


CHAPTER 10

‘LADS AND LAUGHTER’

Humour and the production of heterosexual hierarchies

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the use of humour among male pupils within two secondary schools in the UK where we conducted research. During the research period we were aware of humour as a common interaction of the young men we observed, interviewed and discussed school life with. However, with a few notable exceptions (Woods, 1976, 1990; Stebbins, 1980; Dubberley, 1993), relatively little attention has been paid to the social significance of these exchanges to the lives of pupils. Our study suggests that humour plays a significant part in consolidating male peer group cultures in secondary schools, offering a sphere for conveying masculine identities. By exploring a range of interactions involving young men, our work suggests that heterosexual masculinities are organised and regulated through humour. Using qualitative methods we look at the ways in which humour is used and expressed in the negotiation and contestation of heterosexual masculinities. Here, humour is frequently invoked to expose, police and create gender-sexual hierarchies within pupil cultures. We conclude by arguing that humour is a technique for the enactment of masculine identities and can be seen to produce differentiated heterosexuality. […] We are indebted to the insights of Woods (1976) and Willis (1976, 1977), where pupil humour can be understood, respectively, as both a coping strategy and a product of class cultural tensions. However, our study further suggests that humour is less an ‘outcome’ or ‘effect’ of working-class masculinity but, rather, is constitutive of these very identities. We argue that humour is a style utilised by young men to substantiate their heterosexual masculinities. It appeared that humour was used for consolidating heterosexual masculinities through game-play, storytelling and the practice of insults. Our study suggests that although pupil humour contains moments of subversion (to teachers, bourgeois values, compulsory education, etc.), it is also a compelling mode for sex/gender conformity. Although a resistance to the authorities of schooling, young men’s humorous performances could have oppressive effects on other pupils. Significantly, young women were targets for male humorous insults (Jones, 1985; Lees, 1986, 1993) while young men who did not conform to dominant heterosexual codes of masculinity were also subject to its adverse consequences (Askew and Ross, 1988; Haywood, 1996; Nayak and Kehily, 1996). Although some styles of joking may enhance feelings of equality, we focus on the regulatory effects of humour on pupils’ sex/gender identities. This may call for alternative ways of theorising
Methodology

Our study is based in two secondary schools in predominantly working-class areas of the West Midlands, UK, where approximately 100 interviews were conducted with teachers and pupils between 1992 and 1994. The data are derived from a broader project exploring young people's sexuality in school. We used various qualitative approaches for data gathering including group discussions, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with groups and individuals. A tape-recorder was used for all sessions and combined with note-taking before and after the 2-year research period. This paper draws on ethnographic material from pupils aged between 15 and 16 years of age. In one school, pupils were selected for us by a teacher, while in the other we had scope to choose from a cross-section of the school population. The chapter does not attempt to address the contextual differences of humorous forms within each of the educational sites; rather we explore the commonalities of masculine power exchanges within English schools. Our focus in this paper is upon the role of humour in the lived cultures of young men in school. Although the groups were predominantly white, they included young women and men, some of whom were South Asian, African-Caribbean and of 'mixed heritage'. While there is not scope to consider methodological issues in this chapter, we acknowledge the influence of feminist praxis in this field, which stresses the role of subjects' experiences, self-reflexivity and grounded theory (Finch, 1984; Harding, 1987; Hollway, 1989; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

In our study, the research dynamic was specifically nuanced by our own differently located gendered and ethnic identities, as a white female and Asian male. Originally we had planned to conduct 'same sex' interviews where the researcher and the researched would occupy a shared gender identity. However, once in school we found this to be an impractical and inappropriate approach to fieldwork concerned with the interactions between gendered identities and the social relationships this produces. Recent work has problematised the extent to which a shared 'race' or gender identity can transform the unequal power relations between the researcher and respondents (Phoenix, 1994; Rhodes, 1994). Moreover, gender identities are classed, 'raced' and sexed in all kinds of complex and contradictory ways. Undoubtedly, our growing resistance to recourse to gender or racial 'matching' between interviewer and interviewee had an impact on the structure of responses we were given. As time went on, the placing of pupils within such crudely defined research categories appeared presumptuous and inappropriate for our study, though this may be a productive strategy for other fieldwork encounters.

Regimes of humour: masculinities, game-play and insults

A common style of interaction that male pupils engaged in was the elaborate use of game-play incorporating ritualised verbal and physical assaults. This involved young men using language and physicality in competitive ways where the 'game' became the arena for competing masculinities. Among the pupils we interviewed, such games involved forms of verbal sparring and physical 'play-fighting', which assimilated a range of linguistic and bodily practices. These included 'cussing' or 'blowing' matches, formulaic insults and punch-'n'-run. During the fieldwork period we encountered routine forms of physical game-play that young men undertook to demonstrate their dominance over young women and one another. These regular activities included hitting, pushing, kicking and tripping at frequent styles of physical gaming. Humphries and Smith (1984) refer to such activities as 'rough-and-tumble', identifying the lack of attention researchers have paid to these daily pupil exchanges. Meanwhile, Willis (1977) found actual violence outside the boundaries of play to be rare; fights were the final point of conflict used ultimately to define masculine status. Symbolic exchanges fusing violence with play occurred in the playground, school corridors and classrooms when teachers were not looking. In these examples the notion of humour could be invoked to avoid the charge of outright violence, aggression or abuse. Back explains:

In operating this kind of play the sensitive line of significance is policed. On one side of this line is the meaning which the word/exchange stands for in wider usage, on the other is a meaningless denotation guaranteed in play. The tension in this kind of early and late adolescent play is centred around the issue of whether these practices mean what they stand for or not. (1990, p. 10)

The examples in this section show how the rituals of gaming and humour allow male competitive styles to continue relatively unabated in school. It is through these displays of verbal and physical performance that young men are able to exhibit their heterosexual masculinities.

'Cussing' matches

Hewitt identified a link between verbal sparring and masculinity. He commented that the 'ability to hold your own in a slanging match can be especially important once a boy moves into adolescence, and to do so the language has to be right' (1986, p. 158). The ritualisation of abuse was a central feature of 'cussing' or 'blowing competitions' in the masculine exchanges we studied, described here by one of the teachers, Mr Carlton.

We get things like, we used to have, 'Your mom's a dog'. What does that mean, y'know? [laughs]

'Your mom's a sweaty armpit'.

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'Your mom's a sweaty armpit'.

It is purely an insult and kids had competitions here called blowing competitions to see who could give the worst insult, right. Now we've managed to stamp it out, but my God, you should have heard some of the things that were said. And it was always about their mother right, because that is the one thing that everybody has in common. They all know their mother and that's very personal. They know where they come from, very personal and it hurts. And you get all these brash kids who've been reduced to tears by some of the comments that have been thrown at them.

'Blowing competitions' were hotly contested verbal duals that tended to occur between two invariably male opponents, usually in lunch periods away from the intervention of teachers. During our time in schools we did not encounter any
examples of this activity between young women, though as Back (1990) found, they commonly engaged in less structured ‘cussing’, slurs and name-calling. According to Mr Carlton, the object of ‘blowing competitions’ was ‘to see who could give the worst insult’. The competition involved the giving and taking of ritualised insults where language became the stage for the performance of masculinity. Here, the ability to absorb ‘very personal’ comments with seeming indifference, and to respond sharply, are the weaponry required for successful verbal jousting. That ‘brash kids’ could be ‘reduced to tears’ indicates that a publicly recognised version of masculinity can be momentarily punctured and secured through these contests. These rituals show the techniques young men may utilise to make each other vulnerable, while emphasising the power of dominant versions of masculinity to produce anxieties within the structure of a competitive ‘game’. ‘Blowing competitions’ have the effect of creating clear-cut masculine identities, crystallising who is ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ through the public exposition of power and vulnerability. The term ‘blowing competition’ is a metaphor that provides insight into the ways masculine egos are either inflated or ruptured during these contests. Layman’s research into a US male fraternity suggests that ‘dozens’ – the ritual exchange of insults – perform a range of functions. His study indicates the way in which sexist jokes consolidate the bonds of an ‘in-group’ through mutual hostility against an ‘out-group’ (1987, pp. 159-160). In these exchanges the ability to keep control of your emotions in the face of a barrage of abuse is seen as essential for group membership and the demonstration of a competent, socially validated masculinity. As one of his respondents explains:

If there’s one theme that goes on, it’s the emphasis on being able to take a lot of ridicule, of shit, and not getting upset about it. Most of the interaction we have is verbally abusing each other, making disgusting references to your mother’s sexuality, or the women you were seen with, or your sex organ. And you aren’t cool unless you can take it without trying to get back.

(in Lyman, 1987, p. 155)

The description of ‘blowing competitions’ provided by Mr Carlton is similar to the volatile, verbal exchanges Lyman found, and those identified by Labov (1972) in his study of uses of black vernacular among adolescents in urban USA. Labov describes ‘sounding’ as a form of verbal duelling that involves the trading of ritual insults for prestige within the peer group. Those most skilled at employing sophisticated insults had higher status in the group where the structured performances were constituted around abusing an opponent’s mother. Mr Carlton noted how ‘blowing competitions’ were ‘always about their mother’ because it’s ‘the one thing that everybody has in common, they all know their mother and that’s very personal’. In a discursive manoeuvre, young men are able to mobilise a sexist discourse of power against other males through a verbal attack on their mothers. The discursive shift is a way of accessing a privileged version of male sexual power to humiliate an opponent. The invocation of a boy’s mother into the discourse of peers and situation. Schooling cultures are central to interpreting the meanings of these insults were transformed in the contexts of friendship groups, and away from the intensity of classroom cultures, indicating that it was not the language per se that was immediately regarded as offensive. Within the male friendship group the telling of jokes and relating of insults is structured through the context of peers and situation. Schooling cultures are central to interpreting the shouting rituals of ‘cussing’ matches. However, outside school young men were able to decode mother insults differently according to the variable circumstances in which they deployed them. Walker and Goodson elaborate on the performative dynamics of humour and describe the relevance of interpersonal relationships:

The nature of humour is complex because it resides not only in the logic and content of what is said, but in, the performance of the teller, in the relationship between the teller and the audience, and in the immediate context of the instance.

(1977, p. 212)

The importance of context suggests that mother insults, as invoked for the public appraisal of masculinities, may take on different meanings. This goes some way to explaining how an insult during a ‘cussing’ match may be treated as offensive and capable of reducing males to tears, yet is handled around between mates at another point under the guise of ‘play’. Such examples of mother insults, nevertheless, remained highly misogynistic and often explicitly sexual in whatever contexts they occurred. A school student called Macca related two typically formulaic ritual
puts a padlock on her fanny. Your mom's got so many holes in her knickers you can play Connect Four.' Unlike other aspects of pupil humour (see Woods, 1990), resource for humour among friends: 'Your mom's been raped so many times she such 'speech events' have a 'well articulated structure' (Labov, 1972, p. 334) and may be strategically employed at given moments. The insults described by Macca in situations outside school formed a style of banter that was taken far less personally than in the classroom context of the 'cussing' match where masculine identities were more visibly being conveyed. [...] Labov describes how the structure of mother insults is defined precisely 'as against' middle-class adult sensibilities, and aims to violate social norms:

Many sounds are obscene in the full sense of the word. The speaker uses as many 'bad' words and images as possible — that is, subject to taboo and moral reprimand in adult middle-class society... the meaning of the sound and the activity would be entirely lost without reference to these middle-class norms. Many sounds are 'good' because they are 'bad' — because the speakers know they would arouse disgust and revulsion among those committed to the 'good' standards of middle-class society. (Labov, 1972, p. 324)

Here, the act of transgression is itself treasured, where the rules and norms of adult middle-class society are inverted for shock value. According to Labov, middle-class norms act as a reference point through which the language of young men can be defined as abusive. The rationalism of bourgeois discourse can be disrupted by the 'vulgarly' celebrated by young men in school, where middle-class culture is central to the definition of what is acceptable. The ability of 'family name-calling' to violate 'adult' conventions is also referred to by Troyna and Hatcher (1992, p. 56). However, it is the contrast of sexual explicitness and elaborated structural codes that may appear an unusual combination for the language residing within pupil cultures. The misogynistic practice of mother insults are both a means of speaking the unspeakable and a way of contesting the boundaries of masculine competency within the peer group. In the following section we demonstrate how other competitive bodily practices are encoded through humour and used to demonstrate heterosexual masculine identities and hierarchies among males in school.

**Punch-'n'-run**

The object of punch-'n'-run is to hit an opponent and run off before he or she has time to retaliate. The punch-'n'-run game is usually initiated by young men, though some young women could be drawn into participation. The following is an example of mock fighting which we have termed punch-'n'-run. Here, a young woman, Tina, responds to the masculine physical gaming in school.

I don't really like Darren that much now. He's always competitive ain't he? Have you seen him with Clive? Clive punched me in my arm and he punched me three times, and so Darren did. So I went [demonstrating] one-two-three! The extract shows how punch-'n'-run may be a competitive intra-male contest to see who can deliver the most blows. Tina identifies Darren as 'competitive' and suggests the physical displays are partially about outdoing another peer, put simply, getting more punches in than Clive. Such continual, competitive jockeying for status within male peer groups leads Jordan (1995, p. 79) to suggest that 'many of the disadvantages as suffered by girls and women are the result of being caught in the crossfire in a long-standing battle between groups of men over the definition of masculinity'. Masculinity is performed through the supposedly humorous repetition of sequences such as punch-'n'-run. Punch-'n'-run is also structured around certain implicit conventions, where Tina tolerated Clive engaging in these interactions but disliked Darren's attempt to join in.

The ritual performed similar interpersonal functions as the 'back slap and chase' game that featured in Back's youth club research:

Dueling play is a process whereby young people test out the boundaries of interpersonal relationships (i.e. how far play can be extended and pushed). These exchanges have greater significance than just play for play's sake. They not only mark the boundaries of tolerance within friendships but they also mark those who are included in the peer group — those who are 'airight' and those who are excluded — 'wallies'. (1990, p. 10)

The formative styles and conventions are continually negotiated through the action of game playing. Punch-'n'-run offers a ritual for masculine bonding to be sure, yet it also provides a highly regulated sphere for physical contest. The significance of peer group relations is seen where Darren attempts to copy Clive's action in an attempt to mimic a desired masculinity. In this example Darren is trying to inhabit the masculine presence of Clive by replicating his actions. Tina is positioned as the foil for these transactions, yet her fighting response suggests a refusal to allow Darren to occupy a dominant masculinity in the way he desires, and can be seen as an assertion of her own identity.

The examples provide insights into the way male power is negotiated and contested through the bravado of ritualised humour and social exchanges in schools. Beynon (1989, p. 198), writing about masculinity and routine violence in schools, notes how certain forms of physical humour could be regarded as 'funny violence', becoming 'the boys' principle source of laughter, enjoyment and excitement'. Other researchers have documented the relationships between such types of competitive game-playing more generally, linking them to forms of masculinity and working-class occupational culture (Willis, 1977; Back, 1990; Hollands, 1990). [...]

The comments indicate the ways in which male violence is valorised through styles of humour which draw on verbal and physical game-play. The practice of gaming can also be a coercive technique exerted by certain male peer cultures to establish and maintain power over other subordinated masculine schooling cultures. The routines of 'cussing', banter and punching were used to substantiate male heterosexual identities by expelling 'femininity' from self on to others. This had the effect of creating heterosexual hierarchies within male cultures where 'macho' lads were seen as 'proper' boys and other males were subordinated. Physical and verbal gaming rituals are thus an important route for the performance of masculine identities in schools.
Retelling ourselves — mythic events and heterosexual identities

Alongside the rituals of gaming, we found collective storytelling played a central role in framing classroom humour and consolidating versions of heterosexual masculinity. Certain events achieved a lasting appeal in school and could be reinvoked for the shared pleasure of mutual retelling. The various identifications made when relating certain events elevated these stories to mythic status; they were described as 'classics' and understood as key reference points for making sense of young men's time and place within the education system. The influence that these narratives bring to bear on the structuring of identity is explained by Delamont, who writes of the need to explore anecdote, reminiscence, urban legends and folklore within school contexts:

The argument is that conventional ethnographers have focused too exclusively on rational accounts provided by pupils and teachers and have not spent enough energy unearthing the irrational fears and the fictional narratives that enliven the school day. Educational institutions are rich in contemporary folkloric: cautionary tales, jokes, urban legends, atrocity stories, and so on.

(1989, p. 191)

The popularity of mythic events can be seen in young men's constant readiness to resort to these narrative styles with much relish and little obvious connection with topics under discussion. The shared telling and remembrance affirmed links between the present and the past, and augmented heterosexual identities. As Delamont goes on to explain, analysing narrative forms and irrational investments may 'enrich our understanding of pupils' and teachers' culture' (1989, p. 191); we claim it can also enable us to explore the values embedded in masculine humour in school.

Paddy's story

The repetition of mythic events provides for moments of pleasure where collective investments in the humiliation of teachers have enduring comic status. During our time in school we heard several stories involving teachers having nervous breakdowns, falling through trapdoors, having their flasks of coffee spilt in, being chased by pupils and chasing pupils (Kehily, 1993; Kehily and Nayak, 1996). The comic narrations celebrate oppositional forms of behaviour in the classroom and emphasise pupil power in oppressive circumstances. Like flags being unfurled, these narratives were unfolded with pride and thrust down as markers of resistance, a symbolic victory against the odds.

The attraction of these stories to adolescent male culture can be seen in the rapid ease with which the tale is 'sparked'. In this example Paddy is spotted walking past the room, where an immediate link is made between Paddy as a person and an event in his past which is prioritised by pupils. Incredibly, the event occurred in another school so was not witnessed by the pupils in our research, yet its resonance for the male peer group informs us of the cult status of this story. The interview took place with a mixed group of girls and boys and displays a dramatic style of masculine resistance which appears to be enjoyed by most of the pupils. The mythic tale was repeatedly referred to, becoming a touchstone for pupil experience, while providing evidence of how male resistance to schooling can be fashioned and celebrated through humour. It is difficult within the written format to capture the flavour of the regional accents, the speed of delivery, intonation and excitement embedded in the dialogue, so these must be left to the reader's imagination.

Smitty: There's Paddy!

Jason: He's the one you want to question — Paddy.

All: [laughter] Watch him go red.

Why what's he done?

Clive: He's a nutcase!

Samantha: He's a nutter! [all laugh]

Jason: You'll have to go and fetch him and watch him go red.

Clive: Ask him about his old school days.

[Savage enters]

Savage: Paddy's just beat me up! [all laugh]

Jason: Paddy's beat him up!

Samantha: Is he coming?

Jason: Watch his face. He's going red already! [all laugh]

Samantha: Oh, leave him. He's probably doing something for his own house group.

[Swelling laughter]

Smitty: What's he say?

[Paddy enters]

Clive: Ask him why he got expelled from his old school.

Jason: Say why d'yow git expelled, aye.

We don't wanna embarrass him.

[increased laughter]

Jason: [loudly to Paddy] Why d'yow git expelled from your last school?

[all laugh]

Samantha: Go on tell 'em!

Jason: Jus' tell 'em Paddy!

All: Tell 'em!

You've said it before.

Smitty: They're curious.

Jason: Nothing gets said.

Samantha: Go on!

No, don't embarrass him.

Clive: Jus' say it Pad, go on.

Paddy: I made a cock outta clay an' give it to a nun!

[Mass Laughter]

Paddy's story, in keeping with previous aspects of male humour, can be understood as a 'verbal performance' structured through the social interplay of 'audience' and 'situation' (Volosinov, 1973). Here, the social act of storytelling is reliant upon recognition with others, as the group of pupils collaborate and interact as both actors and audience. Within the research dynamic we felt that the group were providing an audience for Paddy, staging a show for us (and one another) while watching our reactions. Watching Paddy, and watching us watching Paddy, generates great excitement in the school context. The research group mediated relations between ourselves and Paddy, presenting us as an interested party — 'they're curious' — and a confidential one — 'nothing gets said'. At the same time we are informed about Paddy that 'he's the one you want to
Nun can be seen as an ultimate transgressive expression, with all its symbolic produced in the mythic event. Making a 'cock out of clay' and presenting it to a Paddy serve to fuel the exhilaration. The references to being beaten up by question' and asked about 'fetching' him in. Our role as audience is central to the building excitement, where our comments about not wanting to embarrass narrative humour is produced through seeing the nun as a symbol of passivity and masculine overtones. Here, sharp retorts and humorous barbed remarks could be used to

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when Tom is humiliated and laughed at for gender inappropriate behaviour and Paddy is celebrated as school rebel for his phallic performance. The mythic events commemorate versions of masculinity that display sexual daring and an audacious resistance to authority. The repetition of these episodes through a storytelling format affirms hyper-heterosexual versions of masculinity and acts as regulatory reminders, and performative rehearsals, for the desirable behaviour of the male peer group.

**Humour and sex/gender hierarchies**

Researchers have commented on the ways in which male sexual power is consistently utilised by males against women and girls in school arenas (Griffin, 1982, 1985; Lees, 1986, 1993; Jones and Mahoney, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990). In this section we focus on the struggle to fashion dominant heterosexual masculinities through techniques of humour and joking. Here, young women and subordinate males can be seen as targets for comic displays which frequently blur the boundaries between humour and harassment. The competitive process of humour created and consolidated sex/gender hierarchies within pupil groups. Young women deconstructed the competitive workings of masculine performance in formal classroom situations. The young women we spoke with seemed to regard sexist practices as part of everyday life in a mixed comprehensive school (Jones, 1985), and responded to the tiresome routines of male banter in ambiguous ways. As in previous examples, 'play' and aggression become fused:

*Tina:* Jason, he gets on my nerves he does. He used to be really quiet but now I prefer him being quiet, he's really loud. He'll come up behind yer and shout and bawl in yer ear. Or he'll say stupid little things, he keeps on and on and on. He says, 'Oi you! I got something to tell you'. He says, 'Give me three seconds, I'll be home in two' and stupid things like that to you.

*Samantha:* You're sitting there doing yer work and he'll just shout in yer ear.

*Tina:* Or do stupid little noises, makes me laugh some days though.

*Samantha:* It ain't very often though! [both laugh]

Here, Samantha and Tina describe the use of male sexual power and their reactions to it. The harassment evoked in this passage ranges from bullying behaviour such as shouting and bawling, through to making 'stupid little noises' and implicitly sexual comments referring to heterosexual intercourse and orgasm. Although Samantha and Tina view Jason's behaviour as a nuisance ('he gets on my nerves he does'), they regard these encounters as commonplace practices to be humoured, while at other moments want to punch back. The laughter that Samantha and Tina enjoy at Jason's expense ('makes me laugh some days though it ain't very often') suggests that young women may use humour subversively as a form of resistance to sexist practices (Skeggs, 1991). The young women suggest that the routines are repetitive and monotonous in their remark, 'he keeps on and on and on'. The interaction also traces Jason's arrival to the school as a new and insecure pupil to someone who now cultivates a masculinity that is 'really loud'. […]

However, sexist interchanges were not the only resource used to locate heterosexual masculinities. We found that homophobic humour and gestures were used by young men to enact a hyper-masculine identity and so consolidate their heterosexuality. The following extract is taken from an interview with a group of young women where the subject of homophobia arose:

*In your class do you think that boys could be more homophobic or do you think that girls are?*

**Lucy:** I think that boys are.

**Susan:** Definitely.

**Lucy:** Because they go 'STAY AWAY' [demonstrates crucifix sign with fingers] or something like.

**Ali:** Yes.

**Susan:** Like as if he's contagious.

**Amy:** If they're all sitting together like that [i.e. huddled up], one of them will move away.

Homophobic humour is a means through which male exhibitionists are able outwardly to display a heterosexual masculinity. Male sexual power is in process between males where homophobias are performed through symbolic gestures and bodily practices. The homophobic performance suggests an instability of gender categories where masculinity is repeatedly struggled over within male peer groups. The combination of humour with homophobia becomes a technique for the display of heterosexual masculinities as independent, entirely 'unfeminine' and exclusively 'straight'. The crucifix performance is, then, an attempt to purvey a coherent masculinity by ridiculing others through questioning their gender and sexuality. In a doubly defining moment the homophobic performance consolidates the heterosexual masculinity of Self and the homosexual femininity of Other. Homophobic performances can be seen as an (impossible) attempt to convey a coherent heterosexual masculinity. These identities are sustained through fraught exhibition, where the highly dramatised performance is itself evidence of the insecurities and splittings within the male psyche (Nayak and Kehily, 1996). In keeping with Mac an Ghaill (1996), we found interconnections between homophobia and misogyny: 'heterosexual male students were involved in a double relationship, of transcoding the 'other', including women and gays (external relations), while at the same time expelling femininity and homosexuality from within themselves (internal relations)' (Mac an Ghaill, 1996, p. 13).

This suggests that rituals such as the crucifix performance and mother insults are more about psychic processes of enactment where the 'other' within the self must be traduced. Here, homophbic humour is used to police the sex/gender identities of other students, as well as the self. The bodily performance of making a crucifix, shouting 'STAY AWAY' and moving away from other males is interconnected with psycho-sexual struggles and displacements. These internal anxieties suggest the fear that being gay is 'contagious' and needs warding off through humour and performance. According to Lyman (1987, p. 156), homosexual jokes are 'targeted at homosexuality, to draw an emotional line between the homosocial male bond and homosexual relationships'. This allows for the intimate closeness of male peer cultures to be sanctified, without compromising on an overtly heterosexual group identity. Homophobic displays not only consolidate the identities of the heterosexual individual but speak to the wider hyper-masculinity of the peer group. In such exchanges masculinities are visibly performed, highlighting the frequently misogynistic and homophobic structure of these practices and the uncertainties that underlie these outbursters.
Young men who did not cultivate a hyper-masculinity were subject to homophobic abuse which had oppressive effects on their lives in school.

**Miles:** It's a sort of stigma ain't it? A quiet person in a class would be called 'gay' or summat. I was for a time 'cos I was fairly quiet in the classroom and for a while everyone was callin' me gay... I think my grades have suffered 'cos of disruptive members of the class. They're not really interested in getting a qualification so it's, 'Well what can we do for a laugh today? Disrupt the history lesson or something like that'.

As Miles indicates, calling other young men gay is seen as a 'laugh'. It is used as a homophobic abuse which had oppressive effects on their life in school.

Peer group culture. The oppressive effects of homophobic humour are seen in Miles's articulation of the social stigma of being called 'gay' and his belief that his grades have suffered. This style of humour is a technique for disciplining the enactment of heterosexual masculinities where, 'humour is a powerful device for celebrating one's own identity and for enhancing one's status, and for whipping others into shape' (Woods, 1990, p. 195). Walker and Goodson (1977) also identify a relationship between humour and power, to view joking as a 'social contract' since 'success or failure at telling jokes endangers status in the immediate context and so not surprisingly it is usually those with most power in the situation who tell most jokes' (p. 214). [...]

**Conclusion: the last laugh?**

The ethnographic evidence discussed in this paper suggests that humour is an organising principle in the lives of young men within school arenas. Humour was seen as a regulatory technique, structuring the performance of masculine identities. Young men who did not circumscribe to the hyper-heterosexual practice of masculinity were ridiculed through humorous rituals. Consequently, those who worked hard at school, or exposed sexual vulnerabilities in relationships with young women, were targets for banter and abuse. These examples revealed the disciplining effects of humour on sex/gender identities within the English education system. The development of 'cussing matches' and other rituals of abuse offered a practical means of testing male prowess that avoided the dangerous, and somewhat more determining, consequences of fights. In this sense, humour was constitutive of masculine identities in school macho behaviour was mythologised in stories of defiance, some pupils could be seen as 'gay' for conforming to teacher authority, while others were regarded as sexually impotent with 'arthritic tongues' if they failed to perform sexually with girlfriends. Here, humour was a style for the perpetual display of 'hard' masculinity and also a means of displacing fears and uncertainties. Humorous interactions amongst young men were continually concerned with bodily practices: clay cocks, punch-'n'-run rituals, arithmetic tongues, padlocked vaginas, sweaty armpits, antiquay crucifixes. In these exchanges the disciplining process of heterosexuality occurs across the bodies of self and other. The rituals of humour involve the embodiment of heterosexuality where disciplinary techniques operate as an 'anatomy of power' (Foucault, 1977). Bodies are trained, indeed schooled, into heterosexual elaborations through the humorous techniques we have discussed.

The repetitive game-play and retelling of stories creates and affirms the values practised in working-class male peer group culture. Although humour is undoubt-
GENDER-BLIND RACISM IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOLING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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Research on pupils’ responses to schooling has been greatly influenced by work on resistance (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1983), feminist research on female adolescents (McRobbie, 1978, 1983) and the theorizing of ‘race’ and schooling (Wright, 1987a, 1992; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Gillborn, 1990). Work has begun to detail the production of early masculinities through the exploration of male pupils’ responses to school (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1995). School masculinities have also been linked with constructs of ‘race’ (Sewell, 1997). Thus, there now exists a plethora of research on both gendered and racialized processes of teacher/school stereotyping and pupils resistance and contestation in schools. These various pieces of research have provided important theoretical and empirical insights into the experiences of African-Caribbean and Asian pupils in school. However, in neglecting specific aspects of the interrelation of ‘race’ and gender in Black pupil identities, some theorists have only offered a partial view of racialized pupils’ responses. The focus on ‘race’ and schooling, as with other research on Black subcultural forms, has too often concentrated on the experiences of black males, thus equating black identities and forms of resistance with masculinity (Mama, 1995; Weekes, 1996). Similarly, the current educational climate has highlighted the increasing exclusion of African-Caribbean males from school, and focused on the anti-school attitudes of black male pupils. This entirely negates the important work that has shown black pupils’ pro-, as well as anti-, school responses within education (Fuller, 1982; Furlong, 1984; Sewell, 1997)....

Important work is increasingly conducted on black masculinities in schooling, but research needs to build on that of Mirza (1992), Fuller (1982) and Riley (1985) to address how schools also produce black femininities. Feminist work in this area has tended to subsume the construct of ‘race’ within that of gender (McRobbie, 1978). Therefore, based on a study of school exclusions within five schools in a large education authority, this chapter explores the adaptations of both black male and female pupils to school, to teacher–pupil relationships and to the experience of school sanction.

The study

The data presented and discussed here are derived from a much broader ethnographic study of school exclusions conducted in a large local education authority in the Midlands. The aims were to explore and document the nature and pattern of secondary school exclusions of pupils from ethnic groups in general...