

# Berättelser om ungdomsgång i förorten Genus, makt, moral

av

**Susanne Liljeholm Hansson**

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## Abstract

Title: Narratives about youth gangs in the disadvantaged suburban neighbourhood.  
Gender, power, morality

Author: Susanne Liljeholm Hansson

Key words: Youth gangs, criminality, disadvantaged neighbourhood, codes of conduct, social constructionism, narrative analysis, interpretive repertoire, categorization, social exclusion, relative deprivation, moral differentiation, gender, positioning, hegemonic masculinity, protest masculinity, power relations

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This thesis concerns local actors' understandings of gangs and crime among adolescents in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Gothenburg, Sweden. The general aim is to investigate different interpretations of local realities and to study in which ways they are used, communicated and negotiated in a local context. The study has been conducted in neighbourhoods, which occasionally have been depicted as especially challenged with crime and hostile confrontations between local youth and legal authorities. The empirical material comprises field notes from observations and recorded and transcribed individual or group interviews with professionals (e.g. police officers, social workers, and youth centre staff) and adult as well as youth residents. From a general social constructionist perspective, this empirical material is subjected to a narrative analysis. Interpretive work and meaning making concerning human categorizations and balance of power between groups are fundamental analytical themes, and theoretical concepts such as social exclusion, relative deprivation and moral differentiation are used to analyse the data. Another main analytical theme is gender. In this respect, narrative formulas for constructing femininity, hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and protest masculinity are central concepts.

The examined narratives are to a large extent focused on problematic events and situations, in most cases with a group of teenage boys – “the gang in the local square” – placed in the centre of the story. These boys are blamed for a number of problematic behaviours such as misconduct, crime and riots. Other characters in the stories are the decent tenants and representatives for authorities, especially the police. Roles as victim, perpetrator – and perhaps rescuer and accomplice – are placed differently by the narrators. Teenage girls are in the research participants' stories often assigned rather inconspicuous and stereotypical roles. One chapter in the thesis addresses how the girls are portrayed in these stories and are positioned in relation to the boys as girlfriends, cheerleaders, nurturing mothers, saving angels, sisters and so on. In the interviews many participants tell about rules of conduct, which gang members (the Gang Code), and sometimes also inhabitants in general (the Street Code) have to follow. The analysis reveals that the “telling of the codes” is used in different ways, for example for self presentations, masculinity construction and in account production.

In the thesis three main interpretive repertoires are identified – *the normality oriented*, which is based on a notion that youth crime can be explained by negative background factors (in the family, peers, individual development or neighbourhood deficiencies) manifested as deviations, *the justice-oriented* one, where youth crime is regarded as socially excluded groups' external response to unfair treatment and unequal living conditions, and *the goal-oriented* repertoire, which focuses on the enticements, incentives and motives of criminality and on the profits of crime in terms of better economy, popularity, thrill and amusement. Depending on the interpretive repertoire, the situation and its problems linked can be defined in different ways, which alters the meaning of the story. By arranging the characters of their stories in different role sets, connecting them to certain meta-narratives and making factual claims about “how things really are”, the narrators express morality and try to make their own interpretations credible and accurate. The dissertation single out the importance of, in situations like this, putting oneself in a reflexive and listening position and of exposing one's personal and taken-for-granted interpretations to scrutiny and criticism from other perspectives.