

Blurred Lines: The Ambiguity of Disparaging Humour and Slurs in Norwegian High School Boys' Friendship Groups

YOUNG

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DOI: 10.1177/11033088211006924
journals.sagepub.com/home/you



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Abstract

This article examines the use of disparaging humour and slurs in Norwegian high school boys' friendship groups to shed light on the complexity of adolescent males' friendships and everyday socialization through a phenomenon that is usually connected to bullying. The study employed a qualitative approach consisting of participant observation and individual interviews with students. The article addresses the ambiguity embedded in the boys' use of disparaging humour and slurs. The findings of this study suggest that the boys employ prejudiced and discriminatory language frequently with friends; however, the intent behind it is not linked to discriminatory or prejudiced attitudes or practices. Thus, adolescent boys utilize a form of humour where lines between harmful and harmless are blurred and inherently complex. The ambiguity of disparaging humour and slurs may cause challenges for teachers, and this article offers valuable new knowledge that may support them in their daily work.

Keywords

Disparagement, humour, joking, slurs, gay-related, racial, youths, adolescents, high school, boys

Introduction

Today, possessing a sense of humour is valued. High status often aligns with the ability to make others laugh, while being accused of lacking a sense of humour can

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be seen as criticism (Billig, 2005). Billig (2005) asserts that humour, laughter and ridicule can bring people together or it can exclude, through shared enjoyment or through mockery, and further stresses the importance of group dynamics in theorizing humour. Humour must be interpreted by the receivers—the audience. Hence, for a joke to be funny, it must be accepted as just that.

The context and setting in which a joke is told are central to how the joke is perceived and interpreted (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Research in the school context in Norway shows that insults, mockery and discriminatory denigration based on stereotypes and prejudice occur frequently (see Eriksen, 2017; Myrebøe, 2021; Olsen et al., 2016; Slaatten et al., 2015). Many such instances happen under the guise of humour, especially among friends. However, teachers struggle to understand and deal with this phenomenon (Myrebøe, 2021; Røthing, 2017). According to Myrebøe (2021), teachers find it difficult to understand what is *really* going on when students use expressions including prejudice and stereotypes in their social interactions, and they experience discomfort and insecurity in such situations. While previous research has addressed disparaging humour and slurs in relation to bullying (e.g., Olsen et al., 2016; Slaatten et al., 2015; Slaatten & Gabrys, 2014) and how it is perceived from the teachers' perspective, the present research focuses on the perspective of students who *use* this type of language when socializing with friends.

In Norwegian society, race-related words or other words that connote or signal difference (words referring to ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc.) are often avoided, and a national cultural discourse of tolerance and equality is promoted, encouraged—and expected. In 2006, Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad argued that the national narrative and self-image in Norwegian society disregard the history of oppression of minorities in Norway. This entails that racism is regarded as a non-issue, and the self-image of a colour-blind nation acts as a barrier to engaging in critical discussions about issues concerning racism. The race word 'neger', for example, has been, and continues to be, the subject of heated debates in Norway. It derives from the English term 'negro' and is a contested word in Norwegian society (see Gullestad, 2006). According to Gullestad, many majority Norwegians claim that 'neger' is descriptive and neutral rather than racist, arguing that the term does not carry the same racist history as the English term 'negro'. However, 'the perceived neutrality of the word is connected to its traditional use in talking *about* Blacks.' (Gullestad, 2006, p. 215). Gullestad claims that it is mostly used in non-public conversations *about*, and not *to*, people of colour. Regardless, an implication of this can be that the idea of Norway as a colour-blind nation without the presence of racism, as described by Gullestad, is uncritically upheld and remains unchallenged. Additionally, claiming 'neger' to be a descriptive and neutral term can be used as a 'get out of jail free card', possibly exonerating the one who used it from accusations of being racist. None of the students in my study used the words 'neger' or 'niggah' to refer to or describe specific people to me as the researcher. Rather, they arose in explanations of how the students use such words in humorous exchanges with their black friends. As such, there is a use-mention distinction regarding race words: the words were *mentioned* to me but *used* by students in interactions with their black friends.

In this article, I explore from the boys' perspective how this form of humour is deployed and what functions this humour has in male friendship groups. I address two questions: What type of disparaging humour and slurs do the boys use? What are

the functions (positive and negative) of this form of humour for the boys' friendships and group relations?

On Humour and (Hetero-)Masculinity

Humour and joking are embedded in group life, and groups create their own humorous and jocular discourses and traditions (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). In groups, humour can be used, for example, to create community, lighten the mood and relieve tension, gain attention and status, display power, differentiate one's own group from other groups, or shock and disrupt taboos (see Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Kotthoff, 2006; Moore, 2017; Phoenix et al., 2003; Søndergaard, 2018). Humour or jokes that play on one's own identity, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religious beliefs, are considered more socially acceptable than humour or jokes told at the expense of others (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Research shows that when a commonly targeted group/person adopts disparaging humour, it can serve positive functions within the group (Bianchi, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). Re-appropriating or subverting disparaging humour within a group can, for example, increase the perceived power of the group and, thus, 'attenuate the stigma attached to the derogatory group label' (Bianchi, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2028).

Research indicates that both men and women utilize disparaging humour and slurs, but women in particular usually confine this to same-sex interactions (Hay, 2000). Some claim that role expectations shape how, where and when humour is used or not used, perhaps especially for women (Hay, 2000; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006). Previous research also suggests that males more than females perform intimacy through transgressions of public taboos, mocking, and ridicule (see Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Kiesling, 2005; Kotthoff, 2006). This is often referred to as homosociality and is 'defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity' (Odenbring & Johansson, 2020, p. 4). Homosocial bonds can be forged, for example, through humour and 'insults, boasts, and other competitive linguistic forms' (Kiesling, 2005, p. 721). According to a Finnish study, schoolboys' use of humour is a 'significant resource and strategy in procuring and maintaining masculine status and power' (Huuki et al., 2010, p. 380). This coincides with findings suggesting that males seem to prefer humour that is competitive and that can impact power and hierarchical relations (Hay, 2000) and that more aggressive forms of humour are more common among males (Kotthoff, 2006). There is no clear answer as to why this seems to be the case, but a reasonable question is whether this form of humour serves other (or more meaningful) functions for males than for females. Or perhaps it has something to do with role expectations. As Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) suggest, 'role expectations of men and women in interaction shape their sense of whether their joking remarks will be understood primarily as humor' (p. 57). Kuipers' (2011) female interviewees underline decency and protecting their reputation when they discuss how they remain mindful of whom they re-tell filthy jokes to, for example. According to Kuipers, although differences in power between men and women have reduced, there are still differences in standards for feminine and masculine behaviours, and these are relevant to the humour domain.

In the school context, humour can be utilized to regulate social life through ridicule and shame. As such, it can 'contribute to clarifying, manifesting, and replicating

the boundaries of the community, the norms and rules' (Søndergaard, 2018, p. 62). Consequently, humour can play a central role in adolescents' friendship socialization as well as social exclusion in schools. Jonsson (2018) shows how male adolescents at a Swedish multi-ethnic school use language tied to stereotypes, prejudice and assumed traits of specific groups or identities. He finds that urban youth styles and previously taboo words tied to identities are reproduced or destabilized through humorous interactions and that identities can be utilized as tools in constructing social hierarchies. Thus, humour can be a way to express opposition and subvert and 'flip the script' (Roberts et al., 2008). Playing with identity-related words can also involve a balancing act where racist and anti-racist meanings are simultaneously (re)produced (Raby, 2004). Jonsson (2018) describes this balancing act as something that allows the students in his study to 'laugh at the Other, but at the same time their jokes enable them to disrupt stereotypes and display the arbitrary that categorizations of ethnicity, gender, and race contain' (p. 333). Similarly, Roberts et al. (2008) find that students at a multi-ethnic high school in the United States employ racialized jokes and name-calling as a strategy for challenging racism and so-called colour blindness: it can be a way for students to challenge tacit rules of 'polite' talk about race and racism. Self-directed humour is similar to subversion because it involves re-appropriating stereotypes and flipping the script. For people in minority groups, it can be a way of reducing or combatting tensions from stereotypes or prejudice or managing emotions by diffusing tension, thus functioning as an emotional defence (Ellithorpe et al., 2014).

By locating disparaging or derogatory language within a discourse of humour, one can mitigate the effects of the comments made (Burdsey, 2011). The receiver can shield themselves (at least externally) from hurt by downplaying it or categorizing it as 'just a joke'. It can be a means of self-preservation and softening the blow. Similarly, categorizing it as 'just a joke' can offer a defence against accusations of being discriminatory, thus exonerating the one who made the insult (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005; Søndergaard, 2018). Homophobic and otherwise stereotyped and prejudicial language, for example, is often explained by adolescents as generic insults and innocuous banter (see Athanases & Comar, 2008; Cameron, 1997; Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix et al., 2003; Plummer, 2001). This suggests that these words can somehow lose their negative meanings through frequent usage and can instead be regarded as synonyms of 'stupid', 'idiot', 'dumb' and so forth (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Jewell & Morrison, 2010). Though this language use can be tied to anti-gay behaviour, attitudes and bullying (Odenbring & Johansson, 2020; Søndergaard, 2018), it is often seen as a means of asserting one's own masculinity to comment on another's non-masculine traits or behaviours (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1997; Phoenix et al., 2003) or to use outright slurs that have nothing to do with sexual orientation or behaviour (Evans & Chapman, 2014). In a study conducted in a US high school, Pascoe (2011) finds that homophobic epithets and slurs are uttered regularly among boys, who use 'fag' and similar words liberally. However, they claim they would never say these words to a person who identifies as gay. Nevertheless, the use of gay-related labels and slurs has a disciplining effect because of the inherent negative connotations of gay-related labels. This ambivalence in gay-related humour—its positive and negative functions—will be discussed later in the article.

Methods and Data

This article is part of a doctoral dissertation investigating students' experiences with and perceptions of stereotypes and prejudice tied to minority groups and identities. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 28 high school students (16 girls and 12 boys) from three high schools in different parts of Norway, in addition to participant observation in one class at each of the three schools. I followed one class at each school for three weeks. Interviews with the 12 boys and observation data provide the empirical basis of this article.

The inclusion of three schools¹ in the data collection—one school in northern Norway, one in western Norway, and one in eastern Norway—was a deliberate decision to capture as much complexity as possible. The first school is located in a relatively big city and has a large, heterogeneous student body. The students in the class under study at this school have backgrounds from Scandinavia, the Middle East and Asia, and their various ethnic and religious backgrounds were frequently brought up in casual conversations and banter among students. Here, the phenomenon of disparaging humour and slurs was overt for me as the researcher and partly for teachers as well. The two other schools differ from the first one and are similar to each other in many ways. One is located in a rural area and the other in a small city—both areas with much smaller populations than the first school. These two schools, and the two classes under study, are predominantly white. This is especially true of the small city school. The rural school of approximately 500 students also has a smaller student population than the two other schools. As opposed to the big city school, the use of disparaging humour and slurs at the two predominantly white schools was not apparent or visible to me as the researcher, but it was conveyed through individual interviews and informal conversations with students.

Schools are social spaces that reflect and are interwoven with the wider social setting in which they are located. Thus, a broad geographical selection of schools is a strength because a wide geographical scope opens for more variation and richer empirical material. In this study, the geographical variation combined with variation in terms of the student population (including background, skin colour, sexual orientation, etc.) provided insight into how complex the use of disparaging humour and slurs is in different environments and groups of friends. However, the selected classes at each school were within the same educational programme² and year³ in order to strengthen the foundation for comparing data from the different school contexts and classes.

The interviews were semi-structured with some topics and questions set beforehand (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; O'Reilly, 2009). I asked questions on topics ranging from the students' upbringing, family, interests, and hobbies to education and school-specific questions. These latter types of questions were oriented towards their feelings of well-being and safety in school and their relationships with peers and teachers. This was intended to gain insight into the students' experiences with and perceptions of stereotypes and prejudice tied to minority groups and identities in school. I also asked about their experience of contentment in school and perceptions of the school environment. Initially, I did not ask about humour in the interviews. However, as the topic of disparaging humour and slurs stood out in the initial interviews and observations, I implemented it in the interview guide to learn about how

and why students use disparaging humour and slurs. I did not observe any girls in any of the classes use, for example, gay-related or racial humour or slurs, and in the interviews, most girls explicitly stated that, in their opinion, this is more of a 'boy thing' and not terminology that they themselves use. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length of an interview was approximately one hour. The transcribed interviews with boys amount to approximately 128,000 words⁴ and the field notes, 45,000 words.

This article draws primarily on interview data because the boys' joking was covert at the two predominantly white schools. I did not observe any use of disparaging humour or slurs at either of these schools. At the heterogeneous school, however, this humour was overt and an apparent part of the boys' everyday socialization practices both in and outside of the classroom. Thus, observation data from this school provides the backdrop for my presentation and analyses of the compiled data, even if I mainly present the data through interview excerpts.

I analysed the interview transcripts and field notes thematically, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006). The first step in the data analysis process involved coding the material. I used the software HyperRESEARCH 4.0.2 in both phases of coding. In the initial phase (Charmaz, 2006) of coding, I read and re-read the material extensively and coded the material by line or smaller segments of data, making the coding 'close' to the data. In the focused phase (Charmaz, 2006), the codes from the initial phase were integrated and synthesized into broader themes and sub-themes according to the most frequent and significant codes from the initial phase (Charmaz, 2006). During the processing in the initial phase, humour/joking stood out as a central theme. In the focused phase, three main sub-themes were discerned from this main theme, and the results will be presented according to these themes: (a) racial humour and slurs, (b) gay-related labels and slurs and (c) ambiguity tied to boys' humour practices. In the following analyses, I use excerpts from interviews with a select few boys from each school to illustrate broader findings and to highlight individual reflections that can shed light on the complex nature of disparaging humour and slurs used among male friends.

All students were accurately informed, both in writing and orally, about the project and research ethics. All students gave consent in writing. Information about research ethics and rights was repeated orally to interviewees, and their provision of consent was recorded. To ensure anonymity, I have assigned pseudonyms to all students. As the empirical material for this study is in Norwegian, I have chosen to show the race- and slang words as they are used in Norwegian throughout the article. These emic terms are enclosed in quotation marks. The first time a term is used, I will provide an English translation, within quotation marks, in brackets.

The topic of this article is undoubtedly sensitive, and though I focus on how and why boys use disparaging humour and slurs, this does not mean that I dismiss the importance of discussing the topic in terms of racism, prejudice, discrimination and bullying. However, researching the topic from the students' points of view and focusing on how they describe their intentions and perceptions of their language use is an important part of understanding the phenomenon of disparaging humour or slurs.

Racial and Gay-Related Disparaging Humour Among High School Boys

In the following, students' use and mentions of racial and gay-related disparaging humour and slurs are presented, analysed and discussed. In the first two sub-sections, I highlight how the boys developed friendships and utilized social competencies, such as sensitivity and affection, through the use of racial and gay-related disparaging humour and slurs. Lastly, I discuss the apparent complexity and ambiguity entrenched in their use of disparaging humour and slurs.

Racial Humour and Slurs

How do boys develop friendships and utilize social competencies through disparaging humour? Casper, a white boy in the predominantly white small city school, explained how he and his friends use racial humour and slurs—especially with his two black friends:

It's just about taking it as far as possible. Make it 'lættis'⁵ ['ridiculous' or 'hilarious']. But I would never use it as an insult to hurt somebody. Because I'm very against that. Racism and discrimination and stuff. But we have... two black guys in our group [of friends]. And you... so... You mess around with that all the time, for those things as well [being black]. Everything from if they do something that is stereotypically black, and just say... Call them 'neger' or 'jævla neger' ['damned negro'].

The two black boys were mentioned frequently in interviews as often being on the receiving end of disparaging humour and slurs owing to their skin colour. One of them was in Casper's class and the other was in another class. Casper's initial comment—'It's just about taking it as far as possible'—connotes that this is some sort of internal competition within his group of friends. It is as if the one able to take it the farthest will gain more credibility for socially disciplining and putting his friends in place through joking. Much like Willis's (1977/2016) working class 'lads' who frequently 'take the piss' at each other, all the boys from the three different schools (and friend groups) implied that put-downs have a positive effect in their group of friends; they are (supposed to be) understood as expressions of a shared sense of humour and are based on a shared understanding of what and whom it is okay to joke about or with. In this sense, boys' use of name-calling and slurs can be understood as 'symbols of affection and affiliation, rather than antagonism and rejection' (Roberts et al., 2008, p. 348), and as a means to express camaraderie and closeness. This is especially interesting given the boys' different ethnic and religious backgrounds and skin colours as well as their different school contexts. It is especially striking that the boys who said they were humorously using words such as 'neger' and 'niggah,' or making humour out of things their black friends did that were 'stereotypically black', were themselves white. The white boys at the predominantly white schools mentioned the use of racial slurs, such as 'neger', seemingly without reflecting on the historic power asymmetry or what it can entail to use these slurs—intended as humour or not. At the heterogeneous school, ethnic labels were used regularly and overtly in and outside of the classroom, especially by students with

foreign born parents or grandparents. At this school, I never heard the word ‘neger’ and it was never mentioned in interviews. One girl in this class, however, claimed that sometimes boys use ‘my “niggah”’ when they greet their friends. Additionally, most of the students at this school used self-deprecating humour equally as much as they directed disparaging humour and slurs at their friends.

While explicitly stating that their joking had nothing to do with racism or discrimination, Casper, when probed about using racial slurs with his friends, still expressed ambiguity: ‘Maybe it’s not that well thought through’, however, ‘we know each other well, and it’s like... You can mess with anything. With everyone. And yeah, it’s like, it’s no problem.’ This ambiguity was shared by several boys from the three schools but seemed to be laid to rest by claiming that nothing is really off limits when it comes to joking in their relationships. As Billig (2005) points out, the moral ambiguity of humour creates a space for ‘self-persuasion and self-deceit’ (p. 214). The way the boys explained their use of racial humour and slurs among friends can be understood as a means of affirming close friendships. However, the ambiguity they expressed might indicate that what could be understood as naivety may as well be interpreted as self-persuasion and self-deceit. Additionally, the fact that they did not seem to reflect on how their use of racial slurs might make them appear racist or discriminatory, or how they might wound the receiver, further strengthens the impression that relational closeness works to legitimate harmful language, which leaves little room for those subjected to the language to rebut or challenge their friends.

According to Kowalski (2000), people close to us should know what topics are potentially sensitive or hurtful and not exploit those topics for attempts at humour or teasing. However, people close to us are usually awarded more leeway in terms of mocking and teasing. In addition, it is often assumed that if we offend a friend, they will get over it and the friendship will remain unchanged (Kowalski, 2000). This reasoning was put forth by the boys. They claimed to know each other so well that they would either know when to stop or when they had crossed a line. Almost every boy mentioned this, signifying that they did not actually want to hurt anyone’s feelings. They seemed to utilize a specific set of highly context-dependent social skills, which may indicate a specific type of male sociality that can be understood as a mark of real inclusion and friendship, signifying ‘relationship closeness’ (Baxter, 1992, p. 336).

Mathias, another white male from the same group of friends at the small city school, confirmed that their two black friends were on the receiving end of jokes and slurs owing to the colour of their skin: ‘a lot of people call them ‘niggah’ and stuff. But it’s... They like it. They just think it’s fun.’ He continued as follows:

they’re, like, *completely* in on it. I know them so well now that... I know that they are. But, like... Even if so... I personally find it a bit uncomfortable [laughs] to use it because, in the United States, it was a no-no. Like, calling people *that* [‘niggah’]. So, I... I don’t like to use it.

Mathias’s statement clearly shows that disparaging humour and slurs are not without ambiguity and complexity. Due to personal experiences from the United States, he was more doubtful of the appropriateness of using the word ‘niggah’ than his friend Casper. While Casper determined that it was okay because of their close friendship, Mathias seemed to be more conscious of the negative historical underpinnings and ideological connotations that racial slurs can have and potentially carry forward.

Peter, a white male at the predominantly white rural school, said that many students at his school, including himself, use disparaging humour and slurs about both skin colour and sexual orientation:

It's not used a lot in... in... in a negative sense. I don't think. But it is used, I guess, more in a humorous sense. Ehm... And [laughs] at least, like, 'neger' and stuff is used about those with darker skin. But it's not something you say to someone you don't know. It's rather if you, kind of, have a good friend, whom you have a relation with, then you can, [laughs] in need... use it ['neger']. But they [students with darker skin], like, use it among themselves... A lot [laughs].

Peter also said that 'neger' is not something you call someone you do not know. There needs to be a close friendship to use it. However, Peter made an interesting implicit distinction. While explaining that there are certain limitations in terms of who can call whom 'neger', he also stated that 'they' (students with darker skin) use it frequently among themselves. This seems to legitimize his own and others' use of 'neger'. On the one hand, using the language 'they' use, subverting or re-appropriating it, might be an attempt to flip the script (Roberts et al., 2008) and a means to lessen the power and weaken the stigmatizing force of certain categorizations and labels (Jonsson, 2018; Saucier et al., 2016). Or it could simply be that they use it as friendly banter, as a means to strengthen solidarity and express camaraderie, and possibly even to alleviate tensions. On the other hand, in using labels like 'neger', especially in friendships where one person is white and one is black, there is undoubtedly a potential to carry forward dated prejudice and the underlying hostility connected to the word despite claims of good intentions. Peter added that 'neger' is only used 'in need', implying an underlying ambiguity in using the word for any reason, and stated that he is aware of the discriminatory and racist undertones of this label.

Gay-Related Humour and Slurs

The use of racial slurs and disparaging humour based on ethnic stereotypes is directed only towards black friends. Which words are used when addressing white males, who make up the majority of students at the rural and small city schools? The boys at the small city school answered that 'gay' is the go-to and that gay-related name-calling in general is the basis of most slurs and jokes within friend groups. As such, those who have a visible or disclosed minority trait seem to receive slurs and jokes based on this trait, while those with no such visible or disclosed trait—in this case, white boys—are commonly subjected to slurs and jokes that, for many, are seemingly pulled out of thin air and have nothing to do with the actual identity of the receiver. This is in line with other research findings (Cameron, 1997; Pascoe, 2011) that the reason for categorizing someone as gay primarily relates to their way of doing gender, not to their actual sexual orientation. Using 'gay' as a slur or as the basis of disparaging humour between friends, thus, seems 'safe', due to the receiver's presumed heterosexuality: they express this while being very sure that none of them are gay. However, several boys stated that if they actually suspected that anyone they knew was gay, they would be more careful about using gay-related name-calling and jokes around them. Casper stated the following:

I have this friend... who... who I really didn't notice was any different. But one time, we went to a party and talked to other people and then... he started talking about it, that he didn't, like, know... He didn't know if he was bisexual or, like... And then I became more cautious after that. Not to mess around with that. In case it's a sore subject, or...

Casper's statement that he is more cautious if he thinks that someone might be bisexual shows that he is indeed considerate of his friend's feelings. Again, the matter of disparaging humour and slurs can be seen in connection with symbols of affection and affiliation (Ford et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2008). Likewise, limiting oneself and the use of this humour and these slurs to people with whom one is close shows sensitivity and respect for their feelings (Kowalski, 2000). However, a case from the heterogeneous big city school illustrates the ambiguity and difficulties tied to how well the boys actually know their friends. In this class, approximately half the students have foreign born parents or grandparents. The students overtly joked with and made fun of each other's religious and ethnic backgrounds especially, but there were also instances of gay-related joking during my observations. At one point during a casual conversation with a group of students during their break, one of the boys suddenly uttered to me, 'Did you know that Noah is gay?' I had previously overheard gay-related joking directed at Noah inside the classroom, and Noah had laughed it off every time without commenting on it. The name-calling was based on Noah being seen in a close interaction with another boy. In his interview, Noah was adamant that he was not gay. He also said that he really did not like how his friends poked fun at and messed with him about that incident. When asked if he would ever consider telling his friends to stop the banter and mockery rather than laughing along with them, he said that he was in no position to do so, because he often used disparaging humour towards or about others himself. He believed that no one would take him seriously; therefore, it was better to laugh with them as a sort of mitigation strategy—'in one ear and out the other', Noah explained.

Noah's explanation as to why he could not speak out against his friends' gay-related name-calling and jokes involves a contradiction. If he was to speak out and ask them to stop, (1) he might not be taken seriously because he himself was guilty of frequently behaving the same way towards his friends, (2) he could potentially change the social dynamics within his group of friends or (3) the others might think that he actually is gay. If he were to speak out and be taken seriously, it is possible that some or all members of the group would limit themselves in their daily interaction, which might have consequences for the group's functioning as a social unit going forward. Thus, Noah's laughter at his friends' comments can be seen as a means of self-preservation, where the negative effects of the joking are mitigated (Burdsey, 2011), while also signalling that he is in on the joke. Regardless, this case shows how heteronormative discourses of masculinity are reinforced and reproduced through joking, and as such put forth as the most acceptable and legitimate way of being and behaving; the school space is constructed as heterosexual while also underlining the absence of homosexual desire (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Ambiguous Humour Practices

The discussed cases of racial and gay-related disparaging humour and slurs show their various uses among boys at the three schools. The cases show the complexity

and multitude of ways in which humorous interaction plays a part in the boys' friendships and socialization as social rituals. However, common across all cases and in the boys' interviews is the apparent ambiguity tied to their use of disparaging humour and slurs. Despite trivializing and downplaying the effect of their humour, when probed in the interviews, most boys mentioned not being sure of how their humour is perceived and felt by its target. There seemed to be individual internalized disputes, where many of the boys doubted, and to some degree reflected, on potential consequences both for the subjected individual and in terms of potential reactions from outsiders, such as teachers and peers.

First, there is an apparent divide between the schools in terms of the joking being covert or overt. At two schools, the joking was covert, confined to groups of friends who know and trust each other, and was only available to me through the interviews. At the heterogeneous big city school, the joking was overt, occurring in front of peers in general, me as the researcher, and teachers. Here, they joked about each other's ethnic and religious backgrounds in various ways. At the predominantly white schools, where the joking was done covertly, ambiguity related to the boys' joking was much more prevalent. Here, the joking usually occurs at the expense of a person or identity in the minority at the schools. The boys at these two schools showed an acute awareness of how their joking might be perceived by outsiders, who could not fully appreciate and understand the context of their jokes and banter; thus, they kept it within the group. This is in stark contrast to the big city school, where the joking was overt. When people from minority backgrounds represent the majority, or at least when there is a more equal number of people from each group, it seems as if the use of disparaging humour and slurs is more accepted as part of the classroom culture. At the predominantly white schools, it might be that it is safer to maintain this form of humour within your group of friends—that is, with those whom you trust—to avoid negative reactions from peers and teachers. At the big city school, however, the boys employed this humour towards peers, but even more so, they directed it at themselves. Self-deprecating humour is common among minority group members and can be a strategic way to combat or diffuse tensions or manage emotions (Ellithorpe et al., 2014). As there were many students from minority backgrounds in this class, and many of them used self-deprecating humour, it is likely that this contributes to increasing the parameters of acceptability within the classroom in general. Thus, this may be one explanation as to why it was done so overtly.

Second, there is apparent ambiguity in the boys' disparaging humour and slurs. If someone present might be gay, some students stated they would be more careful so as to avoid hurting anyone's feelings with gay-related name-calling and humour. However, gay-related labels are often used in reaction to someone doing something stupid—as synonyms of 'idiot', 'stupid' and so forth—or if someone has put extra effort into looking good or has done something seen as less manly. I also observed boys using these labels to make fun of someone deemed to have deviated from his presumed heterosexuality by closely interacting with another boy, but they would never do it if they *actually* thought he was gay.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has shown the complexity and ambiguous nature of boys' use of disparaging humour and slurs among friends. The cases show what demands boys

might have of their friendships—namely, you should be able to joke about anything with any of your friends.

We do not know how any of the boys would react if they learned that one of their friends did not like, or was hurt by, the jokes made. Is it risky to tell your friends to stop joking about certain things? Will it change the nature of the friendship, or might you even stand to lose that friendship? The friendships that these boys have with each other seemed important, and having close friends in school has a great impact on whether or not students experience the school context and learning environment as positive and meaningful.

Perhaps the most striking finding from the analysis of this empirical material is the difference in uses of racial and gay-related humour and slurs. The latter are used to laughingly point out and make fun of someone who, in various ways, has broken norms of presumed masculinity but more so to serve others with what is regarded as synonyms of more common generic insults and put-downs. Racial humour and slurs, however, are directed at those with darker skin. This means that those with darker skin are less likely to escape being targets of disparaging humour and slurs because it is, in fact, the colour of their skin that makes them targets. As such, the boys' use of racial humour and slurs exemplifies how race still matters and carries significance in contemporary Norway.

The cases of gay-related humour and slurs indicate a significant difference between the predominantly white small city school and the heterogeneous big city school: gay-related name-calling was in most parts used towards the white, presumably heterosexual, males mainly for generic insults and put-downs. Despite the insistence that this form of humour is used without malice or negative intent, and while seemingly serving positive functions for the friendship group as a whole, it is important to note the disciplining effect that it nonetheless can have. The words' negative connotations make social disciplining unavoidable. As such, the use of gay-related humour and slurs contributes to upholding and constructing a specific (hetero-)masculine norm in the school space and within the friendship groups.

In schools, teachers often crack down on the language used in disparaging humour. This is likely because of the common (and logical) link to bullying, racism, and discrimination. Changing attitudes and behaviours, however, is a difficult task, and the positive functions that disparaging humour and slurs seemingly have in many male friendship groups suggest that the use of this form of humour is not easy to eradicate. The data evince that boys do not *talk* to each other about the humour they use. They make jokes, laugh, shrug or make comebacks, and then seemingly move on. Through the lens of humour, I have shown that sexuality and gender norms, and race, still matter, and is basis for or target of disparagement in the empirical material. This disturbs a common notion of Norway as colour-blind, anti-racist and equal. Devoting attention to the topic of disparaging humour and slurs as part of the teaching, where the focus is not only on the negative functions of this humour but also on the positives, could be beneficial in working with issues such as racism, discrimination and equality in schools. Acknowledging that this form of humour, for many people, does serve positive functions could lead to more fruitful discussions and reflections on the ambiguity of disparaging humour. What is apparent, however, is that there is a need to gain broader knowledge of the topic of disparaging humour and slurs used among friends in the school context and perhaps especially from the ones *subjected* to it.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research is part of a research project funded by The Research Council of Norway, lead by Professor Åse Røthing: Prevention of prejudice and promotion of inclusive school environment through increased diversity competence. Project number 273097.

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Notes

1. Throughout the article, I refer to the schools as ‘the heterogeneous school’, and ‘the predominantly white schools’ or ‘the big city school’, ‘the small city school’ and ‘the rural school’.
2. Programme of Specialization for General Studies, which qualifies students for higher education.
3. Graduating classes: students are 18–19 years old.
4. When including the transcribed interviews with girls, the approximate word count for all interviews is 342,000 words.
5. ‘Lættis’ is a slang word derived from the Norwegian word ‘latterkrampe’. It can be understood as a mix of convulsive laughter and cachinnation. It means something ridiculously funny, and something that really makes you laugh, usually lightheartedly. However, it can also be used negatively: ‘You are lættis’, meaning ridiculous or hilarious in a negative sense. Here, it is meant as something laughable, funny and enjoyable.

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