



Swedish Boys' Narratives on Sexual Harassment and their Ways of Doing Masculinity

Mattias Lundin¹ · Liselotte Eek-Karlsson¹

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Abstract

When #MeToo was the most intensive, many girls, women and non-binary people's voices were heard about being exposed. Knowledge on boys' perspectives is important as they need to be involved to provide change. In research, boys' and men's voices are missing unless accounted for in settings associated with violence or harassment. This project contributes knowledge about schoolboys' positionings with respect to masculine hegemony and sexual harassment. The analysis of pair interviews with 22 participating boys, aged 14–16, suggests three ways in which they relate to the topic. With respect to the discursive patterns labelled *equal boy* and *let-go boy*, gender issues are competently expressed and these two patterns convey knowledge about the power that the gender culture exercises. These two discursive patterns also suggest a proficient way of taking the gender order into account to fit in with the peer group. Nevertheless, the third pattern, labelled *the dominant boy*, suggests settings when a traditional masculinity culture exercises power. We conclude that discussions on situations where different discursive patterns are overt would facilitate a shift towards gender equal discourses with less risk of sexual harassment.

Keywords Sexual harassment · Boys' perspective · Discursive pattern · Equal boy · Let-go boy · Dominant boy

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute knowledge about school boys' positioning with respect to sexual harassment as they are a key to make change in this regard. Our starting point is that gender is made; identities are constructed through acts in an

✉ Mattias Lundin
mattias.lundin@lnu.se

¹ Department for Education and Teachers' Practice, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

existing reality where gender configurations are framed by norms that provide both superior and subordinate positions. The concept 'sexual harassment' has different political and theoretical bases, which also vary over time, nationally, legally, and even in practice in several ways (Swedish Research Council, 2018). In the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567), sexual harassment is defined as 'an act of sexual nature that violates someone's dignity'. In addition to comments and words, sexual harassment can be touching, invasive glances or unwelcome compliments, invitations, or allusions. The Discrimination Act also prescribes that all students have the right to be in school without risk of being exposed to violence or harassment.

During 2017, when #MeToo was most intensive, mainly girls, women and non-binary people's voices were heard about being exposed. Boys' and men's voices were seldom heard, but they are also exposed (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2020; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2023). The representation of men and masculinity in media is often associated with violence, harassment, and a culture of abuse (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2021). This project turns to the young men's world to get a deeper understanding of their construction of masculinity through their narratives of sexual harassment. We do not consider the efforts to counteract sexual harassment as being an assignment to change women's actions, for example, by contributing to their awareness about how to dress or reside. To change the gender power order, knowledge about gender configurations of the norms affecting young men is needed, not least in school settings. This project contributes knowledge about boys' positioning processes with respect to sexual harassment, applying the following research questions:

- What discursive patterns emerge in boys' narratives about sexual harassment?
- What dynamics occur between the discursive patterns?

Pair interviews with 22 boys, aged 14–16 will be made to understand how they relate to the topic.

Previous Research

The #MeToo movement made an impact in Western culture, and women's voices were heard in the debates and in research. However, boys' voices were not as frequently addressed. Waling (2022) analysed what was said with focus on the subject positions that emerged about men and masculinity. In the 163 analysed articles, five themes that she calls key framing were found: "(a) men as 'victims' of masculinity, (b) inherently 'good' and 'bad' men, (c) 'lost' boys and becoming men, (d) 'awakening' men and the 'awakened' man and (e) protectors and false heroes." These key framings imply contradictions and a lack of coherence, which implicate the importance of addressing gender.

Constructing masculinity deals with how males are to perform in a proper way, i.e., to be a 'real' boy/man, you must behave as heterosexual. By asking nearly 2000 students in grades 7–12, Hill and Kearl (2011) point out the fear among the boys to be called 'gay'. They argue, being called gay may happen, for example if a boy wears colourful clothing or behaves in a way that is perceived as feminine. However, the

risk does not only seem to involve being called gay, but also being labelled as effeminate and sissy (Nordberg, 2006). To prevent these kinds of harassment, the boys must act in ways that do not challenge gender roles. These informal restrictions apply for both students and teachers, as illustrated by Fifield and Swain (2002) with both the teacher's and the student's perspective in the very same science class setting. However, power can be exercised on homosexual subject positions without any elements involving direct harassment, as when hegemonic speech subordinating homosexual people is delivered by humour (Lundin, 2014).

Mayeza and Bhana (2020) addressed how heterosexuality is constructed on a primary school playground. They noted that some boys dominated the playground space and were popularly known in school as 'real' boys. They used the school playground as a space to construct and negotiate their heterosexual identities. In another study on construction of masculinity, Tricket (2016) focused on how masculinity within a 'male gang' was operationalised through attitudes and behaviours of gang members towards women with whom they were acquainted. In the gang, there was an honour code that validated two central characteristic masculine identities: the expression of toughness through physical violence and the demonstration of heterosexuality. Both characteristics were exhibited through relationships with women. Men need women to construct and define what it means to be a man. Tricket argues that masculinity is defined toward and in alliance with both men and women.

Dominant forms of masculinity seem to be a key for the restricted ways to be masculine described above. A study conducted in Australian secondary schools (Robinson, 2005) reveals the relationship between dominant constructions of masculinities and sexual harassment of young women. The boys knew that girls were exposed to sexual harassment, and they had different views about that exposure. They justified their behaviour by saying that it was just a joke and that it was an expected everyday part of their interactions with girls. Another justification was that the girls asked for the boys' inappropriate behaviour. For some boys, it was part of establishing their hegemonic masculine status and reconfirming their position within the male peer group, but there were also boys that challenged the stereotypical masculinity and heterosexual roles (Robinson, 2005). In another study, Leone and Parrott (2019) explored to what extent bystander behaviour is independently and jointly influenced by situational misogynistic peer norms and men's adherence to hegemonic male norms, implicating the impact of norms on bystander behaviour.

School has an assignment to work with gender issues, and an important aspect is to involve boys in this effort. Gender justice is possible when boys and men work with and learn from girls and women and understand and empathise with their perspectives and experiences. Alienation and defensiveness are common emotional responses when boys and men are invited to consider their privilege. To avoid such reactions, it is important not to blame the boys when discussing sexual misconduct or to praise boys for turning up to participate in gender justice conversations. Nevertheless, emotional responses can open conversations about issues of gender justice (Keddie, 2021). Eek-Karlsson et al. (2022) also highlight the importance of using students' everyday life as a starting point for conversations that promote good and safe relationships between teachers and students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this study is based on Connell's (2005) theory about the construction of gender order in general and more specifically the construction of masculinities. Gender is seen as a social practice related to bodies and what bodies do. The societal structure is always based on gender conditions, which means that masculinity and femininity are organised in social practice as a gender project (Connell, 2005). There is also a gender order based on two principles. The first is that men and women are separate from each other, with complementary qualities where certain qualities are tied to men, and others to women. Secondly, there is a hierarchic order where men are superior, with power to construct normality which in turn leads to a subordination of women (Connell & Pearse, 2014). Connell (2005) also states that the gender cultures are not homogenic; instead, there are multiple patterns within the gender relationships developed through oppositions and dynamics. There are always different patterns of femininity and masculinity. Related to this study, we are interested in boys' discourses when addressing sexual harassment. Young people's gender learning consists of developing a gender competence. They learn to navigate in their local gender order and in the gender regimes they are involved in. Children are not passively socialised into a gender world; instead, they actively work to explore gender roles on their own conditions. There is constant work to create and mark gender boundaries through play, jokes, clothes, speech mannerisms, and so on. Often, following the norms results in rewards and positive reactions, e.g., smiles and appreciation from the opposite gender (Connell & Pearse, 2014).

Connell (2005) uses the concept of hegemonic masculinity and defines it as the configuration of a gender practice that contains the accepted answer to the question of the legitimacy of patriarchy. The concept hegemony highlights that someone gets benefits, and that certain groups invest in a leader's power position. This implies hegemonic masculinity is built on alliances with both men and women in which the legitimacy is created by everyone's consent (Connell, 2005). The hegemonic masculinity is not a locked character type that looks the same everywhere. Instead of talking about the role of masculinity in singular, Connell and Pearse (2014) state that there exist several ways of doing masculinity within a culture or peer group. They present the concept of parallel masculinities, which suits this study, as it facilitates the identification of boys' different ways of relating to sexual harassment. Hegemonic masculinity is also based on gender relations, forming superiority and subordination within groups of men. In western society, hegemonic masculinity deals with heterosexual men's dominance and homosexual men's subordination. Hegemonic masculinity implies more than a cultural stigmatisation of being gay; it is about subordination through an array of tangible practices. In this way, homosexual men are excluded from hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Pearse, 2014). Studying the boys' narratives reveals if and how superiority and subordination within the group of boys is implicitly or explicitly expressed.

Method

In this section the data construction in the Swedish setting, the ethical considerations and the analysis are presented.

Empirical Data Construction and Ethical Considerations

This study is part of a larger Swedish project with an overall aim to contribute knowledge about how boys and girls at different ages talk about and understand sexual harassment. The research project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2019–00675). In the present study, the chosen empirical data consists of 22 participating, mostly Swedish native speaking boys' narratives, constructed through semi-structured pair interviews in conversation form (Denscombe, 2016) in Swedish. Data was collected in school year 8 in compulsory school and in school year 1 in upper secondary school (14 and 16 years old respectively). The two schools are located in a middle-class neighbourhood in the centre of a smaller city in the southeast of Sweden. The compulsory school has 370 pupils and the upper secondary school 1500 pupils. Initially, the principals of two chosen schools were contacted to obtain permission to implement the interviews. Thereafter, the students in the chosen classes were informed, both orally and in writing. The participating students and their parents (when the students were under 15 years of age) gave written consent to the interviews. They were also informed about requirements of confidentiality and utilisation of data (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

Our intention was not to compare the data from the two schools, instead we wanted to capture a variety of perspectives of sexual harassment among boys. Neither did we ask about their background, such as ethnicity or sexual orientation. Discussing sexual harassment can be ethically sensitive, especially when the informants are young. It was therefore important to point out that the study's interest was directed towards young people's talk about sexual harassment and not the students' personal experiences. That being said, there was relatively little detail regarding predetermined questions to benefit from their shared and free talk on the subject. The researchers composed a list of questions and topics that had to be covered during the interviews, but the boys themselves demarcated the phenomenon. When needed, the interviewer asked questions to deepen the understanding. The conversation can be seen as a negotiation between the researchers and the boys, as well as among the boys; an approach chosen to encourage communication of various viewpoints. The analysis and presentation of the present study are therefore influenced by our focus, research interest, and by our knowledge of sexual harassment. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and chosen excerpts carefully translated to English. The boys were given fictitious names to safeguard their anonymity. Each interview lasted 32–47 min. In total, the data material consists of 6 h and 10 min of recordings.

Analysis

In this study, a discursive analysis was used as a methodological tool to gain insight into boys' everyday lives and their positioning with respect to sexual harassment.

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 1) define a discursive pattern as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” implying “socially constructed meaning-systems that could have been different” (p. 21). Discursive patterns compete in regarding how reality should be understood, and Laclau and Mouffe (2001) use the label ‘discursive struggle’ to describe different social forces that are attempting to have an impact on the understanding of specific problems. With respect to post-structuralist thinking, Laclau and Mouffe dissociate from the idea of the individual as an autonomous subject. Instead, their approach is anti-essentialist, implying that people are not assumed to carry fixed, internal characteristics that build identities. Their point of departure is that the subject is fragmented and diverse, and that different identities are offered that we are expected to relate to in discursive processes. This outlook fits well with the rationale of the project as the aim is to study the boys’ positionings as an ongoing and changing process. Another important feature of discursive structures are subject positions. Various competing discursive patterns may offer contradictory subject positions and likewise we regard the boys’ opportunities to take different standpoints.

The analysis of the transcribed empirical material was carried out in two steps. A content analysis was conducted to glean expressions that dealt with the boys’ positioning with respect to sexual harassment. This analysis involved several readings where emerging meaning units were tracked. Meaning units should here be understood as central meaning-bearing terms that permeate the transcription. Based on the aim, the meaning units were put together into themes, which form the basis for the identified discursive patterns, i.e. a variety of the boys’ ways to position themselves emerged. The discursive patterns have been given labels that falsely could be associated with individuals. However, the labels highlight different patterns found in the data. The three labels are chosen to indicate different ways of relating to sexual harassment. The analysis involved connecting theoretical perspectives to data to deepen the understanding. Representative excerpts from the data highlight the meaning of each discursive pattern.

Results

We start by addressing the first research question to understand how these young men relate to the topic of sexual harassment. In the discussion, the dynamics between the discursive patterns will be addressed. In the transcribed material, we found three recurring ways of positioning, each one being the basis for a discursive pattern below. They are named *the equal boy*, *the let-go boy* and *the dominant boy*. Despite the chosen names of these patterns, it needs to be emphasised that the descriptions are *not* descriptions relating to a personal level. This means that a specific boy can relate to all patterns and the setting is a factor for what pattern becomes predominant. In the presentation below, representative excerpts from the empirical data highlight the meaning of each discursive pattern with the age of the boy provided in brackets.

The Equal Boy

An evident position, found on recurring occasions, was the boys' expression of an active stance with respect to hierarchy and layering. In the excerpt below, one of the boys expressed his respectful attitude towards girls his age, while also explaining how he would defend the value of respect. The excerpt starts with Anders (16) commenting on the impact of #MeToo, and Viktor (16) follows with his response.

Anders: No, I have always been respectful towards girls... and so... I haven't changed... I've always been respectful in that sense.

Interviewer: Do you talk about sexual harassment?

Viktor: Not so really... If somebody is disrespectful to a girl and says mean words, then you can react, "What the hell did you call her?" If somebody says to a girl, "You're a fucking whore" or so. Of course, you just react, "You cannot call her whore" or so... it's disrespectful.

Both boys repeatedly returned to respect as an essential feature to stay away from harassment. Respectfulness is expressed as a key to avoid devaluing girls. The narrative can be seen as a discursive pattern bringing forth gender equality in terms of equal values. The excerpt shows that respectfulness towards peers is a fundamental value.

The idea of being respectful is also emphasised as the boys address adults' involvement in their activities. For example, several boys discussed *adults' responsibility* to counteract a downgrading language of girls and thereby support gender equality. Carl (16) gives one example: "Yeah, they are out lecturing about this in sport associations, for children around 10–14 years old, that you cannot speak like this. It is supposed to be equal, see, and you can't downgrade girls in this way."

There is a rationality that adults must take harassment seriously and teach young people in order to prevent them from using degrading language towards girls. In the excerpt below, Jens (16) and Lars (16) describe what may happen if the teachers evade their assignment to counteract sexual harassment:

Lars: "boys will be boys, they do what they do" and "who can stop them".

Interviewer: So how do you feel when you hear that "boys will be boys"?

Jens: That's a really stupid argument.

Lars: It's a stupid argument... a bit irresponsible to speak like that... and just "Yes, we let them get away with it just because they're guys." ...it's irresponsible.

Jens: In written text it might sound good... but then... logically, it's not good.

Lars: In practice it doesn't work.

Interviewer: Why not?

Jens: If nobody takes responsibility to foster you, it's not certain that you achieve the values that you would have had if somebody fostered you.

In the excerpt, the idea of gender equality emerges. Lars suggests that some teachers are unaware of how they express themselves and what consequences this may have.

When the teachers say that “boys will be boys”, the respondents explain this as a devaluation of the boys’ gender competence because of their teachers’ low expectations of them.

The equal perspective also emerges in talk about *close friends*. In the excerpt below, Simon (14) explains that it is important to treat female friends with respect.

Simon: Maybe a little, but I’ve been careful with what I say. If you say something mean... that it is a fun joke... I mean no harm. Often when they say those things, it is to friends that you have had for a long time that can understand that it’s a joke. You don’t want to be a person who says bad stuff....

/.../

Then, if there’s somebody that you know and you can trust... and that’s fair to you... then if they one day infringe on you... you take it harder than if a random person says it. Because then, you also lose a friend....

To affirm friendship, it is important to be a moral subject and a caring person. You really must make sure that jokes are perceived as jokes by your peers. The reason, as interpreted by Simon’s considerations, is that it is hard to be harassed by a close friend. Valter (16) and Anders (16) express a similar standpoint:

Interviewer: But you can say ‘whore’ to somebody without doing sexual harassment, you think?

Anders: As a joke, in that case. But, if you say it to someone you don’t know, then I would still interpret it as harassment. In any case, it’s along with a buddy... and with whom you often make jokes with... and both understand it’s for laughs. Then it’s cool.

Valter: Well, kind of... I would never say ‘whore’ to a girl, so to say... Well, it is damn beyond the limit, so to say.

They say that they may use the word ‘whore’ to joke with a female friend, but they would never use it in a devaluing way, that is, they express they are not exerting power by using hegemonic masculinity among friends.

Another example of this discursive pattern, where gender equality is emphasised, can be seen in the part of the interviews where the boys’ utterances imply appreciating *friends’ sexualities*. The excerpt below is an example, where Carl (16) reflects upon when somebody is called a ‘fag’:

Carl: Well, that I would not do, because... or, maybe later when I know him better, but then, sort of, never to downgrade anybody... if I suspected this. If I see a guy that I don’t know and call him ‘fag’, then we would take it degrading. I would never do it... that’s why I feel ashamed, when it’s done.

Friends’ sexualities are respected by taking an equal stance and not downgrading by using inappropriate words. Nevertheless, the word ‘fag’ is used a lot among boys, and John (14) expresses that it has lost its meaning in the excerpt below:

John: Well, it has lost its meaning. The word, it has derailed a bit and, if someone really would be [gay], I would respect them, really. So, it would probably be seen as pretty harsh if you were homosexual and then heard about that every day.

John's approach to the word 'fag' is that it is harmful when uttered to homosexual persons, but that it has lost its meaning in other contexts. Looking at both Carl's and John's explanations, it stands out that you must be aware of whom you are joking with in order to respect friends' sexualities. They would never use the word speaking to a homosexual friend in a devaluing way. It is important to treat friends with respect and honour their sexualities.

We conclude that the talk of gender equality seems to emerge in narratives regarding *adult responsibility* and when referring to attitudes towards *close friends* and *friends' sexualities*. In these contexts, the narratives contain an aspiration for girls and boys to be valued equally. The boys position themselves as respectful, caring and understanding.

The let-go boy

In the boys' narratives, there appear other ways of relating to gender order and harassment. In the excerpt below, two of the interviewed boys, Jonathan (16) and Bill (16), take on a let-go attitude with respect to hierarchies and layering.

Jonathan: Now when #MeToo and that came up, I think many girls brought up more and more issues to make it come out. Yes, that they get more attention... while we men... we just take it.

Bill: I don't think it's much about, so to say, just attention. I think it's because they want to chat about what's really happening... so that everybody gets to know that it exists.

Jonathan: While we kind of just move on, we do not bring it up as much. We don't care. But then, some... as somebody says... that if somebody says that I'm ugly or so, honestly speaking, I don't feel offended. I usually think, "Well, you can think so," because everybody is different, looks different.

This excerpt exemplifies boys' let-go attitude, where issues are dismissed as something originating in someone's need for attention and a desire to discuss and process. Instead, these boys advocate 'just move on' as the approach they use. The narrative expresses that boys are not as easily offended as girls, which still implicates a certain gender pattern depicting girls as more fragile than boys. Girls, on the other hand, in comparison to boys, are pointed out as being attention-seeking and more easily worried.

Similarly, during the interviews, several statements appeared to reveal that boys are not expected to care so much if they are exposed to sexual harassment themselves. This let-go attitude emerges in discussions about *exposure to sexual harassment*. Viktor (16) provides one example when he describes his probable reaction if he got a sexual comment from a girl; he said that he "would get annoyed, but forget it a day

later". In another situation, the interviewer asked Jacob (16) and Aron (16) if it would be different to get a sexually harassing comment from a boy compared to a girl:

Jacob: For me, not, well, boy or girl, makes no difference. Personally, I don't even care what they say about me....

Aron: There are many girls that are a bit... what can I say... a bit bitchier. They just say, "Damn, he's ugly." They can be very mean. Then I think we boys don't become offended... we do not consider it as a big deal. Just "fine, okay" and then you don't feel much more.

In the excerpts above, the boys positioned themselves as someone who does not care if they are harassed. Viktor explained that he would initially be annoyed, but after a while he would have forgotten, and Jacob and Aron expressed the same opinion. Their stance can be seen as expressing hegemonic masculinity, at least if the let-go position is interpreted as an expression of independence by power. In the excerpt, they also present the idea that girls would be more easily offended than boys. Boys in general are described as not caring as much as girls do if they are sexually harassed. The excerpt below provides another example of how boys relate to sexual harassment, this time when Muhammed (16) and Viktor (16) refer to sexual abuse:

Muhammed: Mm. In this particular world... it's kind of... like at parties... it would be kind of more okay that a girl is on to a boy than a boy is on to a girl, in any case.

Interviewer: But, why is it more okay, then?

Muhammed: 'Cause boys don't take on as much.

Viktor: No.

Muhammed: It's mostly girls who do.

Viktor: If a girl wakes up the day after she would say it's rape, but a boy would not think much about those things.

Muhammed: Can guys report such?

In their explanations, it is not only suggested that boys do not take on things as much as girls, but it is also questioned whether sexual assault at all is applicable to boys/men. Neither Muhammed nor Viktor knows if it is a crime to rape boys. This interpretation implies that a boy being raped is beyond the scope of the discursive pattern denoted by the let-go boy; that is, the let-go attitude is framed by a heterosexual stance where boys do not need to face assaults, neither from girls, nor from other men.

The boys' narratives involving *exposure to gay jokes* also construct the let-go discursive pattern. These examples evolve around settings where boys use a derogatory language towards each other. The excerpt below provides such an example when Sven (16) explains a situation that he experienced:

Sven: Well, I wouldn't be directly sad if I was referred to as a 'fag'. I don't know... I have used the word a lot myself... as a joke and so on. So, I would... I'm not offended if anyone calls me that.

In this excerpt, there is evidence of a let-go attitude as Sven's expression makes clear that the label is not anything that touches upon him; that is, a gender culture includes hegemonic jokes about homosexual people. It seems that the use of the word 'fag' is a common way to address each other for fun, and the let-go attitude seems to be framed by a heterosexual expectancy despite the choice of terms. The excerpt below with Jesper (16), Gunnar (16) and Tom (16) points out a similar expression:

Jesper: Yes, there's 'fag' and there's 'fag'. Really, it's the for-fun-word, and what you actually mean when it's something really bad... or like this... I don't really know how to describe it.

Gunnar: Well, I think it's like this, maybe we are not particularly accustomed, but we have been called 'fags', all of us in a sarcastic and a bit more aggressive way. And then you kind of learn to separate what is more... well... what is meant and what is not meant.

Tom: But really, if you are, if you have a buddy that you get along with that says you're gay... well you... I don't become offended, in any case.

In the boys' reasoning about calling each other a 'fag' and not meaning any harm, Gunnar explains that these jokes are not to be offended by, because they are made in a sarcastic way, implying the jokes are uttered in an ironic manner. The jokes are framed by the heterosexual expectancy and therefore not harmful expressions. In this way, the irony implies a presumption that the receiver of the joke is heterosexual.

In summary, the discursive pattern '*the let-go boy*' is found in the boys' narratives where they address their *exposure to sexual harassment* and in settings concerning *exposure to gay jokes*. In these settings, the boys construct masculinity as someone who is strong and not so easily offended.

The Dominant Boy

The third way of addressing sexual harassment is to pursue a dominant position. In the excerpt below, we find three of the interviewed boys, Viktor (16), Anders (16) and Muhammed (16), explaining why boys sometimes carry on as they do.

Interviewer: Those guys that keep doing such things, comments and calling them 'whore' and 'bitch' and 'slut' and so on. Or grope at a girl.

Viktor: They probably have an anger inside, and they want to take it out on somebody.

Interviewer: Mm. But, to take it out on girls, then?

Viktor: Yes, that would be the easiest target, I think.

Anders: Mm.

Interviewer: Why is it easier to do that [assault] with girls than boys?

Muhammed: Boys are stronger.

Interviewer: Why do boys think it's okay to suppress girls in different ways?

Anders: I don't think it's about thinking it's okay... probably you don't give a damn, if it's okay or not.

The three boys discuss men's verbal aggressiveness, based on a general view of differences between men and women. Boys/men are described as superior and as non-caring about how to treat girls/women.

This discursive pattern emerges in narratives for how a boy/man should behave in order to attract a girl/woman, and this setting is denoted *heterosexual pairing*. This idea about forming heterosexual pairs is seen below as Sven (16) expresses what girls expect:

Interviewer: Why is it like that? Because it must still be attractive girls, you talk about, that you in some ways are interested in. Why do you expose them to these things, then?

Sven: It's maybe somebody... I've heard somebody say... that if you aren't like this, trying to push, they won't be interested. That girls aren't interested in guys that aren't, like... what shall I say... almost a bit grabby, so.

Interviewer: Almost a bit offensive.

Sven: Yes, that you shall be like that if you want a girl.

Sven's last comment shows that the dominant discursive pattern can be associated with a hegemonic masculinity, manifested in a heterosexual expectation for a boy to make a pass or grab at a girl in order to attract her. The excerpt shows a belief in alliances between men and women, as the gender order is reconstructed by an expected hegemonic masculinity performed by groping. In the excerpt below, the topic concerns so-called 'dickpics' sent from boys to girls, when the interviewer asks Martin (14) and Erik (14) if boys could be receivers of pictures:

Interviewer: Could a boy get a... what's it called, the equivalence?

Martin: A naked pic, you mean?

Interviewer: A naked pic from a girl. Or a pic of a naked body part.

Erik: Well, that happens, too.

Interviewer: Is that sexual harassment? If you would get a pic of a pair of breasts, would you consider that to be sexual harassment?

Martin and Erik: No.

The boys were asked about the equivalent situation, that is, when a boy gets a naked picture. The interviewer took the initiative in the excerpt, but neither of the two boys reflected on the possibility that the naked picture could be received from another boy. The 'dickpic' from a boy to another boy does not seem to be a discursive possibility for the boys, and the heterosexual pairing is taken for granted for them. Nevertheless, none of the boys express that they would feel harassed if they received a naked picture from a girl, which again illustrates the masculine hegemony in heterosexual pairing.

Another setting where boys'/mens' superiority stands out is in *male homosocial settings*. In the excerpt below, Martin (14) and Jonathan (14) explain why boys carry on as they do:

Martin: You talk like this in a locker room, and it might imply... well... affect values about girls and such. And then I thought kind of, "Well, you talk like that in the locker room, but it doesn't affect my values." Not mine... I don't know... not anybody else's I know, either. I can at least separate what you say there and how I treat girls.

Jonathan: When you are in a locker room, then it's kind of... you know, that nobody enters, and definitively no one you know. You're sarcastic, and you joke, and you have fun. And then, you do not... kind of... really think about what you are saying, because you know that you're joking.

Jonathan explains how locker room talk can be seen as a sanctuary for degrading talk, where jokes are key to the exception for which expressions can be made. The excerpt illustrates how the dominant discursive pattern offers possibilities to rationalise a dominant way of speaking with sarcasm. The homosocial setting is explained as a place where derogatory talk is rationalised as joking. Martin is aware that this way of talking is not acceptable and it does not impact his values. We interpret these narratives as examples of coexisting masculinities within these boys' gender culture. The secluded locker room setting opens for another way of speaking, where what you say is regarded as separate from your values. A little while later, Martin (14) expands on the locker room talk:

If you talk about girls in a locker room, then you can do that in a more detailed way than in a conversation with an adult. When you are with your best buddies, then there is a bit more... kind of dirty.

It also seems that the dominant discursive pattern implies using a derogatory language, especially in the homosocial setting when girls and adults are not present. Furthermore, it is not just that the talking is a way of joking; the secluded area opens for the sarcastic way of speaking that we regard as a sign of a hegemonic masculinity.

The male homosocial setting where dominance prevails, such as in the above example, is not only associated with the locker room. In the excerpt below, Sven (16) and Adam (16) frame the hegemony between men and women and how it needs to be repeated:

Sven: Really... I don't know... but you need to show superiority in some way, I don't know actually.

Adam: It has been like this through times. Well, men have always been in charge since a really long time ago... and for a really long time ago, then it was always them that would work and women that would stay at home... I think there's kind of an imprint of it today.

In this excerpt, although the homosocial setting needs to be understood as a physical room (as the locker room), the way of addressing dominance seems to be nurtured by traditional homosocial practices built on traditional gender patterns.

Many comments we received from the boys refer to how they need to act or how they relate to girls. Occasionally there are also comments referring to interactions

between boys, and one such example concerns *compliments to men*. In the example below, the interviewer has just asked Viktor (16), Anders (16) and Henrik (16) what happens if you get a positive comment about your body from another boy:

- Viktor: Well, it doesn't happen that often.
 Anders: No. [laughter]
 Interviewer: Would it happen?
 Anders: No, I do not think so.
 Henrik: Hardly.
 Anders: Honestly, people would just think you are gay.

The excerpt illustrates how dominance exercises power over how a boy cannot comment and compliment a male friend without the risk of getting derogatory comments. A return comment insinuating that you are gay, is not to be mistaken for a gay joke. Then, there is the risk of being called a homosexual, whereas a gay joke takes heterosexuality for granted. Andrew (16) and Valter (16) illustrate what a conversation that includes inappropriate compliments would look like:

- Andrew: But it depends on what kind of compliment it is, because if it's, "Oh, you're buff," that would be nice, like natural. But if you would say, "Oh, what nice arms you have"... it would be different.
 Valter: Yes.
 Interviewer: And then you're at risk of being called a 'fag' or what?
 Andrew: Yes.
 Valter: 100%, it is.

The excerpt illustrates the importance of a conscious choice of words if you intend to compliment another boy. A bad choice of words is described as a risky business, because you might be considered a homosexual if you express appreciation of another boy's body. The awareness of identifiers for homosexuality indicates that a homosexual subject position is seen as a subordinate position and that hegemony prevails. The excerpt also shows how pertinent the setting is. If a compliment is put the wrong way, you are at risk of becoming seen as homosexual, which is worse than just being called gay, because being called gay can be interpreted as an innocent gay joke.

To conclude, the discursive pattern 'the dominant boy' is superior in settings where boys address *heterosexual pairing*, in *male homosocial settings*, and in *compliments to men*. In these settings, the boys' hegemonic gender pattern becomes visible.

In the table (Table 1) below, the identified settings of each discursive pattern are summarised.

Table 1 Summary of the settings of each discursive pattern

The equal boy	The let-go boy	The dominant boy
Friends' sexualities	Exposure to sexual harassment	Heterosexual pairing
Close friends	Exposure to gay jokes	Male homosocial settings
Adult responsibility		Compliments to men

Discussion

The aim of this study was to contribute knowledge about boys' positioning with respect to sexual harassment. The findings suggest that the construction of masculinity is organised in the boys' social practice. They navigate in their own settings and in the gender regimes where they are involved, in accordance with Connell (2005). The discourse labelled the equal boy emerged in settings where close friends were concerned and when equality was particularly addressed as a topic. For example, as the boys speak about how things ought to be, the equal boy emerges as manifested by the narrative of respectfulness towards all peers and *friends' sexualities*; here, it is important to take care of *close friends*. The boys know that gender equality is an overall and desirable value in a democratic society. They expect *adult responsibility* and that teachers know their assignment to teach gender equality. For example, Lars (16) argues that he is insulted when teachers have stereotypic expectations of him as a boy, when they say that 'boys will be boys'. Similarly, it stands out from the boys' narratives that it is not okay to say anything degrading to someone who may misunderstand a joke, for example, saying 'whore' to a girl or calling a male peer a 'fag'.

The discursive pattern labelled let-go boy emerged in settings where a risk of *exposure to sexual harassment* could be anticipated or prevented. The excerpts that exemplify this discourse are permeated with the idea of saving one's own skin as an approach to address the problem of harassment. Nevertheless, a quality that in this setting can be connected to masculinity is not to show one's emotions if you are harassed by peers. In the findings one of the illustrative examples illustrate how the let-go boy discourse is brought to the fourth in a hegemonic situation where Jonathan says "if somebody says that I am ugly or so, honestly speaking, I do not feel offended. I usually think, 'Well, you can think so'". Furthermore, the discursive pattern labelled let-go boy is also superior in narratives about *exposure to gay jokes*. With these observations, we conclude that this discursive pattern justifies inappropriate comments similar to the study of Robinson (2005).

To be a boy that fits in with the peer group, he has to invest in the gender order. The let-go boy discursive pattern signifies a traditional masculinity culture and so does the discursive pattern labelled the dominant boy. In this third discursive pattern the solution to the problem of harassment is to dominate. In other words, this is the discursive pattern that makes harassment possible as the boys need to act according to the gender order to avoid the risk of being exposed to downgrading treatment, harassment and losing superiority. The dominant boy includes features that add to Tricket's (2016) findings, and those can be seen as the inherently bad position as suggested by Waling (2022), whereas the equal boy would be described as the inherently good position. Tricket's (2016) gang behaviours equal the *male homosocial settings* identified in the narratives in this study, where the hegemonic masculinity (as defined by Connell, 2005) is expressed, *heterosexual pairing* anticipated and *compliments to men* something to elude.

The different excerpts suggest that the setting of a narrative has an impact on what discursive pattern emerges in the discursive competition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). For example, the content has an impact on the struggle between discursive patterns, which highlights the dynamic properties of the gender culture and the struggle

between the discursive patterns, as suggested by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Waling (2022) pointed to tensions and contradictions in how men were positioned in public debates. The narratives of the boys in this study exemplify a similar lack of coherence. For example, in settings concerning overall relations among boys, the equal boy is superior in narratives concerning near friends who may be homosexual. At the same time, the dominant boy becomes superior when homosexuality is associated with their own identity. The dynamics between the discursive patterns become obvious; the boys express that a desirable value in a democratic society deals with gender equality and social justice. At the same time, however, they are socialised into a gendered world based on heterosexual men's dominance and the homosexual men's subordination, as Connell and Pearce (2014) explain. In the interviews of this project, we can see the boys need to fend off compliments from other males in order not to be regarded as homosexual, which is perceived as highly undesirable. In this respect, there is a resemblance to Waling's first keyframing indicating men, too, are victims. Furthermore, the results point out the boys' own uncertainty surrounding what sexual harassment could imply for themselves; that boys receive nude pictures is one example of such uncertainty. It cannot be ruled out that these situations are unlikely enough – so as not to be considered as problematic.

As mentioned above, the Swedish boys make a crucial distinction suggesting there is no direct fear of being called a 'fag' as is identified in the study of Hill and Kearl (2011). Rather, *friends' different sexualities* are to be accepted (as expressed in pattern the equal boy and the narratives on friends' sexualities), and *exposure to gay jokes* is explained as being considered true jokes. Nevertheless, the existence of these jokes supports the idea that power is still today exercised on subordinate homosexual subject positions, without the necessity of any explicit personal harassment, which was also suggested by Lundin (2014). There are also supportive notions in the narratives. For example, the setting denoted *friends' sexualities* can be seen as the male taking up a role as the protector (allyship) described by Waling (2022), although we cannot perceive the false hero ship as pointed out in her study. When a gay comment possibly can be accounted for as a true denomination of a homosexual person (and a sign of harassment), it is described as devastating by the boys, and an example of hegemonic masculinity exercising power. To give compliments to another boy is described as a delicate practice where expressions must be made with full consideration in order not to be misinterpreted. In this respect, the boys seem fully gender competent and knowledgeable about the power that the gender culture exercises. Through the analysis of the narratives, we can conclude that the boys constantly express consideration of gender boundaries, as Connell and Pearce (2014) also describe. Similarly, the demonstration of heterosexuality becomes overt in the narratives of *heterosexual pairing*. One interpretation in this study is that the boys construct normality by performing a role of 'real' boys, which can be related to Mayeza and Bhana's (2020) study showing how boys construct masculinity on the playground.

The reported results add to the work presented by Waling (2022). She constructed men's subject positions in media where #MeToo was discussed, whereas in this project Swedish schoolboys' voices were in focus for the analysis. Considering that the boys' narratives were collected in interviews, it would be pertinent to study discursive patterns as they emerge in everyday school talk. There is also a lack of coherence

in the discursive patterns that need further attention. The indicated acceptance of gay jokes in contrast to the features of the dominant boy denoted as *compliments to men* and *homosocial settings*, suggests a lack of coherence that leads us to question: What are the boundaries for when a joke (the let-go boy pattern) becomes a risk of being perceived as harassment, which is suggested in the example of compliments from men, framed by the dominant boy pattern. We also suggest research to facilitate our understanding of how the patterns of the equal boy can be supported without making boys into protectors and heroes in such proactive work, as Waling (2022) advises us to avoid. In this respect, the performance of the dominant boy could be a key, at least in emphasising the boys' concerted and possibly unrequested efforts to perform what is part of the settings *heterosexual pairing*, *male homosocial settings* (dominant masculinity expressed), and the delicate *compliments to men*.

The analysis of the narratives shows that schools still can be seen as a 'closet' for LGBT people, especially indicated by the dominant boy discursive pattern with its hegemonic features. Nevertheless, classroom efforts have the potential to influence how gender is done (Connell, 2005) by fostering gender equality, for example, by facilitating the discursive patterns here labelled the equal boy. In such classroom discussions, we suggest addressing how jokes are made, especially gay jokes. We also recommend discussions regarding the taken-for-granted heterosexual pairing as well as the practice of heterosexual pairing. Also, when bringing up these topics, we emphasise that everybody benefits from the disruption of hegemony, that is, not only girls and homosexual people: the gender order has an impact on everyone as it restrains our possibilities. However, to pursue these classroom discussions teachers need to be prepared. Eek-Karlsson et al. (2022) points to the importance of well-informed teachers, a notion that is underlined by narratives in this study, because even the boys themselves point to their teachers as a success factor for the efforts to counteract harassment. The three discursive patterns with their distinguishing features are intended to assist teachers in designing how to address hegemonic masculinity in school. According to Keddie (2021), it is important neither to blame boys when pursuing these discussions nor to praise them for participating, which could be supporting the formation of false heroes that Waling (2022) alerts us to. Based on our data we agree on this position and we conclude that the development work that is needed refers to us all. Nevertheless, in school the teachers have a crucial position to facilitate classroom talk that supports discourses embracing equality by making those explicit to students in contrast to other hegemonic discourses. For clarity purposes we suggest illustrative examples that enable students to take on an outsider's perspective so that the adoption of an equality discourse is facilitated. We argue that students need support to discern careless and dominant discourses and by these means avoid traditional hegemonic masculinity.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval The research project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2019–00675).

Consent to Participate The participating students and their parents (when the students were under 15 years of age) gave written consent to the interviews. They were also informed about requirements of confidentiality and utilization of data (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

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