

Verbal abuse in school. Constructions of gender among 14- to 15-year-olds

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Verbal abuse has been identified as a common element in the life of children in school. This paper explores how this discursive practice is used in the construction of masculinities and femininities among children aged 14–15 through observations and interviews in classes in two schools in Stockholm. Verbal abuse, often with sexual content, contributed to ‘toughness’, a central component of hegemonic masculinity in the schools. Popular, tough boys generated most of the verbal abuse, but were not necessarily regarded as verbally abusive; rather, responsibility for the bulk of verbal abuse was attributed to ‘rowdy’ boys. Girls’ verbal abuse was not similarly advantageous for their femininity; instead, both through being verbally abusive and being the target of abuse, girls risked being positioned negatively. It appears that verbal abuse in school simultaneously orders masculinities and femininities, and structures heterosexual relations between the genders.

Introduction

Verbal abuse in school has been identified as a commonplace component of the lives of girls and boys that reproduces inequalities between genders. This has been established through previous research on the production of gender in school, and how schools contribute to the creation and maintenance of the prevailing gender order (Connell, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990; Thorne, 1993; Eder *et al.*, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Davies, 2003). However, research focusing exclusively on verbal abuse is unusual. Studies tend to have the aim of understanding narrower concepts such as teasing, name-calling, insults (Eder *et al.*, 1995; Blatchford, 1998; Tannock, 1999), sexual verbal abuse (Mahony, 1989; Lees, 1993; Larkin, 1994; Duncan, 1999; Lahelma, 2002; Ambjörnsson 2004; Witkowska & Menckel, 2005), or the long-term harassment of individual students in the context of bullying (Olweus, 1992; Laflamme *et al.*, 2003), rather than looking at the totality of aggressive communication between students.

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Verbal abuse includes various forms of demeaning speech acts, name-calling, teasing, ridicule, taunts, insults and threats (Infante & Wigley, 1986). It can be practiced in several ways, not only through the use of pejoratives, but also via indirect wordings or paralinguistic cues, like tone of voice, body language or gestures accompanying the utterance. Conversational and social contexts are critical to whether something will be interpreted as verbal abuse (Ochs, 1979). Here, verbal abuse is defined as a speech act with derogatory effects for its recipient or for the group she/he is ascribed to, regardless of intent to hurt (Eliasson *et al.*, 2005). The derogatory effects depend on discourses within the frame of which the speech act is performed. Hence, power relations generated by verbal abuse are of central importance.

Gender construction, verbal abuse and power

Gender is created and recreated continuously, 'done' in the words of West and Zimmerman (1987), in social interactions between people. Through speech and actions, gender identities—masculinities and femininities—are formulated and reshaped. Thus, girls and boys are active participants in the production of their gender identities, and not only the passive subjects of socialization into gender roles through institutions like the school and family (Thorne, 1993; Davies, 2003). Particular femininities and masculinities are produced in relation to each other, but also in relation to other femininities and masculinities (Connell, 2002). Thus 'good girl' femininity can be construed in relation to other groups of girls, like 'sluts', as well as to 'unruly boys'. Here, focus shifts from differences between genders to relations within and between genders. Gender identities are hierarchically ordered in relation to one another; overlapping with other identities, e.g., age, sexuality, class and ethnicity, which also constitute orders of power.

School is a major part of the lives of children and young people, and thus a central arena for the production of identities (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Gender—like other identity-creating practices—is situation-dependent, and its meaning varies according to context. Construction of gender is reformulated when children grow older, and expected behavior for one gender and age does not necessarily stay the same (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). In Thorne's (1993) US investigation of the play of girls and boys in school, and work in maintaining gender boundaries, gender was more important in school than playing at home. Other orders of power have greater significance than gender in other contexts or situations.

In this paper, verbal abuse is seen as a cultural resource for the construction of gender identity. Connell (2000) argues that boys in school use sexual, homophobic and racist harassment and bullying against girls and 'weaker' boys in order to construct masculinity, and differences between groups of boys and girls. Through this practice, meanings are created concerning how a boy should be and how to live up to that ideal. A fundamental aspect of identity construction is differentiating yourself from others, pointing out what you are not is, at the same time, to define what you are (Said, 1993). Verbal abuse is a tool for creating such differentiation. Through conversation, girls and boys position themselves discursively, and become

positioned and re-positioned in many different and contradictory ways (Davies & Harré, 1990). In Walkerdine's widely cited analysis of two 4-year-old boys' sexual verbal abuse towards their female pre-school teacher, the boys use a discourse of male sexual oppression, while the teacher responds by constituting them as children in a pedagogical discourse (1990). The boys can achieve power in the interaction through such practice, since the positions offered by discourse differ with regard to power and scope for action. Identities are not coherent and stable systems, but are fractured and shifting in the multiple discourses active at any given moment in conversation. The concept of power is relational, and thus seen as created and negotiated in interaction between people and groups, more or less intentionally (Foucault, 1998). Thus, verbal abuse simultaneously constructs gender and produces power relations.

Verbal abuse in school

In both international and Swedish research, primarily terms of abuse with sexual connotations—such as 'whore', 'slut' or 'fag'—have been analyzed as elements in constructing gender and sexuality in school (Lees, 1993; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Thurlow, 2001; Renold, 2002; Ambjörnsson, 2004). Nayak and Kehily (1996), analyzing the construction of masculinity in schools in the UK found that, due to the function of homophobia in constructing a heterosexual masculine identity, boys risk being called a 'fag' or the like. Swedish research on gender-creating processes in school has shown sexual verbal abuse to be part of these processes (Lundgren, 2000; Ambjörnsson, 2004). Ambjörnsson (2004) found that high-school girls use words like 'whore', 'slut' and 'dyke' to indicate what a 'normal' heterosexual girl is. Even if actual use of the word is not so common, the risk of being called a 'whore' is present and sufficiently manifest for girls to adopt strategies to avoid it. In a recent Swedish study of sexual harassment in high school, verbal abuse was shown to be the most common form (Witkowska & Menckel, 2005). Research on sexual harassment encompasses verbal abuse with a content based on gender or sexuality (excluding other forms). A Swedish questionnaire study showed boys are overwhelmingly named as verbally abusive to other students, by both genders (Eliasson *et al.*, 2005). Swedish research on verbal abuse in school has also taken place within the frame of bullying (Olweus, 1992; Laflamme *et al.*, 2003). However, this concept excludes many instances of verbal abuse; also, gender perspectives and the theorizing of power have been lacking. In sociolinguistic research, terms of abuse have been found to be a distinguishing feature of youth talk (Kotsinas, 1996, 2003), often communicating cultural notions of gender (Svahn, 1999). Actual usage in conversational situations has not been investigated. The aim of this paper is to understand discursively how and why same-age (14–15) girls and boys use verbal abuse in the school context. This entails examining the meanings of verbal abuse to constructions of masculinities and femininities among boys and girls, and how power relations produced through verbal abuse are patterned in this context.

Method

Participants

Students (age 14–15) and their class teachers in two Grade 8 classes at two schools in Stockholm (one inner-city, one suburban) participated in the observation and interview study.¹ The inner-city school had 900 students (Grades 1–9, plus preschool). Most students were middle class and few students were of immigrant background. Three students in the class had one parent born outside Sweden. The suburban school accommodated around 500 students, Grades 7–9, of middle and working class; a large proportion of students had parents born in other countries, although there were only three in the class.² Both classes had fewer girls than boys (7–13 and 11–15 respectively). The inner-city school class had 5 girls and 11 boys in the observation study, and the suburban 11 girls and 13 boys, a total of 40 students.

Data collection

We combined classroom and recess observations spread over one term (half a school year) with in-depth interviews with students and their class teachers. The observer spent a total of two school weeks in each class, during the spring term of 2004 (from January to May), giving a total of 127 hours of observation—62 hours (over 11 school days) in the inner-city class, and 65 (10 school days) in the suburban class. She used a protocol for observations, focusing generally on verbal interactions between students where gender or power relations were particularly prominent, and more specifically on situations of conflict or where verbal abuse was heard.

In total, the principal investigator performed 10 in-depth interviews (with two girls and two boys plus one class teacher in each class) as well as the observations. An interview guide covering question areas and possible follow up questions was used. The subjects covered included social interactions in class and in school, relations among and between girls and boys, jokes, verbal abuse, and conflict and violence between students. Students were also asked about pejoratives heard during observations.

Analytic method

We have used the interviews primarily to examine the meanings of verbal abuse, observations to establish context and understanding with regard to the discursive practices and for discussion of the interview results. The analytic method is based on discourse analysis in the field of discursive psychology (Walkerdine, 1990; Parker, 1992), where analyses start with repeated readings and codings of the observation and interview material. Codes consist partly of key concepts in the texts, partly of theoretical concepts, which serve to give structure to the material, e.g., ‘threat’, ‘insecurity’, ‘boys’. Then, text segments with the same coding are analyzed together for the purpose of understanding the meaning given to them by participants. This involves a search for subject positions, patterns of meaning, contradictions, inconsistencies and

metaphors. When the school context seems relevant for the analysis, this will be addressed in the results.

Gender orders in school

Gender separation in the two observed classes was striking, what Thorne (1993) describes as central to life in elementary schools. The social organization was similar, with two distinct girl groups of somewhat different status and a larger group of boys, comprising virtually all the boys. Nevertheless, all boys did not regularly associate with each other. Also, high status girls often hung out with the 'cool' boys, providing the clearest example of interaction across gender boundaries. The class in the suburban school was described by the class teacher as friendly and with a good atmosphere, the class in the inner-city school as lacking unity and with some conflicts. In the latter class gender separation was so strict that several boys at the start of the spring term in the eighth grade did not even know some of the girls' (fewer in numbers) names.

From both observations and interviews it became clear that verbal abuse is a significant part of students' everyday life in school, not only because such abuse is fairly common, but also due to patterns of meaning created through it—meanings that constitute part of the framework of students' school life. During observations, boys in both schools employed verbal abuse much more often than girls, and they were also construed as the initiators of such communication in interviews, indicating a practice specifically relevant to masculinity. Accordingly, the significance verbal abuse has for masculinity constructions are examined initially, followed by femininities.

Being a tough, cool boy

In the interviews, most students did not agree that verbal abuse was common. However, in both classes, a few boys were very visible in the classroom, taking up space and claiming attention, being loud, verbally abusive and funny. These boys were generally considered popular and of high status, and generated a substantial part of the verbal abuse heard during the observation period. Targets and forms of aggressive communication varied. Against other boys of similar positioning, it often took forms described in the interviews as friendly or jocular. One of the tougher boys describes his relation to the boy (Isak) he associated with most:

No but, you know, I **know** him, he won't care, so... let's say I talk to Isak and fuck him about a bit and say a lot of nasty things and stuff. He'll just laugh and say something even more stupid back to me, and we go on like that, and then we start pretend-fighting.
(Rikard)

Verbal abuse is presented as reciprocal, and the right response is not to take offense, but to laugh and return the insult. A special quality of their relationship is that they are such good friends that some verbal abuse is expected and no one is hurt; to the contrary, it is enjoyed by both. 'Saying stupid things' to each other and thus being funny becomes both a way of being a 'tough' boy and participating in male friendship.

Rikard's account also reveals the close association between verbal abuse and physical violence, both of which can be used playfully or jokingly, according to him. Participating in an exchange of insults provides an opportunity to act tough and show oneself to be unaffected by it (Eder *et al.*, 1995). By contrast, taking offense would show a lack of self-assurance, and thus subvert proper masculinity. Toughness, self-assurance and self-confidence have been found to be central features of hegemonic masculinity among British boys (Frosh *et al.*, 2002).

For boys, a successful masculine presentation, where dominance and self-confidence are important ingredients, is essential for popularity:

No, because guys- Like they **have** something that **makes** them popular, that is, a bit like this... a bit macho, like **superior**, and then it turns out like everyone looks **up** to him, yeah. And it's like a guy doesn't even have to be good looking to be popular. It's just that... he almost has to... well it's just that he should like be sure of himself, and then he just **becomes** good looking and everybody looks up to him and thinks he's really cool. Even though maybe he isn't, really. (Amanda)

Toughness, being suitably macho and superior, having others looking up to them, enables boys to be regarded as good looking and cool. Thus, superiority in relation to others makes a boy attractive. Amanda's description makes the incentives for boys to strive for and to adopt hegemonic masculinity clear.

Toughness is an organizing principle for verbal abuse. This was a fundamental understanding expressed by students during the interviews. Here, Sebastian is talking about boys who are verbally aggressive towards each other and other students:

Interviewer: But why do **you** think they're doing it? Why are they going on like that?

Sebastian: Well. Trying to be cool, cool to each other. Not quite the right way, but...

Sebastian was a quiet boy who cultivated an intellectual and school oriented masculinity. He distances himself from the strategy of using verbal abuse in trying to be cool vis-à-vis other boys, judging it 'not the right way'. Boys' use of verbal abuse to appear tough is a difficult balancing act. Exaggerations and missteps are interpreted as signs of insecurity and lack of self-confidence. Authenticity in the performance of self is crucial, as observed also by Frosh *et al.* (2002). The link between masculinity and verbal abuse is such that a boy who does not use terms of abuse, threats or insults becomes something of an anomaly. As a boy, never 'to swear'³ is so uncommon that it has to be pointed out and commented upon. Yannis was presented as a deviant example in the interviews, i.e., a boy who never 'swore'. He was friendly, rather withdrawn, and well liked, but not considered popular and tough. His mild manners and distance taking from verbal abuse provoked comments from other boys, albeit of a friendly kind. In an episode in the classroom one of the popular boys in the class says directly to him: 'Yannis, it's like this. You don't have to be nice all the time. You can be tough sometimes as well' (Villiam).

In Villiam's utterance, a contradiction between being nice and being tough is created that represents a criticism of Yannis's way of being a boy. This can be read as a form of 'category maintenance work' (Davies, 2003, p. 31), which surrounds gender categories. The purpose of such work is to demonstrate that the boundaries of

gender-appropriateness have been exceeded, and also to reassert the importance of the gender categories and their definitions. That nice, shy boys cannot handle verbal abuse in the right way also emerged in the interviews:

- Interviewer: Would they be insulted if that [whore] was said to a guy, do you think he would take offense?
 Isabel: Well that depends.
 Interviewer: Yes?
 Isabel: Like if the guy is nice or like if he takes everything seriously [...]
 Interviewer: Yes. But those who take everything seriously... are they like...?
 Isabel: Like swots. The ones who study, who do the most schoolwork [...]
 Interviewer: Yes, OK, but you think they would take offense, or what?
 Isabel: Yes. [...] The ones who aren't swots, like the popular ones [inaudible]. A bit like, well, they don't take it so seriously. They say things like that all the time to each other [inaudible].

Here, Isabel gives being a 'nice guy' the same meaning as 'taking everything seriously' and being a 'swot', which in turn is placed in opposition to being popular. Such boys would take offense if someone called them a 'whore'. By contrast, the popular guys usually say things like that to each other, and adopt a more easy-going approach to pejoratives. The jocularity in their attitude becomes a part of the exercise of hegemonic masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Frosh *et al.*, 2002). Of course, not all boys live up to this ideal:

- Interviewer: But then there are some other guys who **don't** do that [make fun of you, tease you, or say dirty things]?
 Isabel: No, the other guys are **not** like that. They are like the girls, like. Yeah, they're nice.

Verbal abuse and gender are clearly connected in this citation. The boys who are not verbally abusive toward girls are like girls, says Isabel, they are nice. Being 'nice' or focused on schoolwork (being a swot) is thus excluded from hegemonic masculinity, and instead connected with femininity. 'Niceness' is a part of conventional femininity that entails things like caring about others' feelings and treating them equally (Merten, 1997). In this context, using verbal abuse can function as a strategy for avoiding the feminine connotations of being 'nice'.

It was evident from the observations that exhortations to 'lay off' or 'shut up' were often used, mostly by boys, to regulate and control others' behaviors. Nor was it uncommon with hierarchies based on intellectual ability, where 'idiot', 'spastic' and 'dimwit' were relevant terms of abuse. In one class, some boys made spiteful comments such as 'You think you're so smart, don't you?' to other students when they responded to teachers' questions. Dedicated efforts to do schoolwork *alone* by boys attracted negative comments, and were regarded as boring and proper. But doing well in school, especially in subjects like mathematics or sport, contributed to the higher status of some of the boys. The possibility of balancing academic performance against, among other things, sexual verbal abuse, enables boys to claim toughness and avoid being branded 'swots'. Being a 'swot' is not regarded as either tough or masculine, but rather represents an asexual position (Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

Similarly, Frosh *et al.* (2002) find that 'nice' boys were construed as desexualized and not masculine. An untroubled attitude to schoolwork was identified by Frosh *et al.* (2002) as one of the attributes significant to being a popular boy, alongside toughness, hardness and being good at sports. In light of the school setting and the value the school attributes to academic performance, discourses of intellectual ability were under-represented in verbal abuse in comparison with those concerning sex and sexuality—highlighting the central importance of the latter in social interactions between students.

Racist verbal abuse was generally uncommon in both the classes, and did not have anywhere near the scope of the usage of sexualized terms, even jokingly. A teacher as well as one of the students at the inner-city school used the high ethnic homogeneity as an explanation to the low frequency of racial abuse. During one of the very few instances that were recorded in the suburban class, a boy with minority background was in a joking tone of voice accused of 'acting like a darkie' by another boy. It was met with marked silence and a stare from the targeted boy and an ironic comment on racism from a third boy, and created an uncomfortable atmosphere. The episode stood in stark contrast with how sexual verbal abuse most often was treated. Students in both classes said that 'your mother!' was one of the worst and crudest things you could say to an 'immigrant', implying that his or her mother was a whore. The ethnically Swedish boys situated its usage in a discourse about 'immigrant' values in relation to sexuality and used the insult as a 'joke' between themselves, simultaneously presenting themselves as 'liberated Swedish boys'. Despite the fact that racist verbal abuse very seldom was used openly in the two classes, there was a striking conceptual divide between 'immigrants' and 'Swedes' in both schools. This was expressed in, among other ways, by students describing these as two taken for granted mutually exclusive groups and during recesses and in relationships across classes and grades, mingling in accordance with this division.

Threats of violence

During the observations, not only insults but also threats, often of exaggerated physical violence, were used between boys, but very rarely by girls. In the following episode, Anders and Otto are in the hallway during recess. Otto's cell phone starts to ring repeatedly and loudly.

Anders: Hell, that's irritating! I'll kill you, I promise!

Otto: I'll kill **you**!

By threatening violence, boys can construe themselves as being capable of using violence, even if they are not using it at that moment. Such verbal abuse alludes to discourses on violence and masculinity, and works as a way of presenting oneself as a 'tough' boy. Threats of violence, however, were very seldom employed against girls. Only one such instance was recorded during observations, and that threat was also directed toward a boy. Instead, boys mostly included sexual content in verbal abuse toward girls. Threatening a girl with physical violence contradicts the notion expressed

in one of the interviews that 'you should not hit girls'—thereby construing girls as weak and soft, and boys as strong, tough and physical. Threats of non-sexual violence allow the potential interpretation that girls are of equal strength, or 'one of the boys'. Sexual slurs, on the other hand, securely subordinate girls, and are hard for them to counteract. Thus, verbal abuse concerns situationally specific choices of what kinds of insults or pejoratives will seem culturally appropriate. Research has shown violence to be a way of constructing masculinity in other contexts (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Hearn, 1998; Messerschmidt, 2000a, b). Even the threat of violence in a non-serious manner can serve this purpose, when actual physical violence or threat thereof would not be appropriate.

Being too tough

In several students' descriptions of verbal abuse, it is connected with 'rowdy' guys in other classes, who don't do well academically, occasionally cut class, are members of gangs, and 'go around acting tough' in school. Implicit in these descriptions is an association to lower class boys. Here, Ulrik describes another 8 Grader, Olof, who uses verbal abuse to create a position of power in relation to other students:

- Ulrik: OK, the only one I can think of who has ever said something really crude to me in school **here** is Olof, whose class is upstairs. He's got kind of bad self-confidence, so that's probably why. He said something, I don't even remember... eh, 'What a fucking spastic whore's ass you are, Ulrik' or something like that. 'Oh well, OK, you're ugly too, aren't you, Olof?'
- Interviewer: But, in what sort of context was this? Had you done something that he thought was really bad, or what?
- Ulrik: I hadn't done anything (laughter) against him. I passed him on the stairs and he just. ... He just said it out of pure intuition.
- Interviewer: OK, and it was just like, you walked past?
- Ulrik: And then I said 'But you're really ugly too, Ol-' or I said 'You're also very **cute** Olof' and then [he] got really fucking mad at me (laughter). That was really funny!
- Interviewer: [Laughter] OK, but then did it stop by you just saying that or did you keep on talking?
- Ulrik: No, no, then he went up the stairs to be at the same height as me and took out a bottle like this and said 'Should I smash you over the head?' and I just 'No'. Then he went like this 'What?' Because he's used to- He tries to run a reign of terror. His own friends hate him. He was kind of taken aback, why I wasn't afraid. So, then... he just left, since he knew I wasn't going to be scared of him.

Ulrik opposes Olof's positioning of him as someone who can be dominated, insulted, threatened and scared. Ulrik reformulates the situation, and portrays Olof as a 'rowdy boy', presenting himself as a representative of another, superior form of masculinity. His coolness, self-confidence and self-assurance mean he can replace the need for pejoratives with ridicule, which becomes a more sophisticated form of verbal abuse. Pejoratives, threats and violence become characteristics of a subordinated masculinity, linked to an inability to have ordinary relationships with friends and

other students in school. Ulrik replies 'You're also very cute', as if Olof had given him a compliment, and refuses to become upset or afraid. Being 'cute' is a quality associated with younger, smaller individuals, something said to a child, and also gender marked as feminine. 'Rowdy' boys were often described as dominant in school, by being loud and aggressive, but were regarded as failures in other ways, e.g., as lacking self-confidence and self-assurance. Verbal abuse becomes part of being 'rowdy', a subordinated masculinity based on resistance to the school's formal power order, and associated with being working or lower class (Connell, 2000; Haavind, 2003). When other resources are lacking, breaking rules and refusing adults' regulation can be used in masculinity construction (Jordan, 1995; Connell, 2000). In the interviews, responsibility for 'real, serious' verbal abuse is placed on individual 'rowdy' boys, perceived as deviant also in other ways.

Boys 'joking' with girls

Girls were also targets of tough boys' verbal abuse. Both interviews and observations demonstrated that boys not only employed sexual terms of abuse, but also attacked their (hetero)sexual attractiveness—e.g., by saying they needed to diet, should shave their mustaches, or could be used as 'car crushers' due to their size, thereby evaluating girls' femininity. Students classify verbal abuse with regard to seriousness; some is seen as so common or trivial it hardly qualifies. Boys' aggressive communication is often described as humorous, or excused in other ways:

- Interviewer: Have any of your friends experienced that [been called whore]?
 Maja: In that case it would be from guys who just say it without meaning it, in my class, who just say it because they are a bit sick [laughter].
 Interviewer: But how do you know they don't mean it then?
 Maja: Because they don't have any reason to, that's why. And then they just laugh. You can just tell from the whole situation that it's like nothing, really.
 Interviewer: Can you explain how you can tell?
 Maja: For example if a girl in my class [laughter] says 'but don't do that, don't do that!' all the time just because a guy is carrying on. And then he says 'shut up you fucking... cunt' or something, things like that and then he laughs. And that's mean, I suppose, but you can still tell that he doesn't... Yes, yeah, but it is mean, really [laughter]. It is!

Maja initially dismisses her example as counting as 'real' verbal abuse and draws on the discourse of boys' joking and sex-talk as harmless and inevitable. Guys are 'a bit sick'; they do not have any reason to mean what they say, and they laugh, which is enough to validate the boys' interpretation as 'joking' (as signaled by their laughter). This is despite the boy bothering the girl and verbally abusing her, while she is trying to be left alone. Not until the very end of the sequence does she produce a conflicting interpretation, stating that saying something like that actually 'is mean'. The discourse of 'joking' has precedence over opposing interpretations, and thus allows for boys' verbal abuse of girls.

Contrasting with the discourse of joking, 'whore' and similar terms of abuse were also presented in interviews as most common when boys wanted to be nasty to girls. The terms were then aimed at girls they dislike or are angry at (see also Mahony, 1989; Lees, 1993), and are thus used more frequently to regulate gendered actions than to describe actual sexual practice (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Actions that are ambiguous, or breach expected gender meanings, are reorganized (Davies, 2003). Through the use of such words, a difference is created between the boy who says it and the girl to whom it is said. A value scale is set up, which is not the same for the two; she is judged based on his perception of her sexuality, whereas his sexuality is never in question. Also, a distinction is made between femininities based on norms of female sexuality that girls need to observe (Ambjörnsson, 2004). According to Walkerdine (1990), girls are constituted as powerless objects in a sexist discourse. Actual usage in the classes, however, was not that common. The observer noted only one occasion in each school where it caused considerable attention and annoyance among other girls; in other instances, use of the word was not met with any visible reaction. Accessibility and presence of this discourse was, however, apparent. Three of the four interviewed girls had been called 'whore' or 'slut' by boys in school. Amanda, a well-liked, outspoken girl influenced by feminist thinking, describes a row with a gang of boys that lasted for several days:

- Interviewer: But has it ever happened to you in school that somebody has said something to you that you thought, well, was really stupid or nasty or something like that?
- Amanda: No, well there are the ones you **fight** with, if you fight with somebody, they often make nasty comments as soon as they pass by, but... You don't **care**!
- Interviewer: Like in the corridor, in passing, you mean, or?
- Amanda: Yes. Because I was fighting... a week ago or so with a gang of guys in Grade 8... and they like always said things like that [whore], but then I told them **off**, like, several times, but they didn't want to stop and then you feel like- Well I don't know, but the best way is almost to ignore them, but then you feel- then it's like the guys get- to think that they have **won** somehow and can go on so you shouldn't really ignore it, you should really... go up- Like I did, I walked up to them like on my **own** in the canteen and **told** them like and they became like mrrr, cos they were thinking like, well I wouldn't say anything because I'm a girl on my own and they are five-six guys, I obviously wouldn't talk back to them! But er- I think that that's maybe what you should do because that way it will at least **end**.

The weight given to not caring about verbal abuse is clear, however, it is a strategy that is not evidently effective. Amanda perceives the positioning of herself as a whore as an exercise of power, that—if she had ignored the boys—she would have accepted. She describes her resistance and challenging of expected power relations by telling them off in public, construing herself as strong and fearless. Later it becomes apparent that her attempt did not make the boys stop. This required her to mobilize her large circle of acquaintances at school and even the teachers. Her chances, on her own, to reject the positioning and avoid further verbal abuse were small. This shows the potential limitation on the scope of action of girls in school, imposed by the

discourse of the 'whore' and the amount of work needed to resist it, but also that girls are not unambiguously powerless in relation to boys. Sexual verbal abuse is a rhetorical means for boys to gain the initiative in evaluating and positioning girls' femininity.

The self-presentations or actions that can be used to position oneself as popular are not the same for girls and boys. In neither class were there girls who were often verbally abusive; instead, the popular girls achieved desirable femininity through appearance and relations with the tough boys (see Thorne, 1993). Popularity also means having as many friends or acquaintances as possible, of both genders. However, relations with boys are not shaped in the same way as with girls. Amanda describes popular girls:

- Amanda: Yes, they are friends with **everybody**. They try like, that's like... the key to it all, that you should have many friends and you should... And they're a bit silly [laughter].
- Interviewer: [Laughter] OK.
- Amanda: Maybe I'm not the one to say, but they are rather silly and like- I don't know, they're not **friends** with the guys in that way, but they are more girls and guys, and then they should act silly and do things like that.
- Interviewer: OK, so then the friendship- You are friends with people of the same sex or is it=
- Amanda: =Yes, and the guys are like guys and then you should be guys and girls, it can't be like a girl and a guy are sitting around talking, but it is more like the roles of guys and girls.

Entering into heterosexual relations with boys is a central aspect of popularity. This entails, among other things, acting 'silly' in their company, involving not regarding boys as regular friends, but interacting with them in a specifically sexualized way. Silliness is a way for girls to conduct themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity, that at the same time confirms a subordinate position. Expectations of 'silliness' undermine possibilities of being assertive when encountering verbal abuse initiated by boys. Presenting oneself as a sexual person is one important dimension of popularity (Duncan, 1999; McGuffey & Rich, 1999). In school, what Epstein and Johnson (1994) have called 'the heterosexual presumption', based on Butler's (1990) thinking concerning heteronormativity, prevails. Heterosexuality is the hub around which all other sexualities are arranged. In Eder *et al.*'s (1995) study of language use in a high school in the US, popularity was not necessarily connected with being most liked, but rather with being most *visible* among students. Girls' status among other girls is also affected by their popularity among boys (Thorne, 1993).

Verbal abuse of boys was very rarely *initiated* by girls, but rather came as a response to boys' disturbing, teasing, shoving them, or taking their things. Often, it was one of the more assertive girls who bit back. Isabel claimed to use verbal abuse in certain settings against both boys and girls. She describes a situation where she has had enough of the boys' constant harassment, getting really angry:

Yes, yesterday... in physical education- I was sitting like this on a fence and Robert was sitting next to me. Then Emanuel came, he often messes with me. He first went to Robert and did something so he fell. Then he went '**Now** Isabel, it's your turn!' And I just went

'No, no, don't mess with me' so he pushed me down like that. And I got fucking mad, I just 'Fucking child of a whore, what the fuck are you doing, what kind of a class is this!' Then Amina went 'Isabel where are you going?' I just 'Away from this fucking class, check these pigs out'. I don't know what I said, everything. So I got mad, left the physical education, and got marked down for cutting class.

In Isabel's narrative, being verbally abusive does not gain her any advantages. Her description of events also shows a fundamental dilemma. In her response to Emanuel's harassment, she gets marked down for absence, whereas he is not punished in any way. Interactions like this establish patterns of power in the classroom and expectations of what girls should put up with. Answering back with verbal abuse can give girls a certain amount of 'respect', but initiating it did not seem to have the same positive effects as it did for boys.

Girls fighting with girls

As for boys, being verbally aggressive for girls is tied to being tough, except toughness does not have the same positive meaning for femininity as it does for masculinity. For girls, conflicts or fights were often mentioned as contexts for verbal abuse; in contrast, boys' verbal abuse was often described in terms of joking or fooling around with a friend. Girls' verbal abuse was the exception:

Like there are **some** girls who can do things like that when they fight or something, but most of the time it is the ones who are a bit—who want to be a bit tough and so on. Like 'fucking whore!' or something like that. (Maja)

Girls also use sexist discourses in verbal abuse of other girls, where the target is ascribed a femininity distinct from and subordinate to the speaker's. The words give meanings with regard to desired or non-expected sexualities. Sexuality functions—even for girls—as one of the most important dimensions of the othering of girls. 'Whore' can also be used against boys, albeit with restricted impact, since the association with a feminine position makes such usage meaningful. As mentioned above, in Isabel's view, only nice, swotty boys would take offense; these boys represent a form of masculinity regarded as more feminine. Saying 'whore' to such a boy enforces this subordinate position. By contrast, saying 'fag' to a girl is, according to the interviewed students, totally meaningless, even ridiculous. 'Fag' was mentioned by several of the interviewed students as one of the most common mean things to say to a boy, but only a couple of instances were recorded during the observations. Rather, it occurred when talking about someone not present, or as an adjective when commenting on clothes, music or hairstyles. Thereby it functioned to mark the boundaries of proper heterosexual male behavior (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Thurlow, 2001; Renold, 2002). To use the word 'dyke' to indicate homosexual girls works to demonstrate one's own heterosexuality (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). But 'dyke' does not have the same resonance for girls as 'fag' does for boys, and was not employed as a general term of abuse aimed at girls. This contrasts with Lee's (1993) finding that being called a 'lezzie' was the worst insult, however for somewhat older girls.

- Maja: Well, it almost feels like... you say it [dyke] to people who **are** that, that's how it feels. Fag is a bit more like you say to anybody just to put them down, while [pause] it doesn't feel like... like it's negative enough with anything like that because... I don't know.
- Interviewer: For girls?
- Maja: Yes.
- Interviewer: It doesn't work the same way as fag=
- Maja: =No, but it is just- Guys still think it's... [laughter] quite fun. No but! [laughter]. No but [pause] yes.

Here, Maja hints at the discourse of female homosexuality being there for the pleasure of males, making being a lesbian not as bad as being a gay, since—as a girl—you are still attractive to boys. Thus, male heterosexuality is the point of orientation (Holland *et al.*, 2004).

Interviewed girls and boys agreed that boys more often employ verbal abuse, but some girls were careful to point out that girls also make use of it in conflict situations. Through this they positioned themselves as strong and assertive. Thorne (1993) observes that girls as well as boys try to distance themselves from despised meanings connected with femininity, such as weakness.

- Interviewer: Is it only the guys that say these kind of things to the girls?
- Anna: Definitely not. Girls say things to each other too. If you're in a fight. I remember hell breaking loose when I said- I was really against it, but I got pissed off with a girl and I called her like child of a whore, and that resulted in a big kafuffle all over the school.
- Interviewer: Yes, so what then, can you describe what happened?
- Anna: No but we- we couldn't handle seeing each other. We started, you know- we **shouted** at each other when we saw each other in the school like aaah, screamed **lots** of nasty things at each other, but now we're friends [laughter]. So everything sort of- We were *fjortisar*⁴ then and unsure of ourselves. Now, everybody has matured so now it's not like that any more. I think I've never, not lately have I heard anything. In the **seventh** grade they may say things to each other. But I don't hang out with them so much. But I have not heard anybody, at least not on our floor, shout anything nasty.

Anna, one of the tougher girls, highly visible in the classroom, states that girls do employ verbal abuse, but then distances herself from it by placing it in a discourse of immaturity. Later, Anna emphasizes that she cannot imagine using words like 'whore', since they degrade girls. Only insecure '*fjortisar*' say things like that. Being defined as a '*fjortis*' is to be placed in a negative position, closely tied to girls' sexuality—a girl 'who shows what she has, with a low neckline and a short skirt,' says Rikard in the interview. They are also described as stupid and paying too much attention to their looks. The discourse of the air-headed, slutty '*fjortis*' runs alongside the discourse of 'good girl' femininity, where girls are nice, follow rules and perform well. '*Fjortisar*' take up *too* much space, running around shouting dirty words at each other, using too much makeup, and being too sexually blatant. A verbally aggressive girl creates a vulgar image. There is a clear conflict in how Anna talks about verbal abuse. On the one hand, she presents a discourse of equality, asserting that girls and boys do

the same things. On the other, she puts in a lot of effort to explain that her own use of sexual insults is in the past. None of the boys bothered to assert that they were not verbally aggressive. For girls, the use of verbal abuse is associated with a non-desirable femininity, potentially leading to lower status. Thus, verbal abuse is riskier for girls than for boys, and not a self-evidently accessible strategy in the same way. Similarly, in Ambjörnsson's (2004) study, girls using words like 'whore' and 'cunt' ran the risk of being regarded as sluts and lower class.

The invisibility of girls' verbal abuse

The close connection to masculinity also seems to render some of the verbal abuse between girls invisible.

- Interviewer: But the girls in class? Do they say such things?
 Rikard: I've never heard them.
 Interviewer: Never?
 Rikard: They may have said nasty things, but then I don't think about it. They say—well they are too good friends, they've known each other since they were tiny, so the ugliest word I have heard them say is 'darling'.
 Interviewer: [Laughter] OK, but they don't even say things like 'whore' and 'cunt' to each other, even as a **joke** like=
 Rikard: =we say to each other. No, they don't.

In this extract Rikard's description of his relation to his male friends is contrasted with relations between girls. Friendship is clearly gendered. The ugliest word he has heard a girl say to another is 'darling', he says jokingly, producing an image of femininity and friendship between girls as considerate and caring, with no room for insults, even as jokes. But the girls' own presentations differ; all four girls interviewed claim to be verbally aggressive in the context of conversations with their friends, albeit jokingly. This can be interpreted as resistance against the image of girls as nice, serious and hardworking. That girls, rather than being quiet and well mannered, do use verbal abuse is also confirmed by the observations. Amanda was in a group with three other girls who referred to themselves as lesbians, and called each other 'dykes' or 'sluts', during both class and recess, thereby constructing an alternative femininity. Rikard was their classmate, but evidently did not attach any significance to what he heard. Because of the gendered power relation, boys can ignore girls, but not the other way around (Frosh *et al.*, 2002). His masculinity construction enabled him to disregard alternative understandings of these practices. In doing so, he also denied any claims to power the girls could make through verbal abuse, such as being 'tough'.

Conclusions

Verbal abuse is a cultural resource to which boys have greater access than girls. In particular, boys who aspire to hegemonic masculinity can gain from the exercise of verbal abuse. This functions in a structuring and hierarchy-creating manner between

different masculinities and femininities. But, whereas boys largely benefit from being verbally abusive, such practices mostly reflect unfavorably on girls. For boys, showing oneself able to handle the giving-and-taking of verbal abuse contributes to toughness and popularity, whereas for girls both using verbal abuse and being the target of it can lead to unfavorable positioning.

Toughness emerged as a gendered organizing principle for verbal abuse, and constituted the students' overarching understanding of this discursive practice. Toughness is a central component of hegemonic masculinity in this context. Boys who combined verbal abuse with heterosexual and self-assured presentations of themselves successfully managed the hegemonic masculinity ideal. By contrast, other boys, who were too verbally abusive or abusive in the wrong way, were considered 'rowdy', or—in the case of the 'swots'—not verbally aggressive enough. Tough boys' verbal abuse did not qualify as such, but was often excused as unintentional or a joke by other students, despite being much more common. In this way, such abuse was legitimized and rendered invisible, giving a wider scope for action. Responsibility for the bulk of aggressive language in school was attributed to 'rowdy' boys instead.

Spontaneous gender separation restricted interactions between girls and boys, where some boys held most of the initiative regarding verbal abuse, evaluating girls' appearances, speech and actions. Girls did not have corresponding possibilities to retaliate. The lives of girls in school were influenced in particular by the possibility of being exposed to sexual verbal abuse—a finding that corresponds to those of studies of other age groups and in other countries. Girls' verbal abuse was seen as exceptional, often framed as occurring during fights, whereas boys' abuse was described as jocular or friendly and humorous. Advantages for girls of being verbally abusive were constrained by the meanings it had in relation to their gender identities, such as the risk of being regarded as a 'fjortis', i.e., brash, immature and air-headed. Also, toughness did not have the same meaning for femininity, where being heterosexually attractive, accepting subordination to hegemonic masculinity and having as many friends as possible were keys to popularity.

Several dimensions of verbal abuse make it a masculinity-constituting practice: the discourses referred to through choice of words and meanings of what is said, persons picked as targets, and even being verbally abusive at all. The analysis shows how verbal abuse is intertwined with discourses of gender, toughness and heterosexuality. Young people's gender identities, sexualities and scope for social interaction are regulated through verbal abuse. In this way, power relations—both between genders and between different masculinities and femininities—are structured in school.

Understanding verbal abuse as a resource in the construction of masculinities throws light on the advantages of such practices and contributes to explaining why it is common in school. Yet, why it has this significance in just this age group remains to be answered, and should be addressed in future research. The gender patterns of verbal abuse were surprisingly similar in the two classes, despite differences between the schools and classes. In addition, discourses and practices of verbal abuse in relation to class and ethnicity have not been examined thoroughly. As the study was

not designed to address these questions, it leaves us mainly with isolated anecdotes. Definitely, those topics need further examination.

Key to transcripts

... short pause
 [pause] long pause
 = overlapping speech
 — interrupted speech
 [...] material edited out
bold stress

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to John Sjöström for valuable contributions to the analysis and to the participating students, teachers and schools. The study was financed in part by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS).

Notes

1. In Sweden, a great majority of students (94%) attend public-sector schools close to their homes (Skolverket, 2004). The school system encompasses ten years of compulsory schooling, from age 6- to 16-years-old, followed by three years of high school studies.
2. Detailed information about data collection, ethical considerations, etc, can be obtained from the corresponding author.
3. In Swedish there is no collective verb for the act of being verbally aggressive, and in the interviews students often used the verb 'to swear' to be able to talk about it. Their usage reveals that it is not restricted to swear words, but has a more general meaning, encompassing terms of abuse and insults.
4. The word 'fjortis', derived from the Swedish numeral *fjorton* 'fourteen', is quite specific to Sweden. It refers to a girl who is brash, dumb and immature, and is related to being or acting like a 14-year-old rather than being older, which in turn is related to the age of 15 being treated as the age of sexual maturity in Sweden. It is most often used when talking *about* a girl, instead of to her.

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