Homosocial communities at construction sites—a workplace culture in transition?

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Abstract

In this article we explore homosocial practices, masculinities and workplace culture in the construction sector. The theoretical approach was process-oriented with the view that gender and workplace culture is constructed through social interactions and relations at work. A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured interviews conducted at two construction sites. The material was analyzed thematically and in an abductive manner. Four practices for cooptation into the homosocial community appeared as status bringing: (i) showing interest, (ii) being older and having extensive experience, (iii) having the ability to be efficient and take risks, and (iv) being caring and loyal. Contradictions were identified in terms of openness for a hybrid caring masculinity at the same time as a hegemonic masculinity was celebrated when a project was threatened. When efficiency needed to increase a traditional homosocial workplace culture took over. Loyalty in terms of caring was interpreted differently depending on work situation.

Key words

Construction work, Gender, Homosociality, Masculinities, Workplace culture, Work organization, Work practices

Introduction

Despite substantial efforts to improve safety, the global construction sector recorded at least 51,962 fatal and over eight million non-fatal workplace accidents between 2012 and 2022 (ILO 2024a; 2024b). In Nordic countries alone, 305 fatal accidents occurred in the same time period (ILO 2024a). In addition, this sector remains gender segregated with a clear majority of men among the vocational workers. This gender segregation has become an issue for employers' and employees' organizations in the Nordic countries, as it results in a harsh workplace culture followed by risk taking and harassments on sites. The Swedish union Byggnads has a program for gender equality stating that in order to be able to create a sustainable work environment, the sector needs to change and be more inclusive. In turn, the employer organization Byggföretagen highlights gender equality as a tool to work with skills provision. However, at a European level there has not been much evidence that these kinds of policies are taken into action (Clarke et al. 2005). Further, among the Nordic countries, Denmark's construction industry stands out in terms of being more unsafe than Sweden's (Overgaard et al. 2023). Identified reasons for this are differences in training, but also in attitudes toward the job (Overgaard et al. 2023). A contributing factor could be that the Swedish industry is less hierarchical, opening for workers' participation and possibilities to have influence over how to perform the job (Nielsen et al. 2017). A study of the Finnish construction sector's organizational culture reveals a clan culture in combination with being hierarchical (Teravainen et al. 2018). This clan culture can be compared to homosocial (Holgersson 2006) culture when it comes to keeping social groups together through mutual trust via loyalty and seeing colleagues as family (Teravainen et al. 2018).

Research on male-dominated work organizations is well established when it comes to masculinity and managers (Collinson & Hearn 1996; Holgersson 2006), masculinity and workers in the mining industry (Abrahamsson et al. 2014; Johansson & Ringblom 2017), and masculinity in the oil industry (Ely & Meyerson 2010). Even if qualitative, oriented research on gender in the construction sector has made progress (Esmée Sinéad & Markham 2019; Paap 2006), it mostly focuses on femininity and women´s experiences of harassment (Denissen 2010; Watts 2007). Hence, there is a knowledge gap about men in construction jobs and how masculinity is expressed and interacts with the workplace culture at sites. Scholars such as Kimmel et al. (2005), Paap (2006), and Stergiou-Kita et al. (2015) have illuminated that homosocial workplace cultures, for example at construction sites, built on practices such as risk-taking and physical strength, can have implications for the workplace culture. In other sectors such as the police force (Lander 2013), the existence of a homosocial culture where men admire each other and where status-bringing practices are highly valued, has been explained by the reproduction of gendered norms at work. Further, it should be stressed that in previous studies on work organizations in Sweden such homosocial practices are dependent on external societal values and expectations outside the concerned work organization (Abrahamsson 2009; Holgersson 2006; Lindgren 1996).

In recent years in Sweden, large construction firms have invested in recruiting women into the carpentry vocation (Ranjalingam 2020; Author). The assumption was that by increasing female carpenters at sites, their very presence would indirectly improve safety and tone down an established macho culture (Johansson et al. 2021). The study presented here is about male carpenters at a large Swedish construction company situated in two smaller towns in a rural region, which has a long history of mills and forestry. Sweden is an interesting context when studying gendered norms and values at

work because, despite having a gender-balanced work force with an equal share of women and men being involved in paid and unpaid work, the labor market is one of the most horizontally gender-segregated in Europe (Abrahamsson & Gonäs 2014; Keisu et al. 2021).

This study contributes to previous research about the construction sector by employing a gender perspective and highlighting men's voices about the workplace culture at sites. In this article we therefore subjectively explore homosocial practices and masculinities among carpenters and in which ways these dimensions interplay with and affect the workplace culture. Two construction sites, representing one large construction company established in a rural area of central Sweden, was included to explore contextual expressions of homosocial practices and workplace culture. The following two research questions were explored to gain a deeper understanding of this matter.

- In what ways are local homosocial practices among male construction workers constructed and manifested within the everyday work at Swedish construction sites?

- What are the implications of the identified homosocial practices for the construction of masculinities and workplace culture within Swedish construction sites?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical approach in this study is process-oriented, based on the interpretation that organizations and gender is something we do through social interactions and relations (Andersson et al. 2022; Korvajärvi 2011; West & Zimmerman 1987). This doing is on a general level surrounded by a gender order based on power relations where men are socially superior to women, manifested in a system where gender segregation and hierarchization come about in society and in work organizations (Hirdman 1988). The concept of homosociality is here interpreted as when men, based on this gender order, orient themselves towards other men (Holgersson 2013, Lindgren 1999) through different normative practices. Strong homosocial workplace cultures are often characterized by traditional values and hierarchies between men and by establishing superior relations to and distance from women. Further, heterosociality is conceptualized as when women orient themselves toward men in pursuit of being recognized and accepted (Holgersson, 2013; Lindgren, 1999). This means that women are also active in maintaining the gender order, through heterosocial practices. In this section we will also discuss masculinity, as a mean to understand homosocial practices and in what ways they operate in a male dominated organizations' workplaces (Galea & Chappell 2022).

Culture is a multifaceted concept within organizational studies, taking on different angles as symbolism (Gherardi 1994) or as influenced by different external and internal social phenomena (Smircich 1983). These two angles imply that organizations are processual and not instrumental, where the work culture is dependent on external forces as well as employees' assumptions, consciousness, and unconsciousness (Smircich 1983) in their actions. Schein (1996) highlights that culture is often underestimated when analyzing organizations, referring to culture as based on artifacts in the organization, shared norms, values, and assumptions among employees (Schein 2010). That organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990) is accordingly a part of the culture, e.g., based on conscious or unconscious shared ideas on differences between women and men in social status and abilities.

Research on homosocial communities highlights different ways in which men orient themselves toward each other in working life, often through practices that provide

status and recognition and thereby strengthen alliances (Holgersson 2006; Lindgren 1996). In a study on male-dominated start-up companies Pöllänen (2021) identified a gendered work culture characterized by hierarchical structures and power relations. Central to this culture was a homosociality, with male bonding practices. A tough jargon served both as a gatekeeping mechanism and a marker of belonging (Pöllänen, 2021). Homosocial practices at work and in work organizations are often context-dependent, because gendered values and norms differ between sectors, workplaces, and professions (Korvajärvi 2011; Author). This implies that what is considered as status bringing and gives recognition depends on work context and societal environment. A work culture, according to Miller (2004, p. 48), does not just include visible everyday practices, but also reinforcements through symbols and symbolic practices (Gherardi 1994). This underlines the understanding that gendered values in the surrounding society or various symbolic actions have an impact on the construction of the images of an ideal worker. In Miller's (2004) study, the iconic cowboy hero with underlying attributes of being courageous, individualistic, and being able to go where no one has been before constituted a gendered ideal in the Canadian oil industry.

A central concern when analyzing social interactions through a homosocial lens is to identify in which ways social relations and practices produce and reproduce exclusion from, or inclusion into, a group (Holgersson 2006; Martin 1996). Previous scholars have shown that to be included into a homosocial group, like a construction team, an individual must pass gatekeeping mechanisms (Acker 2006; Cottingham 2019). To pass such mechanisms usually requires being supportive of an idealized male norm and the gender hierarchy in the concerned organization, as well as fulfilling expectations of contributing with certain status-bringing characteristics (Lindgren 1996; Wahl 2014). This highlights how mechanisms of social exclusion and inclusion are interdependent, as the production of inclusion criteria leads to exclusion of those who do not meet these values. One concrete example is that heterosexuality often functions as a criterion for inclusion into the homosocial community among men at construction sites (Barnard & Dainty 2018). Another is how female carpenters, due to perceptions of idealized gendered bodies, cannot naturally live up to status-giving characteristics in a homosocial community, such as being physical strong, and thus risk exclusion. Such excluding homosocial practices can mean that women, and men who fall outside this norm, are not valued as skilled workers (Barnard & Dainty 2018; Watts 2007). Further, these expectations are underlined by a culture where those excluded from the group should not question a "maleish" workplace culture, but rather accept practices such as a tough and excluding sexist jargon (Watts 2007). These mechanisms can be explained by how strongly gendered and heterosexual norms operate at construction sites and indirectly exercise control over both women and men (Barnard & Dainty 2018; Wright 2016). This risks resulting in a workplace culture characterized by silence and acceptance of unfair treatment (Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson 2015), maintained by social alliances within the construction team and supported by implicit expectations such as being loyal and predictable as a team member (Galea & Chappell 2022). In turn, this is built on homosocial practices that aim to exercise control in different ways, both through formal and informal rules at work (Galea & Chappell 2022). Concrete examples of formal rules at sites are safety regulations, such as wearing protective clothing or reporting incidents. The informal rules that characterize homosociality are by nature a more difficult subject for outsiders, but can be described as serving as a social glue for the team. The use of sexist jargon is an example, which can be understood as an informal homosocial practice where individuals in the construction team reproduce heteronormative ideals and thus signal social stability and

predictability. In the construction sector, the ideal worker (Acker 2006) has historically been based on the image of a heterosexual, physically strong man who is both efficient and practical. Prevailing gendered norms and values in society at large and in the construction sector interplay and create the basis for this ideal, both through concrete and implicit practices. Accordingly, to be able to understand a homosocial workplace culture and its practices (Holgersson, 2013), gendered norms and values in the concerned context need to be identified on both societal and organizational levels.

Masculinities

We argue that understanding variations of masculinities (Connell 2014) is crucial for understanding how homosociality operates in organizations. Connell's (1995) view that masculinities are relational and hierarchical in relation to other gender identities is accordingly of interest for understanding homosocial practices in different contexts. An identified form of masculinity among working-class men is protest masculinity (Poynting et al. 1999; Connell 2005, p. 11), which inherits challenges to the hegemonic masculinity with the aim to tune down senses of powerlessness. In practice this can be about deliberately displaying physical strength and showing courage by exposing oneself to unnecessary risks (Hanna et al. 2020; Iacuone 2005). Recent scholars have identified a hybrid masculinity (Hanna et al. 2020) that incorporates elements of hegemonic masculinity alongside caring practices, which in Western societies are associated with femininity. Accordingly, hybrid masculinity enables men to create a strategic distance from a traditional and questioned hegemonic masculinity and still maintain gendered relations of power and inequality (Hanna et al. 2020).

The meaning of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as developed by Connell (1995), has changed over the years, as it is dependent on prevailing cultural ideals and institutional power. Further, the hegemony is collective and manifested in what Connell (1995) labeled as accepted strategies. This means that hegemony is based on strategies and practices that constitute a collective image on local, regional, or global levels (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As globalization colors our society and work organizations, it becomes crucial to empirically understand how the different levels interplay and affect gender orders and hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Further, hegemonic masculinity is closely related to heterosexual norms and not displaying feelings of sexual desire for a male community member, since homosexuality is perceived as threatening to the idealized collective hegemonic male norm (Connell 1995). Not reacting adversely to inappropriate jokes is another common practice for inclusion into homosocial communities, as well as displaying competency in valued work tasks (Martin 1996).

Method

To explore homosocial practices, masculinities, and the workplace culture among male workers at the studied construction sites, a qualitative approach was chosen along with process-oriented theories (Acker 1990; Gherardi 1994; Holgersson 2006). Accordingly, the study aimed for subjective knowledge based on men's voices about their jobs. Semi-structured interviews with men in different positions at two construction sites served as a tool to grasp this understanding of how they perceived the workplace culture and how they talked about daily work tasks at the sites.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at one large Swedish construction company (550 employees) and two of its construction sites, both situated in a rural area characterized by a long tradition of forestry and mills. The first site represents the

construction of apartment buildings, and the second one the construction of an industrial building. Represented vocations among the interviewed employees are apprentices, carpenters, and site managers (Table 1).

The first site was rather small, representing a young, male-dominated workforce with elements of piecework wages in their work system. The second site was larger and represented a male-dominated and age-differentiated workforce not working according to a piecework wage system. Both construction sites had a high degree of in-house carpenters, employed by the construction company. This contrasts with the norm in the Swedish construction sector, where projects are increasingly staffed with temporarily employed workers and subcontractors (Ahlstrand 2022).

Semi-structured interviews

The recruitment of interviewees was based on the main criteria of having an active role at the site and being employed by the company. The apprentices, carpenters, safety representatives, and site management were in line with these criteria. Although the site managers were not carpenters, they had an active role at the sites, and the majority had worked as carpenters in the past. The study was limited to permanent staff only, since they worked together over an extended period and could thereby provide deeper reflections about working in the organization. Site managers and the HR director selected potential interviewees based on the stated criteria. Identified interviewees were individually contacted and informed about the study by the interviewing researcher and offered participation, which was voluntary and accepted by all.

In total, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted during autumn 2024 by one of the researchers (Table 1). The interviews were held in a separate office at each construction site and lasted 35– 80 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, hand notes were taken on statements and gestures considered to be of certain interest. Directly afterwards, these notes were expanded upon and formed the first analytic steps in terms of (i) familiarization with the data and (ii) informing the upcoming thematic coding process (Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun 2018).

The interview guide contained 28 questions separated into three topics; (i) views on their vocational role and their everyday working experience, (ii) questions centered on the workplace culture and (iii) views on gender equality. These topics were theoretically based and aimed at identifying characteristics of homosocial practices, the workplace culture and expressions of masculinities, as well as views on gender equality.

Table 1. The interviewed men's attributes and pseudonyms.

Position	*Construction Site*	*Age-Span*	*Employed year*	*Employed in Sector*	*Pseudonym*
Apprentice	*Small construction site*	*20–29*	*0–9*	*0–9*	*Benjamin*

Apprentice	*Small construction Site*	*20–29*	*0–9*	*0–9*	*William*
Health and safety representative	*Large construction site*	*50–65*	*20–29*	*40–49*	*Sten*
Health and safety representative	*Large construction Site*	*40–49*	*20–29*	*20–29*	*John*
Health and safety representative	*Small construction Site*	*20–29*	*10–19*	*10–19*	*Olof*
Site management	*Large construction Site*	*40–49*	*0–9*	*20–29*	*Niklas*
Site management	*Large construction Site*	*50–65*	*30–39*	*40–49*	*Sven*
Site management	*Small construction Site*	*40–49*	*0–9*	*20–29*	*Karl*
Site management	*Small construction Site*	*20–29*	*0–9*	*10–19*	*Mikael*
Carpenter	*Large construction Site*	*30–39*	*10–19*	*10–19*	*Balthasar*
Carpenter	*Large construction Site*	*30–39*	*20–29*	*20–29*	*Gustav*
Carpenter	*Large construction Site*	*50–65*	*10–19*	*30–39*	*Andreas*
Carpenter	*Large construction Site*	*30–39*	*0–9*	*10–19*	*Emil*
Carpenter	*Small construction Site*	*40–49*	*0–9*	*10–19*	*Rasmus*
Carpenter	*Small construction Site*	*30–39*	*0–9*	*20–30*	*Börje*

Carpenter	*Small construction Site*	*20–29*	*0–9*	*0–9*	*Peter*
Carpenter	*Small construction Site*	*20–29*	*0–9*	*0–9*	*Anton*

Analytic process

To enable a deeper understanding an abductive analysis was chosen, moving between reflections on previous research, the empirical content of the interview material, and the researchers' preunderstandings (Braun & Clarke 2006). The analysis started when transcribing the material verbatim and taking hand notes during this process. All transcriptions were read through individually by both researchers in search of recurring patterns, and with the aim to familiarize with the material. In the next phase, the two researchers discussed and compared identified patterns and transformed them into seven main themes (Table 2). NVivo Software Program 14 was used to structure the material into a template built on these seven main themes. The coding process consisted of reading each interview in detail and coding relevant text parts into the identified main themes. If necessary, sub-themes were constructed during this phase. Finally, the coded material was critically reviewed in close collaboration between the two researchers. The four final main themes included in this study are: models of explanation, hierarchies, homosociality, and values (Table 2).

The trustworthiness of the analysis was strengthened through working both individually and in close collaboration when analyzing the material. In addition, the analysis was confirmed by the practitioners in a joint workshop where the researchers' interpretations of the results were presented and discussed.

Table 2. A template visualizing four of the main themes and their content.

Main themes	Content descriptions (summary of sub-themes)
Models of explanations	Different explanations to why the sector is male dominated, and why it is hard to reach gender equality. These include individual and structural explanations and technology.
Hierarchies	Reflections on images of the ideal worker, status-bringing practices, authority, trust in colleagues.
Homosociality	How men working at construction sites socialize and relate to each other, and what implications these homosocial practices have for the workplace culture.
Values	Gendered assumptions, values, and norms at construction sites and in the sector at large. Reflections on desired attributes in a colleague.

Ethical considerations

The project here presented, including how the interviews have been conducted, the material analyzed and stored, has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-04858-01).

Voices from the construction sites

Values and models of explanations

The interviewees perceived their workplace culture as open and inclusive for everyone. It was highlighted that this inclusion had been based on displaying what was considered as the ideal male worker (Acker 2006; Connell 1995), but that this image had been toned down and nearly disappeared in recent years.

> If you were a builder in the 70s and 80s and were a girl, you were muscular and swore more than the men, roughly. … they (women) really radiated, like super macho. They had to be more macho than the macho guys. I think that has disappeared. It has completely disappeared. Now women can be women.
>
> (Sven, site management)

Many of the interviewed men confirmed that the “macho-culture” at sites was declining. The concept “macho-culture” referred to a workplace culture characterized by competition, sexual harassment, and a restraint of emotions, even though raising one's voice aggressively to colleagues was a permissible and applied practice. The shift toward what was, by the men, seen as a more inclusive workplace culture was linked to a welcomed decline in those “macho-culture” practices. Further, it was stated that technical improvements such as higher quality ergonomic hand tools, machines, and protective clothing indirectly made the workplace culture more inclusive. These improvements in tools had, according to the interviewees, evened out what was perceived as gendered strength differences and seen as a hindrance for women.

> Rumors say that you need to be big and strong, and able to handle heavy work. But there are so many tools today. I also think that people talk more in the industry now about how it actually suits both men and women.
>
> (Olof, safety representative)

However, there were still practices crucial to display for being included into the work community and being the ideal worker, such as showing a personal interest in construction work, being efficient, and having the capacity to find smart solutions to production problems. Workers interested in construction were perceived to be more likely to find these efficient and smart approaches, which was in turn considered to reduce the occurrence of work-related accidents. Even if it was argued that these attributes were not necessarily gendered, men were often described as more interested in construction work than women. The explanations for this were according to the interviewees to be found on both individual and societal levels (Connell &

Messerschmidt 2005). That is, an interest in construction was perceived as socialized at an early age, when boys were helping fathers at home in carpentry and construction work. Consequently, interest was seen as a private matter stemming from one's childhood and not only a professionally gained skill. The idea that interest could be cultivated at work through working as a carpenter in a construction team was not addressed. Accordingly, women were less likely to have this interest, since girls were not naturally trained in carpentry. These arguments were followed by the image that women were likelier to leave construction, since disinterested individuals were expected to exit from the vocation due to not having the motivation to withstand harsh working conditions.

> Then I know ... it might be about interest perhaps. Construction interests men more than women, in terms of what one is interested in. It has a lot to do with society and culture, how it reflects on people: what interests they develop.
>
> (Olof, safety representative)

However, the ongoing gender segregation (Hirdman, 1988) in the sector was perceived as worrying, since gender equality was expected to bring benefits for the workplace culture, such as more user-friendly tools, recruitment of the right type of women with an interest in construction work, and a safer and more social workplace culture at sites. When talking about recruitment and having the right competence profile, it was also highlighted that the most important parts of the construction sector's production and salary system are efficiency and the capability to meet deadlines.

> I just see it as wonderful: everything from women joining to foreigners, or new Swedes. ...And then it's mostly the macho culture, gradually – it has probably disappeared a lot, much because of that. Then this ... tools and such, I don't know. But that part I can feel directly that it ...
>
> (Andreas, carpenter)
>
> I think it becomes a nicer workplace and that as a girl you might think about slightly different things. [...] If there's something you haven't thought about. So, it's a bit different. Same, but different.
>
> (Karl, site manager)

Women and men were expected to bring with them partially different perspectives, which was a good thing as this could generate new solutions for solving complex tasks. Despite talking about these benefits, the male workers tended to be skeptical about formal gender equality investments, such as gender quotas, because they feared that individuals who were disinterested and not efficient enough could be recruited.

> ... this macho culture could certainly have disrupted the safety work. I think so. It probably disturbed there, a bit ... "Damn coward", do you understand what I mean?
>
> (Andreas, carpenter)

While some men did not see a clear link between the work environment and the workplace culture, Andreas and some others did. They meant that the homosocial culture (Holgersson 2013) had an impact on safety in everyday work, such as the

practice of viewing those who always wear safety helmets, despite the working task, as not being thick-skinned enough.

Homosocial practices and hierarchies

Several of the men claimed that the traditional rough homosocial workplace culture was downplayed in favor of a calmer and more inclusive one. These men opposed practices such as open competitiveness, patronizing bantering, and unwillingness to seek help from colleagues. Such behavior was seen as antisocial and rejected on the basis that it was against the interest of the entire construction site. Instead, carpenters need to be smart and capable of maintaining social relations within the construction team and perform their work tasks adequately. Several men emphasized that being aggressive toward colleagues was counterproductive and did not lead to a good workplace culture.

> Then I don't believe in the hard way, that you should stand and yell at people if they've done something wrong. […] Because if you start yelling, you must keep yelling. That's how it is. … and then they'll ignore everything I say.
>
> (Rasmus, carpenter)

For the older men, this was a recent development, as being hard and berating colleagues used to be a common practice into which they were socialized (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). It was also a site managers' view that practices such as being unpleasant and hard did not encourage their carpenters to follow instructions and work in a safe manner.

> I feel that if you try to be kind, you get more help. And it's teamwork. We need to have everyone onsite together. We all have the same goal, in a way. Even though it looks a bit different. We are building a house.
>
> (Karl, site management)

According to the site managers, kindness was important to get the workers to listen to instructions and perform their job in the expected manner. Karl also emphasized that everyone at the construction site shared a common goal and worked as a team. This view was shared by the carpenters, and some even argued that there was no status hierarchy in the team. They were equals and relied on each other.

While working at construction sites with strict and detailed safety policies, many interviewees argued that carpenters still ought to prioritize performing tasks quickly and effectively. In addition, they did not feel pressure from individual carpenters to work fast. Instead, it was argued that the most efficient approach was rigorous planning and reflection and thereby avoiding unexpected problems. The imperative of efficiency was argued to be due to the developing and the sequential nature of building, where different phases are dependent on each other and have an impact on the production process's fluency.

Practices such as taking big risks or being slow were seen as problematic, as these could deteriorate the building project and make it unprofitable. Accordingly, to complete tasks safely and on time was seen as an expression of solidarity to the construction team and as an expression of masculine identity (Paap 2006). But the men also stated

that the pressure to complete tasks on time could cause feelings of stress and carelessness at work, which in turn affected safety. Some of the older men expressed concern that younger carpenters had no incentives to work efficiently, since piece-work pay was not applied at that site. Further, the constant need to meet deadlines in the building process led some of the men to be skeptical about female carpenters. One of the clearest skeptics of gender equality at site was the safety representative Sten, who had worked in the sector for many years.

> There are men who are like women, so to speak. … Then there are girls who are big and strong, who can handle [the job]. But there are many … I had a girl there … I mean: a woman is a woman. If they come and pout their lips and stand out like this. It doesn't work. No muscles – "I can't do it!" It doesn't work. If it's cold, wet, and miserable outside and you have something … it affects everyone. Then you must run to get from point A to B as quickly as possible. You can't have someone slowing you down.
>
> (Sten, health and safety representative)

However, this open hostility toward women was rare amongst the men at the two construction sites. Instead, the picture was more nuanced, with workers believing that there were both pros and cons to women working as carpenters. Still, women working as carpenters was expressed as something futuristic, dependent on changes in practices and how work tasks were performed.

> But there are tasks that are incredibly heavy, which I also find very exhausting. […] Brutal, is what it is. And of course, if you generalize, women are less built and weaker – if you generalize. Now, I don't mean that everyone is. … It has an impact, it can have a negative impact on my work environment. I think instead that we should look at material choices and machines, try to work innovatively so that everyone can participate in the work. Ideally, I would like to see more women in the industry.
>
> (Emil, carpenter)

Emil supported a decent work environment for everyone and opposed gender segregation in the construction sector. Yet he believed that without ergonomic tools and planning, recruiting women could have consequences for the construction team's performance, since they were generally considered to be physically weaker.

Older, more experienced carpenters were appreciated by younger men for their knowledge and practical experience. This included knowledge about how to work efficiently and safely. Yet the younger men blamed older colleagues for their perceived inability to adapt to new social norms and technologies. For example, a traditional homosocial culture was blamed on the older men as they were considered to support traditional homosocial practices at work. For example, Gustav argued that older workers were less prone to openly discussing or expressing feelings at work.

> They are as they are. They were probably raised not to talk about feelings. …Yes, I think so. It's not often that two people in their 60s go up and give each other a hug at the construction site. It happens much more often among us who are younger, I think.

(Gustav, carpenter)

This statement highlights the divide between younger and older carpenters, where older men are seen as a “they,” separate from the younger “us” (Andersson 2003). In this also lays the idea that older men were less willing to change their habits concerning tool usage and attitudes towards gender equality.

> It's also a matter of habit, I would say. Some people find it harder to adapt. For me, it's not a problem, what it is. … It can be girls, it can be with foreign labor. Some are against it … but it's also a transition that has happened more and more.
>
> (Balthasar, carpenter)
>
> When I started – I don't think there were any girls. There was no foreign labor either. So that has also come over the years. But it's probably more of the older ones, I would say, that it's a harder transition. […] I think we younger ones, we were more raised with this too. It's more in our generation. We are more used to it. It's more everyday for us.
>
> (Balthasar, carpenter)

Accordingly, the younger men in this case perceived themselves as more adaptable to new norms. Nevertheless, it was underlined that it was important to maintain social relations with the older carpenters.

> Yes, of course there are those you listen to more. Depending on the experience one has in the industry, those who are older and have seen and done more – you listen to them more because they have more experience, generally.
>
> (Olof, safety representative)

Olof associated experience and age with each other and regarded older workers with respect, since the older ones provided younger men with advice on how to perform different work tasks.

Summary of results

Traditional homosocial workplace culture practices at the two sites were perceived by the men to be declining, partly due to technical improvements making physical strength and risk taking valued as less important. Competitiveness as work practice was not prominent; instead mutual interdependence and loyalty were seen as important for the construction team and the workplace culture.

Practices such as holding an interest in carpentry and having the ability to be efficient were seen as reserved for men and served as explanations for gender-segregated construction sites. Further, there was a contradiction concerning how age was valued among the men. Being an older and experienced carpenter was regarded as an asset in the workplace, while simultaneously embodying a latent resistance to change within the prevailing workplace culture.

Discussion

Several homosocial practices that serve as both doing the job in a perceived ideal manner and entrance tickets to the team community (Arxer 2011) are here identified.

In the following we will discuss these practices in relation to the workplace culture and how they in different ways interplay with different forms of masculinities (Christofidou 2021; Lindgren 1996).

The traditional character of the ideal worker (Acker 2006; Kelly et al. 2010; Author) including practices such as strength, competitiveness and taking risks was downplayed by, above all, the younger men in this study. The subjective explanation provided by these men was that technical development had contributed with more user-friendly hand tools and machines, which made such traits less important for doing a safe and good job. This change was followed by a redefinition of competence to include new status-referring practices (Lindgren 1996), such as having an interest in construction, be efficient and experienced. Further, the gender segregation in the sector was not explained as being due to physical differences between the sexes. Instead, the importance of men's ability to be efficient and work smart were highlighted as prioritized and status-bringing practices. These findings confirm Holgersson's (2013) study where redefining competence was identified as a practice that contributes to manifesting a homosocial community when it is exposed to external threats, which in this case was bringing in women working as carpenters. This kind of practice is closely interwoven into segregation processes between men and women, as discussed by Hirdman (1988), in terms of a social systems that separate women and men from one another. Further, there were other homosocial practices that were redefined due to a wish to tone down traditional expectations such as enduring physical pain and a tough jargon (Paap 2006). This implies a homosocial workplace culture where derogatory language as well as careless and risky behavior were regarded as undesirable practices. These findings are comparable to Sommerville and Abrahamson's (2007) study of masculinities in a mine, where the workers rejected masculine identity expressions that could risk personal safety.

Like in Ely and Meyerson's (2010) study of oil rig workers, the male carpenters in this study did not perceive their workplace culture as penalizing the act of asking for advice or help. On the contrary, a traditional hegemonic (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and stoic approach was seen as not a very smart one, and thus asking colleagues in the construction team for help was encouraged in the workplace culture. The fact that construction, mining, and working on an oil rig are jobs where risks can lead to far-reaching consequences for the workers is one explanation why this downplaying takes place. Yet, the constant demand for efficiency and keeping to the developer's timeline was leading to work practices such as cutting corners and not putting safety first, followed by a workplace culture with increased risk of injuries and accidents during such situations. Accordingly, despite a de-emphasis on competitiveness and a hegemonic masculinity as being strong and enduring pain (Hanna et al., 2020), there remained expectations of being able to be efficient under time pressure. Efficiency can therefore be seen as a needed status-bringing practice, due to a production system with features like tight deadlines and sanctions if not delivering on time. This implies a hybrid masculinity (Arxer 2011; Hanna et al. 2020) where traditional homosocial practices were renegotiated and used in situations when work was under control and embraced when it required extra effort and keeping deadlines. Therefore, efficiency can also be seen as a practice that meant showing loyalty to one´s construction team (Paap 2006, p. 165–167). As such, working at a high pace paved the way for coming out on a good note in relation to the developer, which was extra important for those men working on a piecework system.

Practical experience was described as something cultivated over time and crucial for being able to work efficiently and solve complex tasks. Those types of skills and

knowledge were carried by experienced, older workers and highly valued in the construction team's homosocial community. Accordingly, experience in combination with age was admired by the younger and less experienced men, and seen as status-bringing (Lande 2013). In line with Lindgren's (1996) work, the act of helping younger team members can be understood as a homosocial practice, where this gesture can be seen as a symbolic gift. In the workplace culture of these construction sites, gifts could consist of helping a younger, less experienced worker with a complex task or, when necessary, keeping up the pace for the construction team by taking shortcuts and ignoring safety regulations. Such forms of symbolic enactment can serve to reinforce the prevailing work culture (Gherardi 1994; Gherardi & Poggio 2007), and in this particular context they contributed to the preservation of established traditions as being tough and strong. This indicates that being skilled and having much experience was a vital part of the image of the ideal worker (Acker 2006), although the situation reveals a subtle contradiction between the preservation of traditions—some of which may be considered undesirable—and the concurrent admiration received for practical experiences and skills. The latter, as older men, were perceived as more likely to engage in traditional homosocial practices and, in doing so, embodied a protest masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Poynting et al. 1999). These practices encompassed emotional restraint and a form of perseverance in challenging work tasks—such as refraining from using available tools—as well as resistance to adapting to new emerging social norms. In this way, the older working-class men exercised power (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) in relation to younger colleagues and site management. This was a situation that challenged the younger and less experienced carpenters to question age as a status-bringing practice at the construction site.

This indicates that masculinity and homosocial practices interplay and can be fractured across age categories. When studying the police force, Andersson (2003) identified that older workers may seek to maintain traditional homosocial practices, while younger workers seek to avoid being strongly integrated into groups with such practices. In our study a hybrid masculinity (Hanna et al. 2020) was taken on by the younger carpenters by distancing themselves from more traditional homosocial practices and instead being more explicitly caring and aware of potential risks. In the long run this means that social co-optation (Lindgren 1996), based only on what was considered as traditional homosocial practices, was not as prominent. Instead, practices associated with taking care of each other in the construction team had value, as those also inherited a form of loyalty to the social community. Accordingly, caring practices could be co-opted, as they contributed to safer team collaboration and thus became integrated into the workplace culture.

The development of new technologies often leads to new ways of working, for instance the implementation of digital technology in the mining industry (Abrahamsson et al. 2014). In our case, new and more user-friendly work tools and machines legitimized new forms of homosocial practices. Yet, practices that were in line with protest masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) had not completely faded away. One example is how collective images of women as not holding an interest or being experienced and strong enough to deliver on time justified the maintenance of traditional work practices. Accordingly, the homosocial practices and co-optation can here be described as being reinforced by images and values of others (women) outside the community (Holgersson 2013; Smircich,1983).

Further, the concept of an interest in construction was used both to maintain the vision of the vocation as open to everyone and to serve as a gatekeeping practice. Images of women can have implications for the work culture (Pöllänen 2021; Smircich, 1983) and

how masculinities at construction sites are constructed. One effect of a prevailing collective image of women was the idea of a workplace culture where everyone—if they had the right interest—could develop their competence (Harvey & Fisher 2015). In turn, this opened for a workplace culture where heterogeneity and a capacity to collaborate with everyone regardless of background was celebrated. Even if there were few women present at these construction sites, such ambiguous values empowered a hybrid masculinity (Arxer 2011; Hanna et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the expectation of showing an interest functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism for entry into the homosocial community. This finding differs from Dozier's (2019) and Paap's (2006) work where male carpenters, from a distance, regarded female colleagues as deviants or potential threats. Further, it supports the idea that when women are individualized through being present as colleagues at the site, the meaning of gender becomes less visible (Korvajärvi 1998). Still, the image of the capable female colleague was surrounded by the demands of having an interest in construction cultivated over time. Accordingly, women working as carpenters were not perceived as having the desirable interest due to not being socialized into handy work during their upbringing. This also served as an explanation for why women are not to be counted on when a construction project is under time pressure. In line with previous research, such gatekeeping mechanisms and practices are often grounded in images of women as not carrying the right competence (Author) and who can therefore not be integrated into the workplace culture without problems (Paap 2006). In terms of being "different" and not living up to the prevailing image of the ideal worker, women both posed external threats to, and also glued together, the homosocial community. Because the homogeneity of the workplace culture is strengthened by identifying recognition and what stands out in relation to an idealized composition of the team.

Inclusion into the homosocial workplace culture was accordingly based on practices that could replace downplayed hegemonic practices and at the same time keep valued practices such as loyalty and work safety. Further, tensions between hybrid and hegemonic masculinities in combination with an ambiguity concerning values about age can be interpreted as a homosocial workplace culture under transition. Nonetheless, the transition occurs within a workplace culture where new forms of status-bringing practices still work as a protecting shield for the homosocial community.

Conclusions

In this study we have explored male construction workers' voices about their workplace culture and how they talk about doing the job from the lens of homosociality and masculinity. Four different practices for co-optation into the homosocial community that appeared as status bringing, but also contradictory to each other, were identified. Namely, (i) showing an interest, (ii) being older and having extensive experience, (iii) having the ability to be efficient and take risks, and (iv) being caring and loyal. Notably, showing previously idealized practices such as physical strength and tough jargon were not highlighted as gluing the homosocial culture.

The contradictions and tensions emerged as an openness to a hybrid caring masculinity, while at the same time a hegemonic masculinity including demands for efficiency and taking risks in times of pressure was celebrated. This had implications for the workplace culture in terms of producing an ambiguity consisting of caring for each other and putting safety first if the construction work went smoothly, followed by a traditional unsafe workplace culture when a project was threatened by forces like

strict deadlines. The unsafe culture arose from a sense of mutual interdependency and loyalty, proven through taking risks for the benefit of the construction team and the developer. This meant that in times of crisis the traditional homosocial workplace culture took over, and that loyalty in terms of caring was interpreted differently depending on work situation, meaning that a hybrid masculinity was in certain situations negotiated within the homosocial community to also include hegemonic-like practices.

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