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“It is Just a Joke!” Informal Interaction and Gendered Processes Underground

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ABSTRACT

The (re)production and persistence of inequalities in male-dominated organizations is an ongoing issue. This paper aims to further examine how banter in male-dominated industrial organizations can be understood as meaningful in relation to the gendered processes of organizations. The male-dominated mining industry in Sweden—more specifically the shop floor of this setting—serves as the empirical context and twenty interviews with both men and women miners were conducted. The findings suggest that the informal interactions underground function as an informal power system carrying important meaning in relation to gendered processes of the organization. Banter has a dual function as both an including and excluding practice and with its inherent ambiguity, it has the potential to both maintain and challenge existing gendered relations underground.

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Introduction

Informal workplace interactions are crucial for understanding the (re)production and persistence of inequalities in organizations (Acker, 2006), especially since the impact of informality at workplaces can undermine formal practices and requirements (Healy, Bradley, & Forson, 2011; Wright, 2011). In this paper, special attention is directed towards banter since informal (alleged) humorous interaction between co-workers has been shown to play an important part in negotiating power and gendered relations at workplaces (e.g., Eriksen, 2019; Holmes, 2006a; Kotthoff, 2006; Sløk-Andersen, 2019; Watts, 2007; Westwood & Johnston, 2013). In male-dominated blue-collar workplaces, there is an interrelationship between blue-collar masculinity and a certain type of shopfloor banter, which frequently includes highly sexualized language (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson, 1992; Paap, 2006; Wright, 2016). I argue that exploring the informal interactions between co-workers in a male-dominated industrial work context is relevant due to formal organizational policies and regulations to achieve more gender-equal organizations and workplaces. For example, prohibiting sexual harassment and discrimination and creating action plans for gender equality can only regulate interaction between co-workers to a certain extent. Moreover, informality can serve to undermine such formal practices and requirements (Healy et al., 2011; Wright, 2011). Therefore, it is both interesting and important to understand how informal structures and relations in organizations work. Acker (1990) argues that organizations are gendered, and that one aspect of this gendered nature comprises the interactions and relationships between individuals and groups that generate superiority and subordination, as well as inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, it is important to understand better how informal interaction in organizations functions.

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In the mining industry, which is the empirical context for this paper, the specific banter of blue-collar workers is sometimes expressed in terms of “pit talk”. Green’s paper from 1978 illustrates that the language of the miners changes considerably as they enter and leave the pit. Green also claims that humorous interplay is one of the most important aspects of social interaction between miners. Pit talk, according to Green, includes elements of contest, and is sexually explicit and full of irony and sarcasm. In addition, the use of banter is considered appropriate only for those who have a claim to group belongingness. As in many industries, this type of banter also functions as a means of initiating newcomers into the working community (Green, 1978). Pitt (1979) asserts that humour is also an important mechanism for miners to handle the dangers of work in the mine (cf. Collinson, 1992). Both Green and Pitt contend that humour is an important element in the collective oppositional culture and group solidarity of miners.

More recent studies indicate that humour, joking and banter still play an important part in the informal interactions in the mine. Yount (1991) examined women’s strategies for managing sexual harassment in underground coal mines in the United States and argues that the efforts of women miners to win acceptance in this environment need to be framed within an understanding of the highly sexual and jocular character of interaction in this social milieu. Eveline and Booth (2002) analysed how gender and sexuality organize a mine site through organizational design and productivity management in Australia, and they claim that men “generated a sense of masculinist camaraderie” (p. 567) by telling sexually explicit stories and jokes. Rolston (2014), in her ethnographic study in a coal mining context in the American West, asserts that joking in the mines often comes with sexualized overtones. When accusations of sexual harassment towards women occurred, it was suggested that it had more to do with the perpetrators’ lack of work ethic or as an interference to the workers as a family.

The male-dominated mining industry in Sweden serves as the empirical context for exploring the function of informal interaction—banter—between workers on the shop floor. Twenty interviews have been conducted with both men and women miners. The aim of this article is to examine further how informal interactions in these male-dominated industrial workplaces may be understood as meaningful in relation to gendered structures and relations. In other words, what does workplace banter “do” in regard to maintaining and challenging gendered structures and relations in this male-dominated context?

A brief history of mining in Sweden

Mining in Sweden has a long history that runs over a time period of almost a thousand years. The industry is primarily located in the northern parts of the country, with 12 active metal mines with both open pit and underground mines currently operating. The mining industry employs nearly 10,000 people (subcontractors not included), but many other types of jobs and sectors in the area of the mines are also directly dependent on the industry. Sweden is one of Europe’s main actors in the production of base and precious metals, generating about 90% of Europe’s total production of iron ore (Sveriges geologiska undersökning (Geological Survey of Sweden) [SGU], 2021).

Although mining has a significant history as work for and by men, the exclusion of women is a relatively modern construction. A historical perspective on mining shows that the mine and its workplaces have not always been an arena for men only. With the industrialization at the end of the 18th century, when mining became more capitalized, centralized, and mechanized, women were also excluded (Abrahamsson, 2007; Ringblom & Abrahamsson, 2017). However, before the industrialization, a significant number of women had worked both in and around the mines. In 1900 a legislative ban on women in underground work was introduced: a law that first ended in 1978. The exclusion of women in mining is not unique to Sweden, but is also found in other national contexts, such as Great Britain, China, and Peru. Women’s more or less temporary exclusion from mining work has been based on everything from superstition to national structural transformations (Ringblom & Abrahamsson, 2017).

Today in Sweden 18% of the blue-collar workforce are women, with this change having occurred rather rapidly—in 2005 the number was only six per cent (SGU, 2021). Even though the number of women has increased, gender division in mines still remains. But instead of that division being above and underground, now the segregation applies to specific workplaces, with women still very much an exception in some underground workplaces (Ringblom, 2019).¹ During the last decades, there have been many changes in the mining industry in Sweden. For example, women have now entered the mines, and the implementation of new technology and improved working conditions and working environment have changed the working context considerably. New production technology has brought new demands regarding competence and has in many ways changed the workers' role in the production system. In particular, there has been a shift towards greater automation and remote control (Abrahamsson & Johansson, 2006).

Male-dominated industrial workplaces

Lysgaard's (1961–2001) theoretical understanding of workers' collective offers a way to understand (informal) industrial workplace relations. Lysgaard concluded that three different systems can be identified within a company: the techno-economic, the collective and the human system. The demands of the techno-economic system of the company (e.g., productivity targets) are inexorable and one-sided, and the collective system takes shape to help workers to endure these demands. One of the most salient features of this system is that workers develop and maintain collective strategies, including limiting output and working hours, and even employing sabotage activities (cf. Fältholm, 1998). This system—built on interaction, identification, and likeness between the workers—demands and ensures that the workers stay loyal and stick to the norms on how to behave as good fellow workers. These characteristics mean that “the workers' collective” is conceptually close to notions of organizational or workplace culture in that the collective functions as a set of norms that control workers' relations to each other and to management, as well as the extent to which deviations from these norms are counteracted or accepted. The workers' collective has, in relation to organizational or workplace culture, an emphasis on resistance and informal power.

Materialized through this normative system, the workers' collective is based on a culture of resistance to gain informal control over the work situation. It can also function as a protector for workers engaged in practical and hard physical work (e.g., Willis, 1979), referred to as “embodied competence” or “body capital” (Connell, 1995; Monaghan, 2002). Furthermore, although the workers' collective protects workers from the demands of the techno-economic system, the collective itself is inexorable. As the strength of the collective system is manifested by conformity to rules and norms of likeness, deviations from such norms are punished accordingly. Sanctions against those that break the rules, though informal, are very powerful and may result in, for example, one being excluded from the fellowship of the workers. This possibility of punishment means that some workers must protect themselves against a system that has developed to protect the majority (Fältholm, 1998). It also entails that the collective “emerges as an informal, non-democratic system, potentially in conflict with ideas of workplace democracy” (Hasle & Sørensen, 2013, p. 15).

Lysgaard's framework is presented as gender-neutral, that gender does not matter for the mechanisms of the workers' collective. Lindgren (1985), on the other hand, argues that it is not given that the pressure of conformity within the workers' collective would not react to gender, since the gender system with its segregation and hierarchy mechanisms (cf. Hirdman, 1988) affects the categorization of people also within the group, i.e., the workers' collective. Fältholm (1998) contends that the workers' collective can also be understood as inexorable (just like the technical/economic system) in its demands for affiliation and adaptation. These demands could lead to some workers who, for some reason, cannot or do not want to join the norm and control system that

¹An early draft of this article was published in this dissertation.

comes with the workers' collective possibly needing to protect themselves against the system that should protect them. As a hypothetical example, a woman who will not agree to adapting to the norm system of a macho-masculinity could be a target for the group because of her lack of adaption. This might force her to find strategies to protect herself from the group. Thus, gender as an analytical lens of informal interactions can explain how a differentiation is made within the workers' collective. The workers' collective, which is situated in gendered organizations, becomes a way of understanding why the pattern of women's mistreatment in male-dominated industrial organizations continues to occur and why some men within this setting are given an arena that enables this type of behaviour.

Humour at work

The very wide range of functions served by humour, and its inherent ambiguity and creative potential, make it a rich resource for expressing complex social meanings (Holmes, 2006b, p. 118).

Humour serves a wide range of functions at work, one of the most important of which is to build and sustain good relations with co-workers, which may be understood as an expression of "doing collegiality" (Holmes, 2006a). Humour between co-workers can be expressed in terms of, for example, jokes, jocular teasing, sarcasm, amusing stories and anecdotes, and friendly insults. Humour at workplaces and between co-workers is not always a verbal practice; it can also take the form of practical jokes and initiation rites (Hay, 2000). Shared humour serves to create solidarity, sometimes at the expense of the "other" as an outsider. Humour often plays a part in the power relations between groups and individuals by helping to establish, maintain and mark in-group/out-group distinctions (Taylor & Bain, 2003).

When using humour in terms of doing collegiality, the use of humour aims to be an including practice. However, humour is also filled with complexities and ambiguities; moreover, it can be inappropriate, misunderstood or even deliberately offensive. Humour in all its representations contains some measure of ambiguity, and this ambiguity makes humour difficult to resist or challenge because the core of humour is that it should not be taken seriously. This characteristic also signifies that humour offers a convenient possible excuse that there was no intention to harm (Kotthoff, 2006). Humour is an effective means to be used repressively to "do power" and exercise control (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Humour used repressively can exclude, diminish, ridicule, and imply threat. Holmes (2006b) argues that humour is an effective way of doing power subtly. Consequently, humour "does not count", and, therefore, people are willing to risk overstepping both potential and known boundaries since the rules of the game dictate that one cannot be held to formal account (Watts, 2007). However, there is also a subversive potential that comes with the ambiguity. Watts (2007) argues that humour can also be used as resistance to dominant power structures by minority groups.

Gender and joking

This section will focus of the interrelation of humour and gender in organizations. As mentioned previously, Acker (1990, 2006) argues that informal workplace interactions are crucial for understanding the (re)production and persistence of inequalities in organizations because interactions and relationships between individuals and groups generate superiority and subordination, as well as inclusion and exclusion in organizations. Humour in interactions can be used to negotiate and confirm gendered identities, for example, particular types of femininities and masculinities (Kotthoff, 2006), and it is understood here as a way of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Previous studies on other strongly male-dominated work contexts have shown that gendered structures of the organizations and the use of humour are intertwined.

Johansson, Johansson, and Andersson's (2018) study of sexual harassment in the forestry sector argues that "one of the greatest social taboos seems to be ruining the mood, either by not laughing or by questioning practices and jokes" (p. 423). The authors claim that the ongoing practices of doing gender, which include expressions of sexuality, constitute interactions, but that men can use sexuality as a means of exerting power and control over women, which becomes a way to demonstrate masculinity. In a Danish military setting, Sløk-Andersen (2019) asserts that laughter plays a key role in the process of becoming a good soldier and that an assumed male (hetero)sexual potency is what seemed to define the humorous tune. As a consequence, women within the military are placed in a difficult position, partly because their participation became rather passive and fairly unnoticed, rather than being active subjects in the interactions between the soldiers. However, women's presence was made visibly when they spoke up, but with the overhanging threat of them ruining the mood (cf. Johansson et al., 2018), and thereby not being a "good soldier". In Eriksen's (2019) paper within the context of wildland firefighters in Australia, she argues that humour functions as an everyday practice to negotiate adversity within the patriarchal stronghold of wildland firefighting. Eriksen concludes that humour masks widespread occurrences of gender discrimination towards women and that humour is used to negotiate gendered relations within and against asymmetric gendered power relations. Wright (2008) argues that some lesbian firefighters who do not fit into cultural norms concerning femininity may find it easier than heterosexual women to be accepted. In an occupation where masculine attributes are considered essential, emphasizing similarities with the dominant group can help one to gain acceptance. For women, in an environment where masculinity is an important feature, being able to identify and bond with men can offer an advantage for achieving acceptance.

Collinson (1992) suggests that there are inter-linkages between workplace joking and working-class masculinity. Collinson argues that shopfloor humour could be understood as having three main functions. First, humour can be a form of resistance. Humour serves as a refuge in dealing with monotonous work and preventing boredom of routine, and a jocular banter becomes a symbol of freedom and autonomy. Shopfloor joking culture could also be understood as resistance towards middle-class behaviour that is often represented in the conduct of white-collar office staff. The shop floor is thus understood as a free space and becomes a reflection of us (on the shop floor) and them (in the office). Second, humour offers a means of conformity. According to Collinson, joking culture is also an internal demand for group conformity. For new members of a group, exposure to group banter instructs them on how to act and react, and it tests their willingness to accept the rules of the group. Collinson argues that the ability to be able to both take and give a joke is central to survival on the shop floor and that joking, to a large extent, centres around men's (hetero)sexuality. Third, humour is used as a control mechanism. The informal structures of interaction can create power structures in the organization that beyond the reach of organizational control and management.

Within the mining context, a macho masculinity has long been a norm underground (Andersson, 2012). A vital part of this form of masculinity is the ability to be able to "take a joke", which is frequently an important feature of male-dominated environments (cf. Collinson, 1992; Sløk-Andersen, 2019; Yount, 1991). The manner of verbal interaction is often heavily sexualized and sexist towards women (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson, 1992; Paap, 2006; Watts, 2007), which means that it denigrates, demeans, stereotypes, oppresses, or objectifies women (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). There is an important difference, according to Hemmasi, Lee Graf, and Russ (1994), regarding sexualized and sexist jokes. In their study, both men and women could appreciate humour with sexual content to the same extent, but neither men nor women enjoyed sexist jokes targeting their own gender. Hemmasi et al. (1994) also showed that who the teller of the joke was made a substantial difference concerning how the joke was interpreted. Another example was in relation to managers, who were more likely to be seen as inappropriate rather than funny and were even perceived as engaging in sexual harassment. The context and the group setting are important for the interpretation. Sexism under the veil of humour can be more difficult to confront than serious remarks. The

interpretative ambiguity communicates that one should not seriously consider the information being conveyed and that confrontation is therefore unnecessary. Thus, the ambiguity in humour can also create insecurity for the recipient concerning the intention by causing him or her to question whether the joke was ill-intended or just a failed attempt at humour (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). In this paper I have chosen to use the term banter to describe the verbal informal interaction between the miners. The term captures a use of language that can be humorous and including, but also offensive and as an excuse to dismiss women's experiences of sexual harassment (cf. Collinson, 1992; Eriksen, 2019; Johansson et al., 2018; Sløk-Andersen, 2019; Yount, 1991).

Design of the study

This paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 miners, both men and women. The interviews were guided by an interview guide and conducted at one of Sweden's major mining companies within the framework of a research project concerning gender, work, workplace culture, and workplace relations in work organizations in the mining industry in Sweden. The interviewees were eight men and twelve women who were 20 to 50 years old and who had been employed at the mining company between one and 30 years. The interviews were conducted at the mining company, with the majority of the respondents born in the area of the mine and living in the community or in neighbouring communities. Of those interviewed, 18 of 20 worked shifts, with all coming from different workplaces underground, including (but not limited to) development, drilling, loading, and charging. In this article, the interviewees' names are fictional, and the precise workplace is not mentioned to prevent identification of the individuals.

The interviews with the miners varied greatly in length, from 30 minutes to 100 minutes. A recurring pattern was that the longest interviews were with women in their thirties, close to me in age, while the shortest interviews were with men who were much older than me. I perceived the longer interviews as more exhaustive, not only because of their length, but also because there was a different type of experienced closeness between me and these interviewees. Part of the explanation may be the experience of likeness, of identification linked to social categorizations, e.g., gender and age, and assumptions that we therefore could understand each other (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Another possible explanation is that these interviewees, just because they are women in male-dominated organizations, have positions that have generated significant experience and knowledge on the subject, and therefore they also have much to tell (cf. Alvesson, 2003).

All the interviews were recorded on approval of the participants; I transcribed the recordings and translated the quotes in this paper from Swedish to English. Translation is always a delicate matter, but maybe even more so when it comes to descriptions of banter and informal interaction since it is closely intertwined with language and meaning can get lost in translation. My transcribing the interviews has been of great importance for the analytical process, especially since it is here the verbal practices that are the focus. To hear how the interviewees accentuate words and how they actually speak on the matter is, I believe, of great importance for understanding how banter is functioning. I have strived for accuracy when it comes to reproducing the interviewees' exact word usage and sequence, but also laughter and pauses, which I maintain are two linguistic practices that can have a major impact on the interpretation of what is said. Furthermore, I have carefully considered the use of punctuation, which do not appear in the verbal expression, but which have a major impact on reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The material that is analysed here are descriptions of interactions, not interactions per se. I argue that there is added value when asking people about their experiences of banter and informal interactions since their accounts of their experiences also indicate what they understand as meaningful, not just what I consider meaningful. As the themes emerged, many were overlapping and with different significance. A theme, in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), captures something important and

significant in the material and represents a pattern or meaning creation in the material. As the process progressed, the thematization was refined, and the themes were categorized into two main themes: *Creating cohesion but containing gendered ambiguities* and *Gendering the workers' collective*.

Empirical findings

Creating cohesion but containing gendered ambiguities

According to the interviewees, banter is a distinguishing feature of underground interactions. These interactions are characterized as being “crude but cordial” (Interviewee no 13). Interviewees also convey that “one dares to speak out” (Interviewee no 17), that there is a “family atmosphere” (Interviewee no 1), and that such banter is a manner of expression for “colleagues who care about each other” (Interviewee no 18). To care for one another is a recurring theme during the interviews, which is often related to the working conditions, where safety issues are an integral part of everyday activities. Another aspect of the banter is described as follows:

Interviewee (no 16, female): It is strange because it is really about degrading yourself. [. . .] it is about taking yourself down and lifting up others.

This aspect of banter is exemplified by a description of someone doing a work task very well and then receiving positive feedback, with an additional comment that a bystander would never have been able to perform the task. The banter and interaction that take place underground are depicted as positive overall and as something that is appreciated. The vast majority of both men and women portray an open and relaxed workplace atmosphere, with banter and cohesiveness considered to be the best parts about the job (cf. Ringblom & Abrahamsson, 2017).

When interactions function in this way, I understand this as a way of doing collegiality (cf. Holmes, 2006a), which builds on processes of interaction, identification, and likeness (Lysgaard, 1961–2001) between workers underground. Even though banter may be viewed as a positive expression of doing collegiality, with the potential to challenge gendered structures since men and women equally can participate and benefit from its effects, there is also another side to it. Banter can be understood as an internal demand regarding group conformity that dictates how to act and react, and the use of banter can indicate a willingness to accept the rules of the group. Thus, there is a potential ambiguity in doing collegiality concerning its function to either maintain or to challenge current gendered structures and relations.

The following quote expresses an awareness that the banter only makes sense to those who can claim belongingness (cf. Green, 1978) or likeness (Lysgaard, 1961–2001) and that it is not for anyone or suitable everywhere:

Interviewee (no 14, female): The banter is very harsh . . . and it is also very ironic [. . .] If you are coming in as an outsider, you might think, “Oh my God! How the hell are they talking to each other?” I mean, the things that are being said can be very, very mean.

The context and the group setting are articulated as important features concerning the sense making of what is happening and why (cf. Hemmasi et al., 1994; Lysgaard, 1961–2001). When asking one of the interviewees if he thinks that there is a particular culture or banter at his workplace, he reports:

Interviewee (no 2, male): [. . .] you are allowed to speak your mind, and no one . . . usually no one gets offended [. . .]

To be “allowed to speak your mind”, as the interviewee relates, is valued, but it also is associated with a possible risk of offending someone. There is an awareness concerning the potential and sometimes actual harm towards the recipient involved in this way of interacting, as well as

a potential awareness of putting oneself at risk when potentially overstepping boundaries that could lead to consequences. Another interviewee shares a similar view, but in this case, more specifically concerning joking and how it is perceived:

Interviewer: Would you say that there is a particular culture at your workplace?

Interviewee (no 17, female): We can joke with each other without anyone taking offence.

Interviewer: So, you do not think that they are joking in the same way up in the office?

Interviewee: No [Laughing]

The interviewee laughed when I asked about the possibility of similar interactions in the office. My interpretation is that my question concerning the possibility of white-collar workers verbally interacting in the same way as the miners underground was perceived as bizarre and, consequently, funny. Interestingly, this perception of the nature of the office interactions is seemingly not based on experience or actual knowledge, as the interviewee did not have any experience with white-collar work in an office of a mining company. There is another element that made my question seem odd. I would, in accordance with Collinson (1992), argue that the element concerns understandings of class and workplace conduct. What occurs on the shop floor is, or must be, different than what occurs in the office, where middle-class behaviour is expected. This expectation may be understood in terms of in- and out-group (cf. Taylor & Bain, 2003) organizational distinctions, i.e., we who work underground and they who work above ground, and in terms of the workers' collective and its logic (Lysgaard, 1961–2001). The difference between the above ground and underground locations in the organization is also signified in the following quote:

Interviewer: What would you say is a particular characteristic of your workplace?

Interviewee (no 1, male): People that have been working above ground and come down say that the banter is totally different above ground and underground.

There is an understanding of a clear distinction between the informal interactions in terms of banter, depending on location within the organization, and primarily dependent on if you are situated below or above ground. The main difference is described in terms of the humour, directness, harshness, and sexualized language (more about that in the next section) that characterize the interactions underground. However, the location in the organization is not gender neutral, where workplaces underground is imbued with macho masculine connotations.

Gendering the workers' collective

Mining has a long and close relationship to men, and macho masculinity has been, and to some extent still is, a part of the ideal of the professional miner identity (Andersson, 2012; Ringblom & Abrahamsson, 2017). This section focuses on the different ways in which gender and gendered relations are made meaningful and become visible in relation to informal interaction. When talking to Interviewee no 8 (male), I asked him if he believed that women experience the banter in a different way in relation to his own experience:

Interviewee (no 8, male): I do not know if they think about it, but I have noticed that most women on this job have a harsher banter than I have [...] but maybe that is natural, that they are coming here if they have a little tougher attitude.

According to the interviewee, women applying for jobs in the mine already have a “little tougher attitude” when entering the workplace. In an environment where women's presence is still regarded as abnormal to some extent, there seemingly must be something “special” about the women who work underground. There is an idea that women who work underground are

somewhat different than women in general. In addition, it is regarded as necessary for women to be or have something “extra” compared to what is expected of women in general in order for them to manage the work environment, especially in those workplaces where men represent the vast majority of the workforce. In the following quote, it is not toughness, but “more” confidence that is regarded as required:

Interviewee (no 15, female): If a woman comes here, you have to be ... not tough but more confident [...] you must dare to take up more space.

Some of the interviewees, both men and women, argue that women, in order to fit in and enjoy the work environment, should not be “too sensitive”, must “tolerate a little more” (Interviewee no 3, male) and have “thick skin” (Interviewee no 9, female). Therefore, women seeking employment in the mine are perceived not only as *being* somewhat different than women in general but also as *needing* to be different in order to be able to manage and fit into the work environment.

In statements regarding banter and whether women’s presence versus absence makes a difference in how informal interaction plays out, the views of the interviewees differ. Some interviewees claim that women’s presence triggers coarser banter, while others suggest that the banter becomes “softer” (Interviewee no 4, male). Regarding her experience of being a woman in a male-dominated workplace, Interviewee no 18 says that it has never been an issue for her and that she immediately became “one in the gang”. When reasoning about potential explanations for why some women experience difficulties in the workplace, while she has not, she communicates the following:

Interviewee (no 18, female): I never tried to change anyone else; if a workplace has their jokes and they have had them for 20 years, then I can’t see any reason why they should change what they like. If I don’t think it was a funny joke, then I can leave. I do not need to change others; I do not need to think it is good, but I do not have to protest or make a scene over something that I do not think is okay.

This quote could be understood as a strategy for not ruining the mood, either by laughing or by questioning practices and jokes (cf. Johansson et al., 2018; Sløk-Andersen, 2019). Since women are still regarded as deviants in the environment to some extent, it becomes up to women to handle the situations that “they put themselves” into. This could be done by having the right traits (see the section above), or by having strategies for how to handle undesirable situations. Some of the women describe their strategies for when they no longer consider the joking funny, such as creating distance by “leaving” (Interviewee no 18, female), “shutting down” (Interviewee no 11, female) or “turning off their ears” (Interviewee no 12, female).

Interviewee (no 12, female): I can tell you that I can handle rough jokes, but that is not the point. I can make dirty jokes and whatnot, but the problem is that it is usually at the expense of women; it is not often at the expense of men.

Interviewee no 12 (female) argues that it is not the harshness of the joke itself that is the issue but rather the subject of the joke, i.e., women. I interpret her point as a matter concerning her minority status and the joke being sexist rather than sexual in nature (cf. Hemmasi et al., 1994), meaning that she is placed in a vulnerable position because of her gender.

Interviewee no 2 (male) asserts that there are both pros and cons of workplaces with only men or with both men and women. On the upside, the “vibe” is better, and it is more “fun” to work when there are both men and women in the workplace. Concerning positive aspects for workplaces with just men, he says the following:

Interviewee (no 2, male): Well, freedom of speech is not restricted in the same way maybe.

Interviewer: Okay, what do you mean?

Interviewee (no 2, male): [...] you do not dare to joke too much because then you might have to go up to the office for interrogation. You do not know where to draw the line, because some are very sensitive, and others can take a joke and also give back a little. [...] it does not really matter if it is women or men. But women have much greater power to do something about those who have said it, but perhaps not meant it. Although no malice was meant, it becomes a conflict.

It seems that it is not freedom of expression in general that is at stake, according to the interviewee, but rather an understanding of a limitation of men's freedom that is correlated with the presence of women. This perception of a limitation is because of women's perceived power to "do something" about the situation, such as informing a manager about something that has happened. It is not an individual woman's power or the power of women as a group, but rather what is understood as a woman's power to activate an organizational response ("going up to the office for interrogation") towards a behaviour. My interpretation is that the interviewee is here leaning towards an organizational logic that has its ground in the Swedish Discrimination Act (SFS, 2008:567). The purpose of the Act is to combat discrimination and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex (but also transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, or age). The law regulates, amongst other aspects, the employers' responsibility for preventing and take action against discrimination, this also including sexual harassment, actions that violate someone's dignity and is of a sexual nature. Consequently, the organization is obliged to act when made aware of an alleged occurrence of discrimination. Therefore, I interpret the interviewee's statement as one in which an organizational response (interrogation) is expected.

There is dissatisfaction with how the formal organization interferes by trying to regulate informal interaction between employees. Since banter can be understood in terms of practising informal control in an organization (Collinson, 1992), women's presence could be understood as activating organizational formal boundaries in an area that is not regarded as one where management, or the equivalent, should be involved, since such involvement limits the possibility for informal control by the workers. The formal practice of the organization becomes a threat to informal interaction. According to this argument, a workplace with only men would be rather unproblematic, with problems beginning when women enter the workplace. This perception could be understood as an expression that the organization is gendered to the advantage of men (cf. Acker, 1990) and that the workers' collective is primarily a matter of men. Another aspect of banter is that it is often sexualized, for example, what interviewees relate as "dirty jokes" (Interviewee no 15, female) and "a lot of jokes about sex" (Interviewee no 11, female).

Interviewee (no 12, female): I doubt that they sit around and talk about stuff like that, that they talk like that when they are at home. I strongly doubt that!

Interviewee (no 12, female): I myself joke about sex, but you notice that guys . . . there is this one guy that has a very filthy mouth that can provoke me. If I talk back in the exact same way to him, then he gets embarrassed . . . red in the face. Then, I usually ask, "Was that difficult? But if you can talk like that, why can't I? I can be as filthy in the mouth as you". So, you have to be a little smart and answer in the same way.

This interviewee suspects that verbal conduct is something specific to a given location, for example, that it is something that would not be possible in the sphere of the home. Women do not participate on the same terms as men: the interviewee relates that when she responds in the same manner as she is spoken to, the other person (male) becomes embarrassed and does not know how to act. I argue that this interviewee's description illustrates how sexualized banter is primarily coded as a masculine manner of conduct, and that it is expected that women will accept it but not master.

Concluding discussion

The informal interactions underground function as an informal power system carrying important meaning. The aim of this article has been to examine how informal interactions—banter—in these male-dominated industrial workplaces may be understood as meaningful in relation to gendered structures and relations. In the empirical findings section, two main functions of banter were made visibly: as an *including practice*, but also as an *excluding practice*. In addition, the element of *ambiguity* sometimes surrounding (alleged) humorous, informal interactions is important. In this section I will further discuss how these practices can be understood in relation to both *challenging* and *maintaining* gendered structures and relations in these male-dominated workplaces.

When informal interactions function inclusively, they simultaneously re-enforce aspects of interaction, identification, and likeness of the workers' collective. The interviewees characterize banter as a specific cultural marker for underground workplaces, and it is primarily viewed as something positive. Banter can create cohesiveness, an enjoyable work setting and be an excellent way of doing collegiality for both women and men. The question here is, should banter be considered a practice that maintains or challenges the gendered structures and relations? One interpretation is that banter can be considered a challenging practice to the current male and masculine culture because both men and women can participate in banter on equal terms. Moreover, banter involves aspects of caring practices, such as boosting and caring for each other in a high-risk work environment. This function of banter can challenge notions of the predominant macho ideal underground.

On the other hand, there is a potential for this cohesiveness associated with banter to maintain rather than challenge the gendered structures and relations of the organization. Wright (2008) argues that emphasizing similarities with the dominant group can help to gain acceptance; in this context, women must seek acceptance to fit in and to be viewed as real miners. In an occupation where traditional masculine attributes and practices have long been considered a necessity for working in the mine, women still must comply with the norm to survive on the shop floor. Informal interactions can thus be understood as maintaining the existing order since banter can be understood as an internal demand for group conformity that dictates how to act and react, and the use of banter can indicate a willingness to accept the rules of the group. As a consequence, there is a potential ambiguity in “doing collegiality” concerning its function to either maintain or to challenge current gendered structures and relations.

Informal interaction between workers reflects the potential of an activation of differentiation in relation to gender within the workers' collective. Women and men *can* be affected differently in relation to workplace banter. Further, women are more vulnerable within a sometimes sexist environment dominated by men since men can use sexuality as a means of power and control over women, which becomes a way to demonstrate masculinity. As previously discussed, banter can be a positive way of doing collegiality that is seemingly independent of gender and that can therefore challenge the current order. However, gender can also activate a differentiation within the workers' collective, for example, when women are measured based on different standards just because they are women. Expressions of this include the interviewees' descriptions of women needing to have special traits to work in the mine and that it is women's responsibility to handle the situations that they “put themselves into” and deal with the consequences. For example, women are expected to endure a sometimes hostile and sexist work environment because of their position as deviants.

Additionally, though somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, is the important aspect of the use of overtly sexist banter, which could be viewed as a potential risk for women since language can push the boundaries of what is acceptable. If sexist and hostile language is normalized, what would be considered verbal sexual assault or harassment when it is “just a joke”? An aggressive sexist atmosphere can contribute to a perception that physical abuse is the only kind of abuse, that language should not be taken seriously since it all is “just a joke”, and that everyday talk could not

possibly be in the sphere of abuse, thus leading the range of what is viewed as acceptable behaviour to be displaced. The awareness of formal organizational control is present, which can make humour an effective, but risky, strategy for maintaining the current order because of its ambiguous character.

Although banter can be used repressively, particularly by men to exercise power and control primarily over women, there is also another side to their use. As Watts (2007) argues, humour can also be used as resistance to dominant power structures by minority groups, and there is a somewhat subversive potential concerning gendered relations in informal interaction. The use of humour underground could also potentially challenge and destabilize gendered norms and expectations. Because humour, especially that is sexualized, is not expected to be a practice that women will manage successfully since this type of banter is heavily associated with men, and especially in male-dominated workplaces. For example, Interviewee no 12 (female) explains that when she responds in the same heavily sexualized manner in which she is addressed, the other (male) person is surprised and embarrassed. When women enter these workplaces and participate and thrive in using banter, an opening is created for the renegotiation of expectations and understandings about what women can and cannot do and say, and how they can and cannot act. This introduces the possibility for change concerning gendered relations.

Informal interaction is a complex matter. Women in this context can be both participants and initiators, and they can use their verbal capability to gain status. At the same time, they are potential targets, and potentially vulnerable because of their gender and their position as deviants. The informal interaction underground in the male-dominated mining industry is a double-edged sword that has the potential both to maintain and to challenge existing gendered relations underground. Finally, even though banter is not to be taken seriously, is in fact not *just* a joke.

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