CHAPTER 7

Young People's Use of School-Based Banter

Mark Mierzwinski and Philippa Velija

Introduction

Banter is a term used to refer to communication styles typically associated with aspects of British culture (Clark, 2018). In this chapter we apply an Eliasian analysis to our empirical findings to understand banter as a form of communication in peer and teacher relations within an English secondary-school setting. Whilst both males and females may utilise banter, it tends to be a more prevalent form of communication among males and within male peer groups (Nichols, 2020). Perhaps because of the association of sport with masculinity, sport is often one such setting whereby banter has become an 'overly lifestyled soundtrack' (Ronay, 2011). Due to its commonality within various aspects of British culture, many young people are familiar with banter as a form of communication

M. Mierzwinski (✉)
York St John University, York, UK
e-mail: m.mierwinski@yorksj.ac.uk

P. Velija
University of Roehampton, London, UK
e-mail: philippa.velija@roehampton.ac.uk

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in contemporary social relations, although little research focuses on how young people are socialised into using banter in peer relations through formal schooling processes.

We start this chapter by adopting a processual approach to banter, considering how it became a common form of communication across many aspects of British society by drawing on Elias's notions of civilising and informalising processes. This approach informs the second half of the chapter where we discuss ethnographic data from a male Physical Education (PE) department in a secondary school in the North-East of England. In this section we provide an Eliasian analysis of how young people come to learn, understand and use banter, how male Physical Education departments can foster competitive forms of *male* banter and how banter can be weaponised as an effective power resource within social relations. Finally, we discuss the concept of banter and why a sociological analysis of this form of communication is necessary. We conclude with a discussion on why an Eliasian approach to this form of communication helps us to understand the complexity of contemporary peer and teacher relations.

What Is 'banter' and Why Is It Worthy of a Sociological Analysis?

Banter is worthy of sociological focus as it has become a central form of communication across many aspects of British society, particularly within specific groups (Clark, 2018; Nichols, 2020). There is a need to study banter because it can be a strong marker of both inclusion and exclusion within modern social relations, involving supportive *and* contestive humour (Holmes, 2006; Plester & Sayers, 2007). *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) traces the etymology of the term 'banter' to the seventeenth century where it was referred to as an 'attack with good-humoured jokes and jests', with one of the leading seventeenth-century writers Jonathan Swift using the term 'banter' and attributing its origins to London street slang. This appearance highlights how the term banter is not new, nor is it a new form of twenty-first-century communication as occasionally portrayed (Bland, 2017), though it may be that the term has now become more popularised within twenty-first-century vocabulary. This suggestion is somewhat supported by Google Books Ngram Viewer data, a search engine that charts word frequencies from a large corpus of books that were printed between 1500 and 2018. Ngram data traces how the term became more readily published in the eighteenth century, dipped

in usage over the nineteenth century and became more commonly used in the later part of the twentieth century. Whilst an etymological overview is useful, like all words, what the term banter constitutes has evolved over time. Now, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) defines banter as 'the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks', with common synonyms including to joke, jest, pun, quip, wisecrack and tease.

Some scholars have argued that banter is a light-hearted form of dark humour that involves mocking or ridiculing through a back-and-forth interaction that can be competitive in nature and often requires quick wit (see, e.g., Cleland et al., 2021; Nichols, 2020; Plester & Sayers, 2007). Leech (1983) defines banter as 'offensive repartees that are genuinely polite and thus appear to be in concord with the paradigm of *mock impoliteness*' (Dynel, 2008, p. 246). This definition reflects the way banter is considered to be reciprocal, involving people entering a jocular frame by exchanging consecutive retorts, akin to verbal pin-pong. In this sense, banter is democratic because those involved have a right to, and are often expected to, reply until one person(s) stops engaging in the duel (Dynel, 2008; Plester & Sayers, 2007). Therefore, as a communicative process, banter can be labelled as a form of 'conjoint' and 'collaborative' humour (Holmes, 2006).

From a sociological perspective, it is useful to see the ways in which banter is enabled and constrained by social and cultural conventions. Banter is culturally specific and reflects current norms and expectations in society, a process Davies (2012) refers to as a 'barometer thesis'. The way banter is used, understood and adapted demonstrates the complexity of current relations between groups of people. This social communicative process has developed and changed over centuries, making a long-term analysis of how banter developed in twenty-first-century social relations an important endeavour.

Banter and the Civilising Process

Whilst Zijderveld (1982, p. 52) claimed that 'playful banter became characteristic of the Renaissance period', not all forms of humorous expression were accepted by social elites during this period. As Kuipers (2015, p. 33) states, '[I]n the sixteenth century, the clergy, humanists and other moralists began a civilising offensive against the laugh'. As laughter was considered a 'wild lack of restraint', 'unrefined' and 'amoral' (Verberckmoes, 1999, cited in Kuipers, 2005, p. 33), measures were taken to increasingly restrain, refine and ultimately civilise behaviours such as joking and jesting

(Kuipers, 2005). Stigma, alongside jesting and raillery, increasingly became labelled as low status forms of communication, not befitting 'persons of breeding' who frequented gentleman's clubs (Campbell, 1856, cited in Billig, 2005, p. 76). This historical snapshot illustrates the gendered aspects of early forms of banter and how 'refinement and restraint are criteria easily applied' to communication styles such as banter (Kuipers, 2005, p. 70), a process that we now further discuss through Elias's (2012) analysis of court societies and his concept of a civilising spurt.

During the Renaissance period, royal courts became spectacles of power, where previous warlords and aspirational citizens flocked to become distinguished courtiers (Elias, 2012). Whilst monarchs employed court jesters, courtiers were increasingly expected to exercise self-restraints when bantering, as spontaneous and/or misjudged vulgar comments carried some potential for reputational damage (Elias, 2012). Male courtiers could no longer use violence to gain or wield power, but instead sought symbolic power from their intellectual wit, good humour and appropriate raillery (Elias, 2012). To do this within an intensely competitive environment in accordance with court decorum required courtiers to exercise greater degrees of self-restraint over their emotional impulses and a greater level of foresight on the potential outcomes of their actions. This shift in banter as a symbolic form of power and legitimate communication style is significant when one considers the 'civilising spurt' and 'trickle-down effect' of court societies (Elias, 2012).

Elias's (2012) analysis of court societies within a civilising spurt can be used to understand the emergence of banter as a term. The 'Age of Reason' in Western societies led to the adoption of more democratically elected governments that presided over common laws, a police force and prison systems. Within public spheres, more pacified social relations led to processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, where different social groups mixed more 'freely' through living and working arrangements. Elias (2012) argued that the emergence of this social figuration contributed to processes of functional democratisation, whereby more equalising trends took place between members within and across different social groups. As England overcame a century of bloody civil wars and began the process of parliamentarisation, following the Act of Union 1707, parliamentary etiquette replaced physical duels with competitive back-and-forth verbal duels between male Whigs and Tories. In these more pacified political contests, the use of quick wit, wise puns and articulate raillery served a powerful function, which could carry damaging consequences for those less

skilled. Indeed, the effective use of wit and good-natured banter became a central form of communication in parliament (Graham et al., 2018).

However, we should be careful not to simply equate male politicians' 'weaponising' of banter to a broader trickle-down effect. Without greater empirical insight, this seems too reductionist and, perhaps, not in keeping with Jonathan Swift's street slang origins of banter and the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s (2023) reference to how banter was deprecated as vulgar by commentators during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Instead, we will consider the role that processes of urbanisation and functional democratisation may have played in banter becoming more widely used and increasingly legitimised as a communication style. Elias (2012) has argued that processes of urbanisation and functional democratisation enabled, and were enabled by, diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties in people's psyches and behaviours, altering social relations between members from different groups (e.g., between children and parents and between males and females). Therefore, we consider if the more widespread use of the term 'banter' was an unintended outcome, a blind social process of an increasingly pacified Britain whereby more and more people from different social groups were interacting: bantering could be used to form social bonds, share increasingly common forms of communication or alternatively distinguish and exclude some social groups from others. In this sense, banter has come to serve as an effective power resource within social relations in multi-functional ways. Our thinking is similar to Elias and Scotson's (2008) empirical findings that illustrated how within social groups, 'gossip' served to foster ties of social bonding and contribute to a sense of group charisma within an 'established group' by simultaneously dividing and stigmatising an 'outsider' group.

As Elias and Scotson's (2008) study has shown it is important to note the long-term psychological shifts that may have taken place for banter, like gossip, to be considered as an effective power resource within people's social relationships. In Western Europe from the fifteenth to the late nineteenth century, Elias (2012) argued that long-term civilising processes have taken place. These processes have largely been underpinned by formalisation processes, which signify a trend towards more refined behaviours, such as manners, and disciplined emotional expressions, such as exercising greater foresight before responding to conflict. From this, we suggest that people could only more commonly engage in banter within and between social groups once they had reached necessary levels of self-restraint over their emotional impulses and responses. For people to

successfully engage in 'appropriate', 'good-natured' and 'respectful' banter, they needed to exercise increasing levels of empathy and identification with others, a process Elias (2012) referred to as psychologisation. At its extremities, a failure to successfully mutually identify with others could lead to what de Swaan (1997) has termed 'disidentification', a cognitive and emotional process where people increasingly struggle to identify with or deny similarities with other people at a personal and/or group level, repressing emotions such as sympathy. This theoretical explanation helps to explain people's use of (*mock*) polite and well-intended banter, a form of banter used for social bonding purposes or to subtly exert power over others in a less physically oppressive manner.

However, some banter can be crude, vulgar and designed to hurt (Phipps & Young, 2015); it 'combines badly with sympathy or feelings of tenderness, anger, embarrassment and indignation' (Billig, 2005, cited in Kuipers, 2015, p. 70). The use of this type of banter does not reflect people's gradual shift towards more refined, mutually identifiable and empathetic behaviour, but instead illustrates how some types of banter can momentary suspend expected moral standards. Apart from de Swaan's (1997) concept of disidentification, another way to explain this would be to more closely consider where banter is more likely to take place, drawing upon Elias and Dunning's (2008) concept of a quest for excitement offered in certain social spheres such as sport. They explain how many modern sports serve as a necessary antidote to the mundanity of everyday life by offering de-routinising experiences centred on mimesis, motility and sociality. Such experiences often included socially permitting forms of aggression and violence, celebrating machoism and embracing gendered (often sexist) attitudes, behaviours increasingly unattainable across many other spheres of society.

In England, Dunning and Sheard (1973) explored a macho subculture within rugby union that involved mocking, vilifying and objectifying females and homosexuals through obscene songs, exclusionary male spaces (e.g., the clubhouse bar), and demeaning peripheral roles within clubs. Dunning (2008) explained such ritualised behaviours, which often involved bantering and gesturing, as responses to the threats to traditional forms of masculinity posed by shifts towards greater equality between males and females that took place within an urban-industrial British nation-state. This perhaps goes some way to explaining the continued prevalence of gendered banter, albeit with less explicit rituals, in many male-centred sport subcultures today (Hylton, 2018; Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Nichols, 2020). More broadly, the *Oxford English Dictionary*

(2023) refers to how in recent use, the word 'banter' is sometimes characterised as a means of justifying or excusing humourous behaviour considered boorish or chauvinistic.

Another important way to explain the emergence of the term 'banter' and its increasing use as a form of communication within twenty-first-century social relations is to consider formality within public life in relative degrees of a formality-informality span (Elias, 2013). Wouters (2007) empirically documented how from the latter part of the nineteenth century social constraints loosened, enabling people to experiment with how they spoke, what they wore and how they expressed their emotions and identity. This informalisation process allowed people to increasingly become conceived as 'autonomous individuals, possessing enduring characteristics of individuality' (Billig, 2005, p. 12). Wouters (2007) argued that these emancipatory opportunities, particularly for women and children, became particularly heightened during the 1880s, 1920s, 1960s and 1990s. Therefore, one outcome of the gradual long-term shift towards informalising trends is that, compared with previous generations, people today are less constrained by strict codes about how individuals should behave (Billig, 2005). Such trends may help us to understand why banter becomes synonymous with 'lad culture' (Phipps & Young, 2015), becoming more readily acceptable between people from different social groups, for example, teachers and pupils, as will be discussed in our study, and within certain social spheres such as sport.

According to Elias (2012) such processes of informalisation are developed when a high degree of individual self-restraint has become taken for granted. In this sense, the loosening of strict social constraints placed increasingly differentiated demands on people's levels of self-restraint, requiring people to exercise what both Elias and Wouters referred to as 'a highly controlled decontrolling of emotional controls'. Wouters (1998, p. 139) argued that such psychological controls foster a 'third-nature psyche', which involves 'a level of consciousness and calculation in which all types of constraints and possibilities are taken into account'. Elias considered a first-nature psyche to refer to people's more instinctive animalistic impulses and behaviours, whereas a second-nature 'psyche' refers to a 'highly automatic functioning of conscience and self-regulation' over such first-nature impulses (Wouters, 1998, p. 139). Wouters's (1998, p. 139) concept of a third-nature 'psyche' involves 'psychic pulls and pushes of both first and second nature impulses and restraints alongside more calculated assessments of the dangers and chances within a social situation'. Whilst not explored in great depth by Eliasian-inspired scholars, a third-nature psyche

could provide an additional theoretical tool to analyse people's more planned, goal-orientated and manipulative use of banter, further illustrating the increasing complexity within contemporary social relations.

To conclude this section, whilst from the seventeenth century the meaning of the term may have changed, banter has shared common characteristics, namely its political, moral and aesthetic nature. The intellectualising and weaponising of banter support our suggestion that the emergence of the term 'banter' and its widespread use are in some respects indicative of broader civilising processes, which include formalisation/informalisation processes and those related processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and functional democratisation. Similarly, the concept of a quest for excitement also explains banter's de-routinising features, lightheartedness and popularity within some social groups, particularly young people and 'sporty' males. These changes in the development of affective processes in people's multi-functional use of banter can provide a suitable context for exploring our ethnographic research, to which we now turn.

Study and Key Empirical Findings

In 2015, one of the authors, Mark Mierzwinski, spent six months within a male PE department in one secondary school, referred to here as Colbeck High School (CHS). CHS, a pseudonym, was a religious-affiliated school in the North-East of England, located in a working-class region with over 1500 pupils aged 11–18 years. Seventy-five per cent of its pupils were Catholic, 25% were eligible for pupil-premiums (funds given to schools by the government to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children), 12% of pupils were registered as belonging to black and minority ethnic communities, 10% were registered as having English as a second language and 7% were registered as having special educational needs. CHS had received a 'good' rating across all components in its most recent Ofsted report, the United Kingdom's government's office for standards in education that inspects schools. In the male PE department, there were five PE teachers and each young male took part in two one-hour compulsory PE classes per week in a single-sex environment.

His study examined relationships, identities and behavioural norms and how young males expressed their masculinity within a competitive single-sex sporting setting. Data was collected from eighty-four lesson observations, interviews with four PE teachers and nine focus groups with young males in years seven, eight and nine (aged 11–14 years). It was analysed

from a figurational sociological framework and key findings were related to gendered social processes, the role of masculine embodiment and emotional self-restraint within young males' peer relations and power dynamics within teacher-pupil authority-based relations. Banter was observed as a first and lasting impression; therefore, teachers were asked the following interview questions: 'What are your thoughts on young males when they banter with each other?' 'Where does this happen?' 'What types of things do they joke about/mock each other about?' Outside of these responses, teachers often referred to banter in answering other questions. Similarly, vignettes were used in focus groups to gain young males' interpretation of the (in)appropriateness of common verbal exchanges observed as taking place in male PE.

By way of example, the following vignette was used with year nine males (13–14 years of age)—all names have been anonymised. 'What's up with you?', Mr Sharp asks. George replies, 'I have a bad back', '[Y]ou're always injured you', says Jake. '[N]o, I'm not', responds George. 'You are, if it's not your glass back, you're whinging about a broken finger nail or summat', Jake says jokingly. George snaps back, '[G]ive up Jake, you're doing my head in, you always say stuff like that'. 'What's up sick note, have I hit a nerve? I hope it is not one in your back', Jake sarcastically comments. 'You don't understand Jake, you just don't', George pleads. Bluntly, Jake responds with, 'I tell you what I don't understand is that you just pick and choose PE when you want. Why don't you just man up and get on with it?' As illustrated here, short stories deliberately did not use the term 'banter', although young males often interpreted aspects within such exchanges as banter. Collectively this data enabled Mark to gain an insight into how young males and teachers socially constructed banter in male PE at CHS, to which we now turn.

Young males often spoke fondly of banter, but some felt it could be negative, as year nine Alfie explained:

> Banter is having a laugh. It can be good, and it can be bad, it has its sides. Sometimes banter can go too far. Like someone calls me ginger, something like that. Something daft like that, I would just have a laugh with them. But, if it was like constant, adding things onto it, it gets too much, and you say 'oh away? It's old now'. It's like an expiry date. You have the certain amount of banter for a certain week and it just stops.

Repetition and context helped determine intent and degrees of appropriateness, both of which year nine Tom bemoaned, '[F]or some people,

it is just in their nature to go around and just cross the line'. However, young males' ability to determine intent was clouded by another common communication style, *chewing*. Year nine Oliver described how chewing was, '[W]hen you are getting on their nerves and you are trying to aggravate them', to which his peer Hugo added to 'try and get a reaction'. For year eight James, '[I]t's [chewing] actually halfway between bullying and banter. You are chewing, and it goes on too long, so you are bullying someone'. Young males constructed banter by comparing and seeking to distinguish it from other similar forms of communication, such as teasing. Whilst they felt good banter was funny and chewing involved a deliberate attempt to test a peer's temperament, they could perceive persistent bantering or chewing as bad banter and/or bullying. The actual and interpretative nuances of similar forms of communication illustrate the complexity and potential blurred lines at play within young males' everyday verbal peer interactions.

Whilst well versed in the term 'banter', how frequently young males engaged in and styled their banter differed with age. Older males (13 years plus) engaged more in banter and bantered more with their teachers. Within focus groups numerous young males alluded to this difference, but it is best articulated in the following two teacher responses to the interview question, '[W]hat is your favourite year group to teach and why? Mr Parker replied, '[M]y year ten GCSE class, the banter is brilliant. I would say more banter with the older ones, and the younger ones more silly jokey behaviour, so where they are not the butt of it'. Offering further insight into this difference Mr Hatton responded:

> I love teaching year nine lads because I think that you get quite a bit of entertainment out of them, you can have a bit of banter with them. Year sevens you can't have much banter because they don't really understand what is going on to be honest. Whereas year nines they are growing up a bit and they understand what good craic is and they can kind of bounce off each other and you can get a good group dynamic through that.

For these teachers, older males had the capacity to engage in more directed, confrontational and competitive banter without taking it too personally. These teachers felt that this style was amicable, entertaining and aided positive social bonds, whilst their engagement legitimised this style amongst young males in their peer-group interactions. However, not having full capacity to engage in this particular style, banter with younger males was adapted in order to be less sophisticated and more immature.

This stylistic differentiation suggests that engaging in competitive banter involves a certain level of maturity about understanding the intention of sometimes provocative and targeted banter, whilst being able to respond in kind within the unwritten social codes of banter, that is, not 'crossing the line'.

This finding is indicative of broader civilising processes which increasingly expect young people to exercise greater self-controls over their behaviour and emotional reactions, a point illustrated in the following example. Not all older males were observed as being able to successfully engage in this perceived more mature form of banter without taking offence and reacting inappropriately. When interviewed, Mr Hatton offered the example of year eleven Justin, who during fitness suite classes repeatedly reacted in a verbally aggressive way to being the butt of his peers' banter, which further provoked their banter. Mr Hatton stated how he intervened by regularly chatting with Justin to explain how he needed to learn to control his temper, particularly given his desired career path into the Navy. From this case, the interviewer posed the question to what extent is being able to banter a life-skill—Mr Hatton responded:

> I think the more you are exposed to it the more you understand it. […] I have got a year eight who cannot take banter at all, none whatsoever, or sorry couldn't take banter at all until recently, and he has started to improve slightly […] it is all about character I think and personally I would say that I am a strong character in the sense that I can give it and I can take it banter. […] I just think it makes you stronger as a person.

This example re-emphasises the perceived maturity needed to successfully engage in this complex form of banter, whereby not being able to is considered a character flaw, one that can be exposed repeatedly by peers. This exposure was not stopped by Mr Hatton, who instead sought to address Justin's perceived weakness—in this case his inability to exercise the expected levels of emotional self-restraint—by educating him on how to successfully engage, and conform to, the cognitive and affective processes involved in this perceived normalised form of communication within teenage social relations. Mr Hatton seemed to legitimise his intervention on the grounds that it was in Justin's best interest that he learned the unwritten social codes and art of bantering in order to embody civilising and mature behaviours.

Given the legitimacy that teachers granted banter within this competitive setting, it was observed as being rife within social relations between

male PE teachers, teachers and older pupils and within young male peer groups. Referring to this, Mr Glovers commented, '[I]t's [banter] par for the course isn't it', whilst Mr Hatton acknowledged how: '[A] lot of us in PE are very banterful. […] I would say we do like rip each other'. When further probing why male PE teachers were very 'banterful', Mr Parker responded, 'I know teachers who have banter who aren't PE teachers, but they are sporting, they have a sporting background'. Indeed, during the first week of ethnography, Mr Parker expressed how banter boosted camaraderie and togetherness, which he believed made his department relatively unique across the school.

Similarly, during focus groups, many young males acknowledged how banter was much more prevalent in PE compared with classroom-based lessons, with some young males suggesting that the style of banter differed in PE. Year nine Charlie claimed, '[I]n PE it is like *sport* banter'. With competitive banter being deemed appropriate, banter was a popular form of *sporting* communication in male PE. This normalisation and acceptance seemed partially based on beliefs that banter mimicked a verbal sporting contest and therefore, by extension, was part of the sporting process. Aligning this perception to a perceived fundamental value within sport, banter was *fair game*, but also perceived as being valuable as a form of social bonding, despite being often harsh, crude or ripping. Tracing this sporting attitude to our previous discussion, successfully engaging in banter appeared to require an emotional resilience, a form of stoicism so often lauded within particularly male athletic communities, whilst simultaneously having the potential to offer gains in terms of the power balances between young males.

The relative uniqueness of the normalisation, acceptance and competitiveness of banter also needs to be considered within the gendered dynamics within this single-sex environment. During interview Mr Hatton considered how:

> In PE, because most of the time it is single sex, the lads will have banter about the performance as well. I don't think they would take the mickey out of someone for not being able to read well. Whereas, in PE if someone can't pass a ball straight there is a different kind of mentality.

Performance-based banter was observed daily, particularly amongst older males who enjoyed providing running commentary on their peers' actions. On one level, due to its regularity and apparent randomness, there appeared to be very little pattern in who or how frequently a young male

was commented on, making the banter process appear quite inclusive in that most young males engaged in it in some way, shape or form. On another level, commentary often carried gendered identity connotations and could subtly or blatantly involve gendered shaming attempts. For instance, re-visiting the case of Justin, when peers bantered him about his 'spaghetti legs', he struggled to control his temper, but Mr Hatton knew that such comments would be common within male-dominated and often 'hyper-masculine' military professions, such as the Navy.

Aware of such gendered social dynamics within male PE, Mr Parker felt it necessary to explain the unwritten social codes of sporting banter to new arrivals at the school. During interview, Mr Parker explained:

> I said (to year sevens), me having a bit of banter with you is saying, 'oh well we got beat by you or you beat us etc'. That is banter. But, as soon as I start being nasty and not about football, and getting personal, then that is bullying. I was trying to define it [banter] to them.

Mr Parker's intervention sought to ensure that sporting banter fell within the realms of appropriateness in PE and did not get too personal. However, because much of performance-based banter was based on personal characteristics, and because many male PE-based sports carry such inherent attitudes towards desirable forms of masculinity, banter could easily be received by young males as being a personal attack on their gendered identity, on their developing sense of self. As Justin found out, the darker humorous elements of banter must be understood as being 'par for the course' within a sporting mentality, whereby emotional reactions needed to involve high levels of self-restraint, for example, 'be the bigger man'. However, perhaps Justin just thought that his verbally aggressive responses symbolised a desirable form of masculinity that his lack of physical prowess failed to embody.

Whilst it is difficult to fully gauge if such levels of foresight or rationalising was present within older males' reactions, like that of Justin's, it is possible to present another strategy some older males adopted to deflect from their sporting incompetence or 'unpopular' body shape. Seemingly aware of the connection between sporting banter and performance within male PE, some older males were observed using self-deprecation. For instance, during a football match, Luke, a year eleven male, repeatedly referred to himself as 'Fat Messi', in reference to the world-class male footballer Lionel Messi, much to the amusement of his peers. Acknowledging this strategy during interview Mr Hatton recalled:

> So, him [referring to Will, a year eleven male], for example, is absolutely horrific at sports, hates sports, when he was here in year seven, he was the biggest geek I have ever seen, I thought he is going to be absolute bait here for all these lot. And then he kind of [...] because he didn't care [...] because he was good at French for example, he kind of took the mickey out of himself and people would say what is the answer for this Will and he would torture them for not knowing the answer, and they would be like, yeh I am a bit stupid, there's my weakness, he's got his strength, but also, he has his weakness in PE like.

Seemingly aware of the prevailing unwritten social codes and preempting forthcoming banter, Luke and Will appeared to initiate the banter process. In doing so, they successfully engaged in banter by better controlling a process that finds them at the butt of any peer comments by illustrating how any gender shaming attempts would not lead to affective outbursts or offence. The fact that only older males were observed using this deflecting tactic perhaps illustrates at least three things: (a) that banter was an effective power resource within male teenagers' relations, (b) that young males like Luke and Will understood prevailing gendered relations involved within sport and, in doing so, (c) demonstrated their self-awareness and self-confidence to poke fun at their identities.

Young males were not the only people to strategically use banter for their own gains. Teachers often weaponised banter in their relations with young males, as seen during an interview with Mr South: '[I]t [banter] is one of my favourite weapons because it gets other kids onside if you are taking the mickey out of a kid that you know can take it'. Whilst banter could erode traditional teacher-pupil boundaries and develop closer social bonds, it could also be used to discipline a young male who crossed the line of appropriateness, as described by Mr Parker during interview:

> Sometimes it can be, 'hey, there you go, keep your mouth shut', but I think they also respect that type of thing. The kids that you deal with they respect that and maybe they are used to it, maybe who they knock around with you know, that type of banter or that type of approach to things. I think that does help; quick wit helps you a lot. You can diffuse a situation just like that [clicks his fingers].

Qualifying his comment, Mr Parker disclosed how a year ten male, Dominic, shouted out in a GCSE PE theory lesson, 'Sir, did you do that Strictly Come Dancing Show? That's right gay, are you gay Sir', to which

Mr Parker reported swiftly replying, '[Y]ou what? I am not gay, but my boyfriend is', much to the apparent amusement of the class, which caused Dominic momentary embarrassment. Teachers saw banter as an appropriate, effective teaching aid to develop or reinforce authority-based social relations with young males. Part of banter's effectiveness was its subtle approach, as opposed to screaming or sanctions, designed to momentary shift their perception of the situation or confrontation. In this sense, teachers were relating to young males' perceived preferences, illustrating and seeking to maintain mutual respect, all be it on heteronormative grounds. This strategy was based on teachers', like Mr Parker, understanding of how banter can be used as an effective power resource and their mutual identification with young males concerning good and appropriate sporting banter.

Elias's (2012) explanation of civilising processes was concerned with how people gradually became more mutually orientated and dependent, a greater mutual identification with others through long-term shifts in diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties at a psychological and behavioural level, a process Elias (2012) referred to psychologisation. However, it is necessary to view psychologisation as a process and mutuality in terms of degrees, because using banter as an effective teaching aid was observed to have some potential flaws. During interview Mr Glover reflected how 'they are not clever enough to come back, but you do get the odd one who is, and you think jeez he is clever'. Being outwitted risked undermining the authority relations teachers wished to reinforce through weaponising banter. Another potential flaw was that some young males misinterpreted teachers' attempts at bantering, as Mr South recalled during interview:

> There are some throw away comments I have said to other kids, I have been asked by the Senior Leadership Team to apologise because they [young males] have taken it seriously. It was a throw away comment like, 'oh sit down or I am going to kick you outside', and he took it seriously and he said, 'Sir you made me scared'. And I was like, 'blinking heck Philip, do you think I would really give you a kicking?' I just thought it was a throw away comment from me, banter, and all that. He was only in year eight at the time, it was earlier this year and I didn't teach him last year. Our relationship has got better, but I am wary of how I speak to him now and what I say.

Clearly, whilst many young males were well versed in teachers' banter, perhaps not expecting it from teachers, Philip struggled to identify with

Mr South's comment in a humorous way and took it seriously. Conversely, this momentary lack of mutuality was observed when young males' attempts at bantering teachers would not be identified as such, as described by year nine Alfie during a focus group:

> I remember someone ages ago, they said something to a teacher as well. They were having fun and they said something back and the teacher didn't like it. Because the teacher had riled him up to have banter back, but the teacher had not taken it as banter, so they gave him [the boy] a sanction or detention, [to which Charlie commented], it gets personal something like that.

These ill-directed or misconceived attempts at banter remind us of banter's potential ambiguous and nuanced nature, which can have adverse and detrimental effects on social relations, unlike processes of social bonding. It seemed ambiguity was based on the perceived appropriateness of the banter in the teacher-pupil authority-based relationship, one that was sometimes blurred for young males when their teachers frequently used banter with them. In this case, whilst young males could and did misinterpret banter with peers, their momentary lack of mutual identification concerning banter with people from a different social group (adult teachers) could carry much greater social consequences for both parties.

Young Males, Banter and Male PE: An Eliasian Analysis

The above section outlines several key empirical findings, namely, young males' social construction of banter and how they differentiated it from other similar forms of communication; the relationship between prevalence, style of banter and age primarily based on perceived maturity and young males' ability to 'successfully' engage in banter without taking offence or reacting 'inappropriately'; banter as a normalised and popular form of sporting communication within male PE, mainly due to its strong affiliation with a sporting 'mentality' viewed in terms of fair game and stoicism; sporting banters gendered connotations due to its competitive nature and its inherent links to desirable forms of masculine identity; self-deprecation as a strategy to better control the banter process and deflect any peer attempts at gender shaming; teachers weaponising of banter to more effectively exert their authority over young males in terms of

obedience; and issues of appropriateness within teacher-pupil banter. Whilst these findings were presented with figurational sensitivities in mind, in this last section we will provide a more detailed Eliasian analysis. We will focus our attention on the following three overarching themes: young males' socialisation into and ability to successfully engage in banter, competitive banter as part of a gendered sporting mentality and the weaponising of banter as an effective power resource.

Most 11-year-old males were able to describe what banter is and what it entails. By 13 years of age, many used it regularly as a form of communication within the male PE environment at the school. From an Eliasian perspective, young children are biologically equipped to acquire language as a form of communication, but their ability to do so is based on important processes of social learning (Elias, 2010). From birth, in order to survive and thrive within their family, community and school, young people have to acquire a stock of language that has been transmitted from generation to generation. Part of this socialisation process involves children undergoing 'an individual social civilising process' before they become considered (largely by adults) as full members of society (Elias, 2012, p. xi).

To 'successfully' banter, young males needed to display high degrees of mutual identification with and respect for peers and teachers by exercising appropriate levels of emotional self-restraint and foresight over its consequences. Such degrees of mutuality represent a shift from a 'me' to a more 'I-we' centred approach in social relations which many young people experience during infancy and adolescence. Using this approach, most 13 and 14 year olds had a common understanding of verbal norms and prevailing school standards, interpreting moralised banter on good and bad grounds, believing that by this age their peers should know what constitutes 'appropriate' banter. Therefore, when bantering, those not able to adhere to such expectations were suspiciously evaluated in terms of their 'true' intent, bringing their 'moral standards' and/or levels of maturity into question.

When being bantered those who were either not able to mutually identify with attempts of polite mocking or reacting inappropriately to banter tended to be deemed immature by their peers and teachers. However, young males' ability to understand 'appropriate' banter could be blurred by their peers' attempt to deliberately provoke them through 'chewing', a process which intentionally sought to test their emotional self-restraint. Irrespective of the degree to which these psychological processes were at

play, we suggest that banter should be considered as a sophisticated form of communication, one which required young males to have reached a certain stage of their individual civilising process. This civilising requirement may help explain the trend for older males to engage more and differently in banter than their younger peers, whilst also illustrating some of the complexities young people face understanding 'appropriateness' when engaging in verbal interactions in developed societies.

Prior to entering school most young males were aware of banter as a form of communication, but it was during their time at CHS that many developed their ability to 'successfully' engage in 'complex' banter with their peers and teachers. To understand the role that the male PE department, and CHS more broadly, may have played within this learning process it is useful to consider some of the key figurations that young males belong to. Elias coined the term 'figuration' to refer to 'the network of interdependences formed among human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is here called the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people' (Elias, 2012, p. 525). From birth, babies are born into a particular family figuration and during infancy many are enrolled into nurseries or pre-schools. In England, nursery can start from as early as three months old and for some infants involves up to ten hours of care per day. Family and early years educational figurations are a key part of young people's individual civilising process, which includes acquiring elementary forms of communication and understanding how to socially interact with others in an appropriate manner (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2014; Olwig, 2011).

Gabriel (2016, p. 374) has highlighted how in the Communication and Language Development section of the English Early Years Foundation Stage Non-Statutory Guidance it stipulates that 'it is desirable that a child between 40 and 60 months, understands humour, e.g. nonsense rhymes and jokes'. When young people enter primary school (4/5 years) the learning process becomes mandatory and more formal in terms of subjects studied such as PE and English and, more broadly, they are expected and taught how to display greater emotional self-restraints and behavioural refinements. The primary school figuration involves young people relating to greater numbers of people and teachers, both of whom may come from diverse family figurations that involve different processes of socialisation.

During these formative years, young people will also enter community-based figurations through religious groups or organised leisure activities. Collectively, it is through these leading figurations, alongside consuming

popular culture (e.g., TV, social media and the Internet), that young people develop an individual habitus that enables them to more often than not communicate with each other in a 'civilised' manner that fits the prevailing social norms and behavioural expectations. However, not all young people master such communications skills nor wish to simply conform to broader societal standards as cultural dupes. Indeed, the individual civilising process that takes place within schools, homes and community clubs often involves tension balances between young people's wishes, habits and emotions, and the demands of parents who expect 'a degree of caution and restraint (Elias, 2008, p. 191, cited in Olwig, 2011, p. 122). It is from these figurational relations from which young males entered the school and developed their ability, or not, to engage in 'appropriate' forms of banter.

The transition from nursery to primary school and from primary to secondary school (at 11 years of age in England) also involves young people entering a larger and diverse school figuration with a more formalised and routinised figuration in terms of the school day, structured lessons and refined behavioural expectations. Concerning the latter, the school's website stresses how 'each individual in it is on a pilgrimage of growth', whilst detailing core values such as 'integrity', 'mercy', 'compassion', 'fairness' and 'equality', noting how 'curriculum and relationships will be based on these values'. Like many schools in England, CHS had an anti-bullying policy and took part in the Anti-Bullying Alliance's 'Anti-bullying Week' campaign in November 2015. This illustrates the expected role that secondary schools play in young people's individual civilising process, offering some policy-based context for our analysis of the degree to which banter was enabled, constrained and deemed appropriate within the schooling process.

Banter was observed as occurring across many aspects of the school, but given the perceived 'sporting banter', we consider it useful to consider male PE as a 'sub-figuration' within the broader CHS figuration. We are therefore arguing that competitive banter was more developed due to the distinctive structural and social characteristics within male PE, as well as the legitimacy of banter accepted by male PE teachers. As banter was attributed to a male sporting shared habitus, most banter was trivialised, endorsed and even celebrated by male PE teachers, so that older teenagers entering male PE expected to be able to banter with each other and their teachers. However, as banter was often based on perceived differences or performance, it could be harsh and received negatively. Thus it could be

construed as countering the school's broader civilising mission. This helps to explain why some schools feel the need to clearly differentiate between banter and bullying, or why some have contemplated banning or constraining the frequency and types of banter young people engage in (Adams, 2017; Buchanan, 2014; Evans, 2018).

It is also worth noting that the figurational dynamics of certain behavioural norms and attitudes towards verbal conflict may be more relaxed or condoned compared with other dynamics across the school. In viewing the banter permitted in male PE along the formality-informality span, there were many formal aspects within male PE, but it was within certain activities (competitive team games) and informal spaces (changing rooms and transitions) where banter was allowed to develop. Significantly, young males were not merely passive recipients, but actively contributed to the figurational dynamics within male PE. However, in one sense, their ability to understand when they could be formal or informal before successfully engaging in 'appropriate' banter further illustrates the complexities involved in this form of communication.

We conclude this section by considering the role of banter in teacher-pupil relations in terms of young males' individual civilising process. As young people entered the school and the male PE department they were at an impressionable phase of their gendered identity development. Male PE teachers felt the need to use their professional status as a position of authority to educate young males on the appropriate ways to use or react to banter, to civilise them in communication styles. However, these explicit interventions were also supplemented by more implicit role modelling of how banter could be an effective power resource within social relations. In a broader sense, the use of banter in a more informal, subtle and less confrontational way to discipline young males in an competitive, social and loud environment is indicative of long-term shifts towards more informalised teacher-pupil relations that are based less on traditional authoritative methods, such as corporeal punishments or shouting (Wouters, 2007). This informalising approach is based on teachers' greater level of mutual identification with young males' preferences for subtle discipline as opposed to intimidating fear-based tactics such as screaming, illustrating some of the long-term equalising trends in teacher-pupil relations (Wouters, 2007).

As a pedagogic approach banter formed a key part of the formation of male PE teachers' habitus, making it a 'natural' and well-versed tool. Teachers' weaponising of banter as a disciplinary tool served to convey to

young males how banter can be used to exert or maintain power over others. This was something that some young males tried to replicate, but often faced social reprisals from suspicious peers or teachers, the latter seemingly unaware of the contradictions in their regulation of certain forms of oppressive banter. Perhaps that is why you rarely, if ever, see mockery, sarcasm or banter feature in teaching manuals. Indeed, in a *Times Educational Supplement*, Featherstone (2019) wrote an article titled, 'Why Teachers Should Never Use "banter"'.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have demonstrated the theoretical strengths of applying an Eliasian approach to understanding the emergence of banter as an important form of communication within school settings, contextualised within the wider relation of longer-term trends in informalising processes in twenty-first-century England. We have used empirical evidence from a male PE department to provide an Eliasian analysis of the role banter plays in peer and teacher relations within a secondary-school setting. A recurring theme throughout our analysis was that banter has become an increasingly *complex* form of communication in school relations, one that does not seem to carry the same 'civilising' constraints as in Renaissance times.

Whilst this trend may be indicative of broader informalisation processes, to 'successfully' engage in 'appropriate' banter young people are still required to have undergone a long process of social learning in key institutions. The longer amount of time younger people spend in nurseries and mandatory schooling demonstrates the complex communicative processes children are expected to attain before entering 'adulthood', highlighting the central role of schools in the civilising process. Within the formality-informality span that young people now experience across these different figurations, banter has become more complex due to the increasing sensitivities around people's need to use 'appropriate' communication styles that are based on greater levels of mutual identification and respect.

In viewing the school as a civilising institution, we discussed how male PE provided a distinctive social environment that enabled young people to foster competitive banter for a variety of purposes, including the use of weaponising banter as an effective power resource. We discovered that banter was developed within one of the few single-sex school environments young males can enter, where many sports carry inherent links to traditional and desirable forms of masculinity. Those entering male PE at

CHS became aware of and contributed to the prevailing social norms that banter is a gendered form of communication, one that is legitimised within sporting environments, forming a key part of their gendered identities. Whilst further theoretical-empirical exploration is needed in this area, we have suggested that male banter could well be an unintended outcome of long-term equalising trends in gender relations, particularly within previous male preserves such as sport.

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