorities (cf. Odenbring, 2019a; Odenbring & Johansson, Chap. 12 this volume).

### *Physical Fights for 'Fun'*

Among certain boys in the study, homosocial relations are also expressed through fighting for 'fun'. Sometimes these kinds of activities escalate into quite painful and violent situations. During a focus group interview, boys at Station Master School reflected on a game that they referred to as 'the nipple twist'.

Interviewer: Do you fight for fun? What does that mean?

All: Yes.

Alexander: You hit each other on the nerves [on the muscles], then you're quite exposed.

Interviewer: But that's painful.

Jesper: In the sixth grade, he was completely blue around his nipples.

Alexander: Someone introduced the 'nipple twist' in school and everyone was doing it to me. A couple of guys were holding me down while two to three other guys did the 'nipple twist'. When I was at the gym and went to the sauna afterward I was completely fucking blue!

Interviewer: Yeah, of course.

Alexander: My whole chest.

Interviewer: Of course.

Alexander: I was completely blue on my chest. So, they didn't only hit my nipples.

Interviewer: So, your whole chest was blue?

Alexander: Yes, yes.

Simon: It sounds like we assaulted you.

Alexander: Well, you actually did!

Interviewer: You actually did, yes, but what was the point of this 'nipple twist' thing?

Simon: I don't know, you were pretty retarded back then.

Alexander: When I tried to get back at them, they called for each other to 'hold Alexander' and they did it again.

Interviewer: So, this was a thing between certain boys.

Alexander: It was between all boys. (Focus group interview, Station Master School)



In the extract above, the boys are looking back to when they attended middle school. During this time, one of the boys in particular, Alexander, was exposed to 'the nipple twist'. Alexander is also the only boy who reflects on these incidents as actual assaults. None of the other boys refers to these incidents as physical assaults; instead, the 'nipple twist game' is referred to as something they did when they were younger and did not know better. Now that they are older and in the ninth grade, they do not play the 'nipple twist game' anymore; instead, the boys play a game they refer as to 'the Krona', which is a 'fight for fun game' and involves physical violence.<sup>1</sup>

Interviewer: So, do you still fight for fun in the ninth grade?

Alexander: We played 'the Krona' for a while.

Interviewer: What kind of a game is that?

Alexander: You take one krona [a one-krona coin] and then are you going to hit the other person on their fists.

Jesper: I can show you.

Alexander: No.

Interviewer: Okay, so you have a coin and then you're going to hit his fists with it.

Jesper: And then it starts to bleed.

Alexander: It's not that painful.

Interviewer: Do you still play this game?

Jesper: No, we're not allowed.

Alexander: They forbid it because they said it was dangerous.

Interviewer: Okay, so it's the school professionals who forbid it?

Everyone: Yes.

Jesper: All teachers who caught us doing it took the krona. (Focus group interview, Station Master School)

Apparently, the views of the teachers and those of the students differ considerably. Often this game leads to the ritual bleeding of the victim. When the interviewer asks if they are continuing with this ritual, the students reply that the teachers and other school professionals banned the game. The situation with 'the nipple twist' game, indicates that some students are more exposed to violence than others. For a young boy it might be quite hard to oppose fights for fun and other games, because it is part of the existing 'lad culture' in the boys' group. For the individual boy it might also mean that he in a way feels included in the boys' group. Gabriel at Station Master School defined the existing lad culture at his school as a 'macho culture'. Gabriel also reported that the school climate at Station Master School was very harsh, which means the boys are expected to handle physical pain and not cry; if a boy does cry because he is in pain, the other boys will call him a 'wimp', Gabriel says.

At Amber school there were similar situations in which boys were involved in fights for 'fun'. When talking with the students, it became apparent that they were trying to handle the situation carefully, balancing between their desire to wrestle

---

<sup>1</sup>The Krona refers to the Swedish currency, Swedish Krona. In this particular case, it is the one-krona coin the boys are referring to.

and have some fun during the breaks and the teachers' attempts to restrict the fighting.

Karl: We usually try to start something during the breaks, some fights, just for fun, and then when the teacher comes, we just hug each other, like, it's all at that level, because you are not allowed to fight in school, so immediately when the teacher comes, we grab each other, so it should look like we are doing nothing at all.

Interviewer: Mmm. Have there ever been any problems, injuries?

Simon: Yes, Mats had to go to the health centre once!

Karl: We had a ten-minute break, and then we started arguing because we all wanted to sit on a bench.

Interviewer: Were there people on the bench already?

Karl: Yes, there were some guys sitting on the bench, and then everyone else wanted to sit there too, and then they started to push each other, to sit on the bench, and then there was chaos all around the place.

Interviewer: Did anyone have to go to the health centre? What happened?

Simon: It went well, I think.

Interviewer: What happened? Did he fall off the bench or what?

Simon: I cannot remember why he got hurt.

Karl: It was because he hit something. (Focus group interview, Amber school)

At Amber School, the students talked quite a lot about rumbling and tumbling at the breaks. An incident during which a boy fainted had led to a zero tolerance for this kind of behaviour.

Ossian: A while ago, two boys were fighting for fun. One of the boys tried to lift the other one up, and then he dropped him to the floor. That boy hit his elbow quite bad, and he fainted. Since that incident happened, the teachers and the headmaster have said that we are not allowed to fight with each other. However, many students are still doing this, of course. It is very difficult to stop people from having fun, and doing things they like. /.../

Interviewer: It sounds pretty serious; I mean the story you told about the student who fainted. Do you know when it is only a joke or when it is serious and you have to stop?

Ossian: I'm not sure about how others think and when they realize [it's time] to stop.

Interviewer: No, I see. What about you guys? Oskar, what is your experience?

Oskar: I'm not sure when to stop.

Ossian: I know when I have to draw the line, because when someone is in pain, I have to stop so no one gets hurt.

Interviewer: How do you know that? Is it when the other person say 'it hurts, please stop'? Do you stop then?

Ossian: Yes, I do. (Focus group interview, Amber School)

At Amber School, the fighting continued. The boys interviewed indicated that they were quite aware of the restrictions, but their desire to have some fun overrode these norms. The boys also told us that they had considerable difficulty in judging where to draw the line; that is, knowing at what point fun had gradually turned into something more serious, and maybe also deleterious. The fights for fun can be seen as part of a homosocial culture among the boys. Although the boys expressed an awareness that this was part of the boys' culture, there were also boys who expressed that they did not want to get involved in such activities and did their best to avoid them.

Hilding: When there is a lot of fighting going on in the corridors you do not want them to get you, so you try to avoid it.

Interviewer: Do you go somewhere else then?

Hilding: You just sit there and try to ignore it and hope for the best.

Interviewer: What is going on in the corridors then?

Hilding: They are fighting for fun, they yell. Wasn't there someone that was fighting for fun that had to go to the hospital?

Hugo: Yes, there was. I actually think they fight for real sometimes. Everything can happen in the corridors, you know.

Interviewer: Is there no one [adult] who knows what is going on in the corridors?

Hugo: I don't know. I was really lucky in the seventh grade once. Some people came up to me and were mocking me when I was at my locker, and then some other people came and saw what happened. I was really lucky because the people who were mocking me left; they might not have left if the other people didn't turn up. There were almost no people in the corridors at that time. (Focus group interview, Amber school)

The interviews also reveal that not all boys find the existing lad culture amusing. Some of the boys actually oppose it and try not to get involved in the fights for 'fun', as expressed in the extract above, where Hugo and Hilding express the seriousness behind the fights for 'fun'. Hugo also expresses vulnerability and actual fear of being beaten by the students who mock other students in the school. Here we can see that the power relations tend to turn into vertical and hierarchical power relations and oppressive practices in the everyday life of school (cf. Haywood et al., 2017).

## Lad Cultures in Schools

In the present chapter we have addressed teenage boys' narratives of existing joking and lad cultures in two rural lower secondary schools located in different parts of Sweden. Demographically, the students' community contexts and the schools' catchment areas are quite similar. Both areas consist of a majority white working-class population. Given this, the empirical data from the two schools were considered to be comparable for the purposes of the meta-analysis of this chapter.

An important aim of this study has been to analyse different narratives and to give different boys a voice concerning their views and experiences with joking cultures and lad cultures in the everyday life of school. The picture that emerged from the boys' narratives is far from one-sided; boys have different experiences about the existing schools' cultures and being a young boy in school today. This, we argue, is an important contribution to the research field on young boys and masculinities. We have used the concepts of vertical and horizontal homosociality to interpret and highlight different dynamics and aspects involved in jokes and fighting for 'fun' among male students in the everyday life of school. Using the concepts of vertical and horizontal homosociality, we have tried to demonstrate that there are aspects of both power and emotional bonding present in the processes of homosociality in boys' peer relations. We have analysed our results in relation to how boys make and form homosocial bonds between each other. On the one hand, we have problematized the somewhat positive image of boys making fun of each other in school. Calling each other names and fighting for 'fun' may be considered harmless and

viewed as connecting features of social life in school settings. On the other hand, we have also analysed and discussed that there is sometimes a very thin line between what is considered fun and what may be regarded as harassment.

Homosocial bonding and 'having fun together' can serve as a kind of glue in boys' social relations at school. However, there are also situations when the fun-making actually crosses a boundary and turns into violence. Using jokes or fighting for 'fun' as a way to conceal different forms of harassment, as presented in this chapter, can be interpreted as part of the construction of a highly contradictory homosociality. Clearly the boys themselves tend to interpret teasing, name-calling and fighting for 'fun' as intrinsic parts of friendship and homosocial bonding. At the same time, this kind of behaviour could be interpreted as a way for boys to discipline themselves and others to maintain hegemonic masculinity (cf. Pascoe, 2005). However, the tendency to trivialize different forms of everyday violence makes it difficult for most boys to actually discern when they have crossed the thin line between fun and harassment.

In analysing this phenomenon, it is important to look more closely at the dynamics between horizontal and vertical homosociality. As we have seen, there is a thin line between teasing and having fun on the one hand, and harassment and violence on the other. Our results show that the young boys seem to appreciate and enjoy many parts of the teasing culture and name-calling behaviour at school. As we also have seen, there is sometimes a considerable difference between how adults/teachers and students perceive and interpret what is going on in schools on an everyday basis. This makes the balance between teachers' and other adults' urge to restrict and prohibit certain behaviours and the teenagers' desires and perceptions of the same behaviour quite challenging.

Jokes and 'joking around' sometimes also turn into something very different from having fun together; they can turn into power games as well as violence. Our results indicate that the boys are not expected to show pain or cry, and if they do, they have failed the manhood test and are called 'wimps' by the other boys (Connell, 1995; Lahelma, 2002; McCann et al., 2010). The results also show that some of the boys at both investigated schools question this behaviour. Not all boys want to join the fights for 'fun'. These boys express that they try to avoid getting involved in such fights. The same group of boys also express awareness about the seriousness behind these kinds of violent acts, where some students were badly injured and had to go to the hospital. Also, the jokes and name-calling are reflected upon and questioned. Some of the boys express that there might actually be some truth behind the verbal insults and that people also sometimes tend to cross the line. Here we can see that the power relations move towards vertical power relations and create a school environment that is rather hostile. This, we would argue, shows the complexity of what are considered homosocial relations in school. Our results show that not all boys support the joking and lad cultures in their school, and that some actually indicate that they are against such behaviour.

## Young Boys' Well-being in School

We would argue that our results raise several critical questions about being a male student in school, and also about male students' well-being. Contemporary research suggest that young people have a tendency to downplay violence, sexism and racism (Raby, 2004). When young students get used to a certain level of everyday harassment and violence, it leads to desensitization and a skewed notion of where to draw the line between joking and harassment. The complexity of 'just joking' also makes it difficult for teachers to recognize harassment or bullying and to know when to act and support the students who might be involved (Rawlings, 2017). As suggested by Sulkowski et al. (2014), this raises questions concerning the importance of understanding and recognizing different forms of violent acts and gendered norms in school settings. This is especially important for schools' preventive work and school officials' work with these issues in the school milieu.

Connected to this, and also important to highlight here, is what is stated in the Swedish curriculum of the compulsory school, that is, the preschool class, primary and lower secondary school levels (grades 0–9). Among the values that the school should represent and impart are those covering individual freedom and integrity, equal rights, gender equality and solidarity between people (Skolverket, 2018):

The school should strive to promote equality. In doing so, the school should represent and impart equal rights, opportunities and obligations for all people, regardless of gender. In accordance with fundamental values, the school should also promote interaction between pupils regardless of gender. Through education, the pupils should develop an understanding of how different perceptions of what is female and what is male can affect people's opportunities. The school should thus contribute to pupils developing their ability to critically examine gender patterns and how they can restrict people's life choices and living conditions (Skolverket, 2018, p. 7).

Given the results presented in the current chapter, we have to ask a critical question regarding boys' joking cultures in school: is it just a joke or is it a serious game? To approach this question we need to further develop our conceptual framework on the relation between homosociality, violence and boys' well-being in school. As suggested by previous research, investigating gendered explanations for students' health problems and what aspects of the school environment may cause these problems is an important question for further research (Odenbring, 2019b). Consequently, there is a greater need to analyse the complex relation between vertical and horizontal homosociality, and to avoid stereotypical categorizations of boys' behaviour and notions of boys' school experiences. Giving different boys a voice is therefore crucial, we argue. Future research could include, for instance, interviews of boys from various social backgrounds and to take a closer look at different teenage boys' school cultures, masculinities and well-being in contemporary schools.

## References

- Bird, S. R. (1996). Welcome to the men's club: Homosociality and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. *Gender & Society*, *10*(2), 120–132.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.
- Chen, E. J. (2012). Caught in a bad bromance. *Texas Journal of Women and the Law*, *21*(2), 241–266.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity Press.
- Flood, M. (2008). Men, sex and homosociality: How bonds between men shape their sexual relations with women. *Men and Masculinities*, *10*(3), 339–359.
- Haywood, C., Johansson, T., Herz, M., Hammarén, N., & Ottemo, A. (2017). *The conundrum of masculinity*. Routledge.
- Henriksen, A.-K., & Bengtsson, T. T. (2018). Trivializing violence: Marginalized youth narrating everyday violence. *Theoretical Criminology*, *22*(1), 99–115.
- Higate, P. (2012). Drinking vodka from the 'butt-crack'. *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, *14*(4), 450–469.
- Lahelma, L. (2002). Gendered conflicts in secondary school: Fun or enactment of power? *Gender & Education*, *14*(3), 295–306.
- Lipman-Blumen, J. (1976). Toward a homosocial theory of sex roles: An explanation of the sex segregation of social institutions. *Signs*, *1*(3), 15–31.
- Lund, A. (2015). At a close distance: Dropouts, teachers, and joking relationships. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, *3*(2), 280–308.
- Marwick, A., & Boyd, D. (2014). 'It's just drama': Teen perspectives on conflict and aggression in a networked era. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *17*(9), 1187–1204.
- McCann, P. C., Plummer, D., & Minichiello, V. (2010). Being the butt of the joke: Homophobic humour, male identity, and its connection to emotional and physical violence for men. *Health Sociology Review*, *19*(4), 505–521.
- Mills, C. M., & Carwile, A. M. (2009). The good, the bad, and the borderline: Separating teasing from bullying. *Communication Education*, *58*(2), 276–301.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*, 1–3.
- Odenbring, Y. (2019a). Standing alone: Sexual minority status and victimisation in a rural lower secondary school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, s. 1–15. Published ahead of print on 5 December 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1698064>.
- Odenbring, Y. (2019b). Strong boys and supergirls? School professionals' perceptions of students' mental health and gender in secondary school. *Education Inquiry*, *10*(3), 258–272.
- Odenbring, Y., & Johansson, T. (2019). Tough girl femininity, sisterhood and respectability: Minority girls' perceptions of sexual harassment in secondary school. *NORA*, *27*(4), 250–270.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2005). 'Dude, you're a fag': Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse. *Sexualities*, *8*(3), 329–346.
- Pesola McEachern, K. (2014). *Building a brotherhood? A teacher researcher's study of gender construction at an all-boys Catholic secondary school*. Boston College University Libraries.
- Raby, R. (2004). 'There's no racism at my school, it's just joking around': Ramifications for anti-racist education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *7*(4), 367–383.
- Rawlings, V. (2017). *Gender regulation, violence and social hierarchies in school: 'Sluts', 'gays' and 'scrubs'*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Remy, J. (1990). Patriarchy and patriarchy as forms of androcracy. In J. Hearn & D. H. J. Morgan (Eds.), *Men, masculinities and social theory* (pp. 43–54). Unwin and Hyman.
- Ritchie, C. (2014). 'Taking the piss': Mockery as a form of comic communication. *Comedy Studies*, *5*(1), 33–40.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and homosocial desire*. Columbia University Press.

- Skolverket (2018). *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare* (Revised 2018). Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Statistikmyndigheten SCB. (2019). Kommuner i siffror [Municipalities in numbers]. Accessed 28 April 2019. <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/kommuner-i-siffror/>
- Sulkowski, M. L., Bauman, S. S., Dinner, S., Nixon, C., & Davies, S. (2014). An investigation into how students respond to being victimized by peer aggression. *Journal of School Violence, 13*(4), 339–358.
- Varjas, K., Meyers, J., Bellmoff, L., Lopp, E., Birckbichler, L., & Marshall, M. (2008). Missing voices: Fourth through eighth grade urban students' perceptions of bullying. *Journal of School Violence, 7*(4), 97–118.
- Vetenskapsrådet. (2017). *Godforsknings sed* [Good research practice]. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs*. Saxon House.