Just a Joke? The Thin Line between Teasing, Harassment and Violence among Teenage Boys in Lower Secondary School

Ylva Odenbring¹
and Thomas Johansson¹

Abstract
The present article, addresses and discusses thin line between teasing, and violence in lower secondary school. The main aim of the study is to highlight and explore different types of “joking cultures” and lad cultures. This study draws from interviews with ninth grade students conducted at three schools in various geographic locations in Sweden. The results indicate that jokes and fighting for “fun” are recurrent in everyday school life and part of how boys conform in masculinity and homosocial relations. As part of conforming masculinity, boys are not expected to show pain and are expected to take part in homophobic teasing.

Keywords
homosociality, homophobia, masculinity, jokes, teasing, lower secondary school

Nils: There are people you know better and you probably joke about other things with them rather than with people outside the inner circle, if you know what I mean? (Focus group interview, Shoemaker School).

This introductory quote has been chosen because it represents clearly how the students in the current study understand joking cultures in school. Looking more closely at the research conducted in this area, it becomes apparent that many studies have stressed the complexity of the relation between teasing and bullying in schools

¹University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Corresponding Author:
Ylva Odenbring, Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Box 300, Gothenburg 405 30, Sweden.
Email: ylva.odenbring@gu.se
Teasing can be expressed as a playful act between friends, but it can also be an expression of dislike and a cruel act toward others (Mills, 2018). Psychological studies have shown that teasing can vary considerably in different kinds of social interactions, and there are also complex patterns of social class, gender, and teasing behaviors (see, e.g., Keltner, et al., 1998, 2001). Among teenage students, teasing can be used to bind and build relationships within the peer group (Mills, 2018; Mills & Carwile, 2009). Teasing can also be used to approach and discuss difficult topics as well as to address and manage embarrassing situations. Research has indicated that 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).

In the present article, we will explore the relation and tension between jokes and teasing among teenage boys in Swedish schools. Drawing on the narratives of teenage students, the aim of the present article is to investigate the different dynamics and aspects involved in jokes, teasing and acts of fighting for “fun” among boys in the everyday life of three lower secondary schools. The main aim of the present study is to highlight and explore different types of “joking cultures” and lad cultures in the investigated schools. The following research questions have guided our investigation:

1. How do the students perceive and talk about nicknames and different types of verbal insults in school?
2. How do the students talk about and understand homophobic teasing in school?
3. How are fights for “fun” expressed as part of the lad culture, according to the students?

The current study is inspired by anthropologist Douglas’s (1999) definition and understanding of jokes: “a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time” (p. 152). According to Douglas, a joke depends on the social situation in which it is expressed. The social situation and context are also vital for a joke to be received and understood as a joke by the social group where it is uttered.

The Thin Line Between Teasing and Harassment

Previous research has revealed the complex and contradictory picture of the relation between teasing, “having fun,” and bullying in schools (Lund 2015; Mills & Carwile, 2009; Ritchie, 2014). Looking closer at research on bullying, researchers have suggested that that bullying is a form of exclusion where certain students are repeatedly excluded and exposed to violence by other students (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Yoneyama, 2015).

Students’ perceptions of bullying at school indicates that there is a thin line between what are considered serious insults and what are considered acts of playfulness (Varjas et al., 2008). Varjas et al.’s (2008) study indicates that behavior such as fighting between consenting individuals and joking around is not necessarily defined as
bullying by the students. As long as these behaviors do not turn into a physical fight, the situations are identified and described as playful acts between peers (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Mills & Carwile, 2009).

Similar findings have been recognized by Henriksen and Bengtsson (2018). Their interview study of young boys showed how everyday violence was trivialized and became an intrinsic part of daily life. Often these young people experienced violence as “nothing special.” The authors argue that experiences of accumulated violence result in passivity and desensitize young people to violence. There is a risk that young people will become accustomed to a certain level of violence. Research has also shown that students who are exposed to peer aggression tend to underreport these violent acts to school officials, not least because they fear being labelled as a snitch or tattletale, or because they fear future bullying (Sulkowski et al., 2014; Varjas et al., 2008). Some students also excuse the violent acts, considering these acts not bothersome and problematic to them personally.

Previous studies indicate that teasing and mocking are part of the social process of becoming a man (McCann et al., 2010; Sulkowski et al., 2014). Being able to joke and laugh about abuse or violence is part of “toughening up” and becoming a “hard” man (McCann et al., 2010). The boys who fail this “manhood test” remain in the sphere of non-men and sissies. In line with Sulkowski et al. (2014), these results mirror how students conform to existing gender norms, but they also highlight the importance of understanding and recognizing these norms when dealing with and supporting victimized students. Research has also suggested that teasing and joking are expressed differently when targeting boys as opposed to girls (Lahelma, 2002). In her study, Lahelma (2002) shows how girls were more frequently exposed to different kinds of sexist comments, whereas insults aimed at boys were often expressed through homophobic teasing and name-calling.

Homophobic teasing has been recognized in several contemporary studies. Pesola McEachern’s (2014) study showed how male students’ use of calling each other “gay” was synonymous with being accused of and labelled as feminine. Using degrading words such as “gay” or “homo,” as well as talking in a degrading manner about women, was a strong element of the masculine culture in the investigated school. Being subject to homophobic name-calling and to remove any doubt about their heterosexuality, some of the boys had to emphasize their heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, Pesola McEachern concludes. Similarly, Miller’s (2016) study of girls’ experiences of sexual forms of drama, that is, gossiping, slut-shaming, and homophobic labelling, indicates that girls use similar strategies when making claims about their femininities, but also when expressing respectability. On order to position themselves as respectable, they talk about what other girls are and what they themselves are not.

Miller et al.’s (2020) survey with teenage boys in the United States showed that three quarters of the boys were involved in homophobic teasing. Considering that this behavior was so common among the respondents, Miller et al. concluded that homophobic teasing may have become normalized. Previous studies have also shown that sexual minority students often hear the word “gay” used in a derogatory manner (Kosciw et al., 2018). A majority of this group of students also experience bullying and
peer victimization as early as in primary school, which later has an impact on their well-being and mental health (Hillard et al., 2014; Mittleman, 2018).

Pascoe (2005) argues that homophobic teasing and insults have multiple meanings in boys’ use of homophobic language and teasing. Using the concept of fag discourse, Pascoe demonstrates how this discourse affects all boys, irrespective of sexual orientation. The use of “fag” has different meanings in different social contexts. For instance, the fag epithet can be used to tell another boy that he is unmanly, without necessarily labelling him a homosexual. The complexity of homophobic insults has also been discussed by other scholars. Diefendorf and Bridges (2020) highlight the importance of a multi-dimensional understanding of the relationship between masculinity and homophobia. They underline the importance of exploring how gender and sexual inequality are connected with dominant masculinity. It is, therefore, crucial that the researcher not only investigate the relationship between masculinities and homophobia, but also what forms of homophobia are perpetuated and in what ways this is expressed.

As demonstrated above, previous studies have suggested that there is a thin line between what is considered teasing, “having fun,” and bullying in schools. In the present study, we will particularly focus on the construction of homosocial relations and masculinity among teenage boys in school. Looking at previous studies, there is still a lack of studies looking in more detail at how the thin line between teasing and acts of harassment is negotiated in lower secondary schools. The current study hopes to contribute new insights into these issues.

**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 (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 (cf. Higate, 2012). 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 et al., 2017). 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. This more structuralist notion of hegemony has been put forward and defended by Connell (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Consequently, the concept of homosociality is often used to refer to how white men strengthen hegemonic gender ideals as well as a certain gender order. Introducing a more complex and multifaceted version of homosociality, our ambition is to contribute to a reformulation of the concept and understanding of homosocial relations. As a first step toward redefinition of the concept of homosociality, we will introduce the distinction between vertical and horizontal homosociality.

The development and conceptualization of bromances and horizontal homosociality—new forms of more inclusive intimacies between men—points to variation and transition, and consequently a reconfiguration of hegemony including tendencies toward an eventual transformation of intimacy, 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 basic principle 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 behavior.

In the present article, we will take a closer look at how teenage boys approach each other in terms of name-calling, fights for fun and “having a laugh.” Using the concept of homosociality as a tool to decode and interpret the different practices related to “fighting 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 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, which is viewed as a social competence and skill.

**Method and Methodology**

The present study draws from focus group interviews, individual interviews and in some cases also interviews in pairs with ninth-grade students in three lower secondary schools in Sweden. At the time of the interviews a majority of the students were 15 years of age and a small number of students was going to turn 15 during the first semester of the ninth grade. In the current study, a qualitative approach with a mixture of focus group interviews, individual interviews, and interviews in pairs has been chosen because of the advantage of revealing interesting results as well as highlighting students’ voices regarding their experiences—in the present case of acts of harassment and violation in their everyday life at school.
The three participating schools were chosen because they vary in terms of demographics and geographic locations in Sweden. The fieldwork was conducted from November 2017 until September 2018 and was conducted at the following schools: Ship Owner School, Station Master School, and Shoemaker School. Due to ethical considerations the names of the schools are pseudonyms (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). Also, to diminish any recognition of the schools all the names of the schools have been randomly chosen.

Ship Owner School is a lower secondary school located in one of Sweden’s most socially disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The majority of students attending the investigated school have an immigrant background with descent in the Middle East or Somalia. Station Master School is a village school located in a rural village in the deep forests of the Swedish countryside. The majority of students at the school have a working-class and ethnic Swedish background. However, during recent years a number of immigrants, predominantly from Syria, have moved to the village, slightly increasing the number of students with an immigrant background at the school. Shoemaker School is located in a middle-sized industrial town. Socially the students have quite mixed backgrounds, although the majority have a working-class background. The majority of students also have an ethnic Swedish background, but during recent years the school has enrolled a number of students with a foreign, predominantly Somali, background.

Access to the schools was initially gained through the principals at the respective schools. It was during the contact with the principals that the school classes were selected, and the project group received contact information for the main teacher of the selected school classes. All participants were also provided with information about the purpose of the project and received a participant information letter that was signed by the students as well as their guardians (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). To ensure confidentiality, all the names of the participants as well as the name of neighborhoods and places in the study are pseudonyms.

During the first phase of the interviews, the research group conducted focus group interviews with the students. Each group consisted of four to six students. Both boys and girls participated in the focus group interviews. The students identified themselves as either a boy or a girl, no students expressed non-binary identity. Forty of the students identified themselves as boys and 45 of the students identified themselves as girls. At Station Master School and Shoemaker School the focus group interviews were gender mixed, whereas the focus group interviews at Ship Owner School were conducted in gender separate groups. All focus groups were organized and divided by the main teacher of the respective school class. Focus groups have the advantage of allowing identification of a range of experiences and perspectives as well as of group norms and cultural values based on group interaction (Kitzinger, 1995). The challenge, however, is the group constellation and group dynamic and that this may affect what is said and who speaks during the interviews, which we also witnessed at some points during our interviews.

The focus group interviews were followed up by interviews in pairs and/or individual interviews with at least half of the students in each school class, though at some schools
a majority of the students participated. All students who wanted to participate in the follow-up interviews were welcome to do so. For different reasons, three students at the Station Master School only participated in the individual interviews. The two interviews in pairs conducted at Ship Owner School were gender separate, that is, they included one interview with boys and one with girls. The combination of focus group interviews, interviews in pairs and individual interviews not only resulted in building a trustful relationship, but also generated considerably more and deeper information about students’ everyday lives (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviews were semi-structured and covered specific themes, such as experiences of different forms of physical and verbal violence, name-calling, social relations, perceptions of safe and unsafe places in the school, and what kind of support students receive from the school. Methodologically, it was important to enable the students to verbally construct chronological narratives and to create and tell their story as well as to express different aspects of their experiences of violence and safety at school (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed on computer. When the interviews transcriptions were complete, the research team jointly read, discussed, analyzed, and coded the empirical data to derive themes (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

The interviews in this study were conducted by the authors of this article. During the interview phase of the project the interviews were divided between the researchers and were conducted individually at the respective schools in either classrooms or conference rooms provided by the schools. The interviews lasted from approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, and in total the interviews with the students conducted at the three schools comprised 17 focus group interviews, 37 individual interviews and two interviews in pairs.

This collective working process not only provided fruitful analytical tools, but also strengthened the empirical analysis during the joint writing process. When discussing adequate and interesting themes and the structure of the results, the researchers were informed by the theoretical discussion on homosociality. Using the distinction between vertical and horizontal homosociality, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced discussion on boys’ behavior in school.

**Results**

During the analytical part of the empirical data, themes connected to boys’ joking cultures and homosocial behavior in school were discerned. During this process it also became clear that this was a phenomenon among boys and particularly certain boys in the investigated schools—and this was also why we have specifically chosen to focus on the boys in this study. During the thematic analytic processing of the data three main themes connected to teasing and fighting and wrestling for “fun” were discerned and the results will also be presented according to these three main themes (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017): (1) Nicknames; (2) Homophobic Teasing; and (3) Physical Fights for “Fun.” The main aim of the present study is not to contextualize the results in relation to the different school contexts, but rather to explore and critically discuss teasing and physical acts “for fun” among boys in school.
**Nicknames**

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 teenage boys themselves have a different view on this. They constantly call each other things, using different nicknames. During the interviews, it became clear that their perceptions of the name-calling and insults expressed at school differ substantially from how they think adults in school—and in this case also the interviewer—perceive such verbal assaults.

Interviewer: What is harassment?
Ali: We tease each other, but never so it ends up in a fight. I mean, we are just laughing and teasing.
Interviewer: Do you hear about harassment at school?
Ali: Not that much actually.
Interviewer: Harsh words?
Ali: Yes, there can be harsh words!
Interviewer: When I sat down in the corridor, I heard many harsh words!
Ali: Yes, but it’s mostly jokes, you know. It doesn’t happen to me, and when we say harsh words, it’s mostly for fun.
Interviewer: So, what do they call you?
Ali: [Giggle] Isis, Daesh, because I have a beard. I usually fight back, saying something about his big ears, we are laughing at each other, but these things are quickly forgotten.
Interviewer: Isis, really?
Ali: Yes, because of my beard (Focus group interview, Ship Owner School).

According to the students, there is a clear difference between how the teachers and adults perceive and relate to the verbal insults used in the school corridors, and how the students view these insults. The students call each other names, and these names are quite often degrading. In order to understand the dynamics and functions of the name-calling, it is necessary to investigate the social mechanisms involved and, in particular, the homosocial order in itself.

Abdullah: Everyone has nicknames.
Interviewer: What about you?
Deniz: I’m called the Salt stick and Mount Everest, and Abdullah is called the big nose because of his big nose. We call Sasha the ghost because he’s all white, and we call Mehmet the Bulldog, because of his cheeks.
All boys: [Giggle]
Interviewer: What if someone gets upset?
Everyone: No, No
Abdullah: The teachers think that we cross the boundaries, but...
Interviewer: You don’t think so?
Abdullah: No.
Interviewer: Do the teachers tell you to stop?
Abdullah: Yes.
Interviewer: What do they say?
Mustafa: “Stop, soon something will happen,” but it never does (Focus group interview, Ship Owner School).

Our results indicate that even though the students find the school professionals’ reactions odd and unjustified, they do not form any type of counter- or subculture. Apparently, these kinds of jokes and verbal insults are not considered harassment, but rather a means of keeping the group together and expressing solidarity with the ingroup. The high level of offensive name-calling, expressed by the students in the current study, can be interpreted as part of a normalization process, where students accept a certain level of everyday verbal insults, but it is also possible to view this form of name calling as an expression of horizontal homosociality. In this example, it is clearly difficult to separate the vertical from the horizontal aspects of homosociality (cf. Haywood et al., 2017). However, taking the perspective of the students, we would argue that name-calling seems to have a positive function in the peer group. Consequently, the distinction between vertical and horizontal homosociality helps us get closer to the student’s everyday life, and to their own perceptions of, for example, name-calling.

**Homophobic Teasing**

Homophobic name-calling and teasing have also been recognized in the boys’ narratives in the current study. This form of name-calling is expressed as a part of boys’ lad culture, and the students refer to this as everyday jokes at school, as André at Station Master School puts it: “It’s just like random talk, you know.” Similar stories were also identified at Ship Owner School.

Interviewer: Do you ever insult each other by calling each other sexist words?
Amir: Sure, but it’s not that bad. Someone may say something, but you don’t care.
Interviewer: So, no one gets angry?
Amir: Well, someone might argue, but stops after a while.
Interviewer: Is anyone ever upset?
Amir: It’s not that kind of bad word, so.
Interviewer: Do you call each other gay?
Amir: Yes, but it’s never meant to be serious (Individual interview, Ship Owner School).

The expression “just random talk” and claims that the verbal insults are not serious say something about the normalization of the boys’ use of “gay” and how it is used among teenage boys (cf. Miller et al., 2020; Pascoe, 2005). Moreover, at Shoemaker School, the word “gay” was expressed recurrently among the boys. When discussing the
meaning behind this kind of insult, one of the boys, Nils, expressed it in the following way:

Interviewer: Calling each other gay might be understood as homophobia, what’s your reflection on that?
Nils: Emm, definitely. But when you say it, the meaning is rather that the guy is goofy or a coward (Focus group interview, Shoemaker School).

Recurrent in the narrative is that the teenage boys call each other “gay” as a way of teasing and degrading each other. Also, when students are angry and upset, they also call each other sexist words.

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).

Sex-based harassment and homophobic teasing, such as calling another boy “gay,” is a powerful way to diminish and marginalize him, but it is also a powerful way to build hierarchies between different groups of boys and masculinities (cf. Lahelma, 2002). When a boy calls another boy “gay,” it can also be a way to tell the other boy that he is not a man or not manly enough (Pascoe, 2005). Use of the sexist expression “cunt” has a similar function, but this is also a sex-based form of harassment aimed at girls and women to harass and degrade them (cf. Lahelma, 2002). In the current study, 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.” As suggested by previous researchers, the line between what is considered “just a joke” and sex-based harassment is often thin or non-existent, because it constitutes a way of maintaining gender hierarchies (Connell, 1995; Lahelma, 2002).

Although homophobic teasing is recurrent in the school settings and framed as a joke between boys, there are also students in the current study who reflect upon and critically discuss the underlying seriousness of name-calling.

Interviewer: You talked about the existing homophobia in school and the name calling and calling each other gay?
Gabriel: Hmmm, yeah, it’s bad to be a homosexual.
Interviewer: Okay, how is that expressed?
Gabriel: How that is 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.
Interviewer: Would you say that homophobic teasing is a typical guy thing or is this something all students express?
Gabriel: Emm, I’m not really sure what it’s like in the seventh and eighth grade, but in the ninth grade it’s definitely a thing between the boys. The girls aren’t engaged in that kind of oppressive behavior. It all has to with the expectation among the boys to be tough (Individual interview, Station Master School).

The existing homophobia and sex-based harassment at school, as Gabriel reflects upon it, is framed from a perspective where homosexuality is understood as something bad and subordinate to heterosexuality (cf. Connell, 1995). The sex-based harassment is also part of the existing hegemony, as it is expressed randomly and on an everyday basis in the school. Although the boys themselves sometimes have difficulties making a distinction between teasing and harassment, it is obvious that the vertical aspects of homosociality tend to dominate in these interactions. Some of the students are also well aware of the detrimental effects of this form of name-calling and also question this behavior.

**Physical Fights for “Fun”**

Among certain boys in the study, homosocial relations are also expressed through fighting for “fun.” This involves, for example, wrestling and hitting each other. As one of the boys at Ship Owner School, Amir, says: “Everyone knows that fighting for fun can escalate and lead to real violence, but never if you’re real friends.” Linus at Shoemaker School puts it the following way: “It might be simulated hitting, you fight a little, but it’s not hard. A punch in the stomach and like that.” Still, sometimes these fights for “fun” escalate into quite painful situations, as shown in the extract below where a group of boys at Station Master School discuss a game they refer as to “the Krona.” The Krona refers to the Swedish currency, the krona. In this particular case, it the one-krona coin the boys are referring to.

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: 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 (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 continue with this ritual, the students reply that the teachers and other school professionals banned the game. Again, we can see that the students and the adult world have different ideas about what is considered a violent act and dangerous. Similar to the other two schools, students at Shoemaker School referred to situations that involved fights for “fun.” During one of the focus group interviews the students discussed and reflected about this behavior.

Nils: You behave different toward different people, depending how well you know them, how much you hang out with them and how much you know they can cope with. /.../. And some people might be quite rough with each other and fight for fun and things like that, but they would never do that to other people.
Interviewer: How would you describe this behavior?
Nils: It’s the same thing as playing.
Interviewer: So, it’s the same thing as playing, okay.
Nils: You fight for fun.
Interviewer: You fight for fun?
Nils: It’s never serious, there are never fists involved and you never hit the person.
Sofie: Everyone involved runs around and laughs and when the teachers come and the teacher says: “Stop fighting! Stop this fighting for fun!”
Interviewer: Who’s involved in this?
Nils: It’s boys (Focus group interview, Shoemaker School).

The students continue to discuss the fighting for “fun,” and during the interview it becomes apparent that the line between joking around and being too violent is sometimes quite thin when boys are involved in fighting for “fun.” According to the students, it is the same group of boys who are involved in these fights for “fun” at Shoemaker School.

Interviewer: Please tell me more about this and explain to me what it’s like. Can you give me a picture of what it’s like?
Sofie: You know the sofa in the corridor, there are like eight people on that sofa, but there’s actually only room for three people.
Interviewer: Wow, it must be pretty tough for the guy in the button then. So, they’re like sardines in a tin can [in Swedish: “som packade sillar”?]
Nils: That’s the whole thing, you know.
Interviewer: Right, so that’s the whole thing. Will they stop if the guy on the bottom can’t breathe and tell them to stop?
Nils: I’m not sure actually. But I think they know when to stop most of the time.
Interviewer: There seems to be a thin line here for what’s considered a joke or harassment, but do you know where to draw the line?
Nils: I think so, in situations when it get too serious it gets pretty quiet. /. . ./ The people involved know when to stop.
Sara: Yeah, because they know each other (Focus group interview, Shoemaker School).

At Shoemaker School, a group of boys in the ninth grade were regularly wrestling or forming “a pile of boys” on one of the sofas in a school corridor. Being the boy at the bottom of the pile seemed to be quite difficult; it was hard for this boy to breathe, and he was sometimes also physically harmed. Some students seem to be more exposed to violence. This was for example expressed by one of the students, Nils, at Shoemaker School, who refers to a boy named Gustav who was quite often in a vulnerable position: “Well I’m not sure if Gustav likes it actually. I’m not sure about the relationship in that group. He might say that he’s okay with it, but I don’t know.” Although other students have recognized Gustav’s vulnerable position, no one actually intervenes or questions what the boys are doing. Considering Gustav’s position, it might also be quite hard to oppose this game, because it is part of the “lad culture” among this group of boys and may be a means for him to in a way be included in the boys’ group. Again, we can see that there is quite a thin line between fun and the seriousness behind the action.

In conclusion, the fights for fun can be seen as part of a homosocial culture among the boys. However, there is also awareness among some of the students that these kinds of violent games sometimes tend to cross the line. What we can see here is that there is a thin line between the horizontal and vertical aspects of homosociality in boys’ everyday lives in school (cf. Haywood et al., 2017). In order to understand the function of homosociality in these young boys’ everyday lives, we need to consider and also respect their own definitions of the social interaction involved in different games and behaviors. Although certain games, such as the one described here, can be perceived as violent, and maybe also detrimental, we should consider the possibility that such games can have a positive and social function for the young boys.

Conclusion

In the present article, we have used empirical material collected in three Swedish lower secondary schools. Although, the intention of this study has not been to contextualize the results in relation to the different school contexts, we can discern some local differences between the schools. At Ship Owner School verbal teasing and harassment seem to be the most recurrent form of teasing among the boys, whereas at Station Master School and Shoemaker School, the students also talked about fighting for “fun” as a recurrent behavior among the boys.
In this study, we have interpreted our results in relation to how boys make and form homosocial bonds between each other. Teasing, calling each other names and fighting for fun may sometimes be harmless and connecting features of social life in school settings. We have also created a possibility to see, in relation to these behaviors, that there is a thin line between fun and harassment. In order to understand this, we need to look more closely at different forms of homosociality.

Using a definition of homosociality that takes into consideration the dual aspects of this form of bonding, we have tried to show that there are aspects of both power and emotional bonding present in the processes of homosociality in everyday school life. Teenage boys are getting used to a certain level of “making fun of each other,” which includes calling each other names and fighting at school, but sometimes “having a laugh” turns into something different from having fun together. We connect to the idea that there are trivializing processes going on at the schools, but we also want to further qualify this argument. Homosocial bonding and “having fun together” can serve as a kind of glue in social relations among boys at school. However, there is another possibility, which is that the fun-making actually crosses a boundary and turns into violence.

Using humor and jokes or fighting for “fun” as a way to conceal different forms of verbal insults, as presented in the current study, can be interpreted as part of the construction of a contradictory homosociality. On the one hand, the boys themselves tend to interpret teasing and fighting for “fun” as intrinsic parts of friendship and homosocial bonding. On the other hand, the homophobic teasing among the boys can be interpreted in the light of policing each other and maintaining a certain form of masculinity. When a boy calls another boy “gay,” it is made clear that boys are expected to behave in a certain way, and sometimes it is a way to mark that the boy is not manly enough (cf. Pascoe, 2005). Sometimes the boys also call each other “cunt.” This verbal insult is, however, not as clearly expressed as joke by the boys in the study, it rather seems that this verbal insult is used to diminish and marginalize each other.

Therefore, we would argue, when analyzing homosocial relations, it is important to look more closely at the dynamics between horizontal and vertical homosociality (cf. Haywood et al., 2017). As we have seen, there is sometimes a thin line between teasing and having fun on the one hand, and harassment and violence on the other. Our results show that the teenage boys seem to appreciate and enjoy many parts of the teasing culture and name-calling behavior at school, but sometimes this drama escalates and is turned into power games as well as violence. The tendency to trivialize different forms of everyday violence, makes it difficult for the boys to discern when they have crossed the thin line between fun and harassment. However, we also need to consider and listen seriously to the boys’ own definitions and perceptions of name-calling and different games. Bringing in the concept of horizontal homosociality provides us with a tool to discuss the complex and multifaceted functions and meanings of homosocial relations.

Naturally, we cannot draw any general conclusions on data conducted in three schools, but our results raise several critical questions about boys’ security at school, and also about their wellbeing. As suggested by Sulkowski et al. (2014), this also 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. This is because we have to ask a critical and important question: Is it really just
a joke? Asking this question means that we need to further develop our conceptual
framework on the relation between homosociality and violence. Consequently, there is
a greater need to analyze the complex relation between vertical and horizontal homoso-
ciality, and to avoid stereotypical categorizations of boys’ behavior.

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ORCID iDs
Ylva Odenbring https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8221-8980
Thomas Johansson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2047-4943

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**Author Biographies**

Ylva Odenbring, PhD, is associate professor of Education. Odenbring’s main research interests are in the field of sociology of education and she has written extensively in the field of gender and social justice in education.

Thomas Johansson, PhD, is professor of Education. Johansson has written extensively in the field of gender studies, the sociology of the family, and youth research.