"I want to be me. I want to be kul":
An anthropological study of Norwegian preteen girls
in the light of a presumed “disappearance” of childhood

By Mari Rysst

Dissertation submitted for partial fulfilment of the
Ph.D. degree, Faculty of Social Sciences, The
University of Oslo, 2008
Acknowledgements

This study is inspired by media debates in recent years on the subject of how young girls are dressing and acting “older than their age”. I felt the need to explore and focus the postulated “sexualisation” and “disappearance” of childhood. I am grateful to The Museum of Cultural History and The University of Oslo for granting me a scholarship to do this. I wish to thank my colleagues there for their inspiring seminars and Kjersti Larsen for her constructive advice and support particularly during the last phase of writing up.

Throughout my work with the study I have been fortunate enough to take part in two inspiring professional milieux. The administrative staff and the researchers at the National Institute of Consumer research (SIFO) have provided inspiration and support during and following my participation on the Nordic project “Vulnerability and Consumption in the Nordic Welfare States”. I am especially grateful to Elling Borgeraas and Runar Døving for letting me in on this project, and to SIFO for giving me time to finish the doctoral study. I also wish to thank other colleagues at SIFO for encouragement, comments and informative contributions, particularly Ragnhild Brusdal, Lisbet Berg, Ingun Grimstad Klepp, Ingrid Kjørstad, Jo Helle-Valle, Anita Borch, Lill Vramo, Ardis Storm-Mathisen, Dag Slettemeås and Pål Strandbakken.

I am very grateful to my supervisor at The Institute of Social anthropology of The University of Oslo, Signe Howell, for setting deadlines and giving invaluable professional advice throughout. She has provided inspiration, support and fruitful supervision all along. I also wish to thank Harald Beyer Broch and Hilde Lidén for constructive comments on the manuscript. Anne-Kathrine Brun Norbye and Bjørg Moen have contributed with their anthropological perspectives, and Bente Edlund as part of the “mature women’s PhD association”(!). Joanna Deacon has done an excellent job proof-reading the manuscript.

The teachers, parents and children at the two field sites were fundamental to this study. Without their positive attitudes and welcoming manner, the written stories would not have been possible. I thoroughly enjoyed the time spent with you all, and a special thanks to the girls and teachers at Østli.
And of course, I wish to thank my friends, my extended and close family, my own children and their father for their warm support and encouragement all the way. I hope each of you know just how much *your* smile, touch and support have meant and means to me. The discussions at home have informed and corrected many arguments, particularly with my youngest daughter and her friends being preteens when the field work started.

Oslo 12/2-2008

Mari Rysst
Chapter 6: The family context and girls’ presentations of self...........page 99
Norwegian gender stereotypes
Dress codes, distinction and styles
The ten year-old’s social classification system
The hierarchy of categories
Classification, peer power and materiality
Parental influence and gender construction
Interest in clothes
Intergenerational controversies concerning clothes

Conclusion

Part IV: Girls and material culture

Chapter 7: The girls’ thinking and living through things.................page 135
Dress, fashion and eroticized gazes
Hair
Underwear
Make-up
Clothes
Fashion for ten year-old girls
Shopping with Nina, Marit and Ida
“My own style”

Chapter 8: Childish, kul or sexy....................................................page 161
Shopping with Mitha, Farou and Samira
Non-western femininities
“Cool is the rule”
The meaning of kul
The meaning of ‘sexy’
Kul, sexy or sporty
Sexy is the rule?
Conclusion

Part V: Peer relationships

Chapter 9: The everyday practices of the girls...............................page 194
The social context of school lessons
In the classroom
Mealtime at Hudøy Island
In the assembly Hall
The social context of non-play
First day of school
Excursion in the woods
Walking to the swimming pool
The social contexts of play
The sub-context of Traditional play: Games with traditional names; Skipping; Ball games;
Commercial games;
The sub-context of Particular Play: In the schoolyard; School outdoors; Inside activities
Characteristics in ten year-old’s peer relationships
Conclusion
Chapter 10: Friendship and popularity........................................page 235
  The meaning of friendship
  “Birds of a feather flock together”
  Different femininities
  Proximity
  The “mystery” of popularity
  Popularity and peer power

Chapter 11: Consumption, belonging and integration.......................page 263
  Social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms
  “It costs money to be kul”
  Needs, wants and bicycles
  The birthday party
  Conclusion: The birthday party as an asset for popularity

Chapter 12: Girls, bodies and romance.........................................page 284
  Girls’ magazines, bodies and femininities
  The social context of romance
    During swimming lessons: “Fight; “Baywatch”; Walking back to school
    School settings: Morning gymnastics; The 4th grade Hudøy disco; The School disco; At the beach; Massage in the woods
    The practice of “going out together” (være sammen)
  Conclusion

Part VI: Girls and childhood past and present

Chapter 13: “I want to be kul”: The intergenerational gap of interpretation........................................page 323
  Non-western childhoods
    Age-related (hetero-) sexuality
    Age-related clothing-fashion codes
  The intergenerational gap of interpretation
    Norwegian children’s sexual socialization and education
    The heterosexual male gaze reconsidered
  The story of the “arm bracelets”
  Conclusion

Chapter 14: Continuity and change ............................................page 352
  The sexualisation of childhood?
  New clothing-fashion codes?
  New femininities?
  New sexualities?

  Conclusion of the study..........................................................page 369

References....................................................................................page 371
List of illustrations: tables and diagrams

Paid, organised leisure activities among children at Østli..........................page 78
Paid, organised leisure activities among children at Vestdal.......................page 79
The children’s social classificatory system...........................................page 112
Model of overarching femininities.......................................................page 116
Distribution of Barbie and Bratz dolls at the two field sites.....................page 173
The girls’ experience-near conceptualization of “being kul”......................page 174
The girls’ notion of “being sexy” .......................................................page 177
The girls’ notion of “friendship” ......................................................page 240
The girls’ understanding of “popularity” ..............................................page 256
Distribution of popular material objects at Østli.................................page 270
Distribution of popular material objects at Vestdal................................page 271
The girls’ understanding of a “kul birthday party”................................page 283
The girls’ understanding of “Romance” over time ................................page 318
The thirteen years’ old understanding of “being kul” ............................page 344
Part I: Introduction
Chapter 1: Childhood and young girls

The claim that childhood has been lost has been one of the most popular laments of the closing years of the twentieth century. It is a lament that has echoed across a whole range of social domains – in the family, in the school, in politics, and perhaps above all in the media (Buckingham 2000:3).

The theme and research questions

This study aims to explore gender constructions, sexuality and peer relationships among preteen Norwegian girls in the light of a presumed “disappearance” of childhood. The focus is on whether girls’ everyday lives are affected by what is currently expressed as the “sexualisation of childhood”. The sexualization of childhood forms part of the wider preoccupation that “childhood” is disappearing, as inferred by the above quotation. The concern can be put down to a profound fear that preteen children are acquiring knowledge about adult sexuality “before their time”. In Norway, as in many other western societies, there is a tendency to think in developmental terms of children as “becoming” adults (see Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Engelstad 1987, Kampmann 2003). This implies maintaining a clear distinction between the worlds of children and older people, particularly with regard to activities associated with sexuality and “older” presentations of self. Young girls are not supposed to engage in what are considered adult activities – including modes of dressing. Fashionable teenage-inspired clothes for girl-children challenge that notion. The idea is that a “pure” or “innocent” childhood, that is to say a childhood protected from the adult world of sex, violence and drugs, will disappear if the child/adult barrier for activities relating to sex, drugs and violence is violated (see Cunningham 1995, Davidson 2005, Wyness 2000, 2006). The sexualisation of childhood thus implies the disappearance and deconstruction of a “pure” childhood, not childhood as such.¹

Understanding children and childhood in developmental terms has so far meant that children have to be protected from the “evils” of adult society (sex, drugs and violence) in order to become healthy adults. In particular, the positive potential of children can only be realized if they are not “spoiled” (too early) by the “impure”

¹ In other words, the “disappearance of childhood” is understood as the disappearance of “the pure and innocent” childhood, not of childhood itself.
adult world. In this lies a moral paradox: The ideal, pure childhood is not to involve a preparation for what children will inevitably be confronted with as youths and adults. The paradox is historically and culturally specific, having its roots in the Enlightenment and Rousseau’s perception of children as “pure” or “innocent” (Ariés 1962, James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Non-western societies do not necessarily share this conceptualization, which highlights childhood as socially constructed (Ariés 1962).

My research is inspired by this paradox and provides empirical examples from the everyday life of preteen girls from the western cultural hemisphere, or more precisely from one of the Nordic countries.

The ‘Sexualisation of childhood’ implies that children learn about adult sexuality before their time. I will explore to what extent the sexualisation of childhood is experienced by Norwegian preteen girls (and to a lesser degree boys) and in which ways, with which consequences. The overall conclusion is that current Norwegian childhoods are not innocent regarding sexuality, but I will differentiate between junior and older/senior sexuality.

Norwegian childhoods include aspects of both junior and older/senior sexuality depending on the situations and social contexts the girl (or boy) engages in. Most importantly, the research shows that junior sexuality dominates young girls’ peer and romantic relationships in much the same way as in previous generations.

---

2 Barrie Thorne highlights the issue in the following quotation:

Our culture organizes the contrast between “child” and “adult” (“teen” vacillates between these major age categories) around a series of dualisms: irresponsible/responsible; dependent/autonomous; play/work; asexual/sexual. The last is particularly charged and increasingly contested. As a culture we have been invested in the notion of childhood innocence and the belief that children should be kept apart from sexual knowledge and action (Thorne 2003:154).

As will be shown below, reactions in Norwegian mass media suggest that Thorne’s interpretation from the US resonates with the situation in Norway.

3 As such, societies differ as to what is perceived as the “good” childhood, if they reflect on childhood at all. In Norway the good childhood (den gode barndom) consists of the possibility for lots of spontaneous play, particularly outdoors in “fresh” air. It also includes sports and child-like activities with different kinds of toys (Hollos 1974, Gullestad 1996, 1997, Klepp 2006, Lidén 2000). James, Jenks and Prout (1998), paraphrasing Ennew, express a similar view:

In the twentieth century….Western childhood has become a period in the life course characterised by social dependency, asexuality, and the obligation to be happy, with children having the right to protection and training but no social or personal autonomy (James et al. 1998:62).

4 The concepts are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
The project has emerged from different parallel experiences in 2001. The starting point concerns me as a mother out shopping clothes for my then seven year-old daughter, when, to my dismay, I mostly found clothes which imitated the teenage look. My little girl was not about to wear tight jeans and short tops, nor black glossy miniskirts, I told myself. I was deeply annoyed about what seemed to be mainstream fashion for girls, a fashion aimed more at producing the “cool” teenage girl than the traditional “innocent” or “childish” girl. I still wanted my daughter to look like a girl-child, a desire I shared with many Norwegian mothers (see Klepp & Storm-Mathisen 2005). My reactions illustrate common Norwegian values concerning young girls, which I soon found presented in the media with fervour close to moral panic.

Norwegian newspapers and other media reported with anxiety that young boys and girls were dressing and acting as if they were “older than their age” (for instance Dagbladet Magasinet 24/1-2001). This concern was particularly directed at the new clothing-fashion codes for young girls, depicting eroticism rather than chastity (see Davis 1992). Some Norwegian feminists argued that the “connection between fashion and sex is apparent from the time the girl-children are very small. Five year-olds look like small pop stars” (Dagbladet Magasinet 24/1-2001, my translation). The year before, the Norwegian Minister of Family Affairs, Laila Dåvøy, had made Lindex, a leading low-price chain shop on clothes, withdraw small bras for girls from the market. That same year the distribution of a school catalogue for sweaters was stopped because it showed two girls in sexy poses:

From the catalogue

The next issue of the catalogue was free of such advertisements. The Norwegian children’s Ombudsperson (Barneombud) also expressed concern about sexuality and young girls and boys:
The heavy focus on sexuality and the body that is aimed at ever younger age groups, is upsetting. Repeated appeals to marketing agencies have not led to identifiable improvement. Therefore the children’s Ombud calls for a debate and political efforts in order to combat the negative influences this industry is having on children and young people (Barneombudet 2001:69, my translation).

In light of this concern, the voice of the children’s Ombud is often heard in the media. Indications of the sexualisation of childhood have also regularly mobilised Norwegian politicians and feminists. In 2004, bras and string briefs for young girls appeared again in some shops and were withdrawn from the market. In March 2005 the Norwegian Minister of Family affairs again made leading shops/chain stores withdraw baby bikinis from their shops: “It is the exact copies of grown women’s bras that are the worst. This is children in adult women’s clothes, a fact that changes childhood into something different than it is” (Dåvøy in Verdens Gang 31/3-2005, my translation, emphasis added):

Dåvøy does not want very young girls to wear clothes meant for women, indicating that the boundary between childhood and adulthood is to be protected. A similar case came up in February 2006, when Cubus (another low-price clothes chain) was criticised for selling underwear tops to three year-old girls, which was interpreted as sexualising young girls and “breaking down the boundary between adult women and children” (Verdens Gang, 10/2-2006, my translation).

---

5 The Ombudsperson is an independent branch of the official governmental bureaucracy. Norway was the first country in the world to establish an Ombud for children in 1981. Today there are 67 of their kind in the world (Dagbladet Magasinet 26/8-2006). Their aim is to encourage children to express their views on relevant issues in their lives and to make sure that children’s voices are heard (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann 2004). During its 25 years of existence, the Children’s Ombud has fronted issues such as child abuse, systematic harassment and bullying (mobbing), sexual abuse, video violence, unsafe school milieus and roads etc. Brembeck, Johansson and Kampmann (2004) suggest that the “ombud” institution illustrates the Nordic emphasis on equality, in that individual rights are also given to children, and not only adults (people above 18 years of age).
This fear of the disappearance of childhood exists not only in Norway, but in many western societies such as the UK and the US. Emma Renold reports a similar case as above from Britain, in which “a tabloid campaign (The Sun) successfully halted the selling of ‘sexy’ underwear to preteen girls, from thongs and padded bras to t-shirts inscribed with ‘Little Miss Naughty’ motifs” (Renold 2005:23). Likewise, the following quotation from Daniel Thomas Cook and Susan Kaiser from the US is a suitable introduction to the themes to be discussed in my study:

What remains unresolved in the history of this age range for girls is the ambivalence and anxiety regarding sexual innocence and agency. The subteen, preteen and contemporary Tween seem to encode anticipatory statuses and identities to be acted out in the present, all the while preparing the ground for entry into a particular articulation of heterosexual female culture. They represent a coupling of everyday anxieties and pleasures with cultural discourses that blur age boundaries while also (strategically and commercially) aiming to define them. In this way, middle girlhood has increasingly become a favoured political site for the understanding of femininity, for discourses about the vulnerability and “lost childhoods” and for locating some of the evils of the consumer marketplace (Cook & Kaiser 2004:223, emphasis added).

As will be shown, I discuss in my project most of the issues introduced by Cook and Kaiser, particularly issues concerning ambivalence and anxiety related to young girls’ (hetero-) sexuality. Such issues regularly front Norwegian newspapers and other media. The focus is primarily on young girls because of the greater media coverage they receive due to the greater fear and anxiety concerning their sexuality both as subjects and objects. In other words, the disappearance of childhood is based on the assumption that a collapse of boundaries between the categories of adults and children is imminent. However, this collapse is understood to have highly gendered consequences: It is first and foremost girls that are to be protected from growing up too soon, and particularly white, middle-class girls (Renold 2005, Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford 2003, Cook & Kaiser 2004, Walkerdine 1997, Cherland 2005). 6 To my

---

6 The issue of “innocence” and young girls and boys has many ramifications connected to race, class and gender. Gary Cross discusses innocence in relation to the consumer society, which is of special relevance for my study. He starts with the notion of “sheltered innocence”, introduced by Locke in the 17th century, which is based on the image of the “pure” child, born as a blank slate. The idea of sheltered innocence is central to the modern idea of the good childhood, in that children are to be protected from the “evils” of adult society (violence, drugs and sex). The pure, innocent child is thus a child who has no (or little) experience and knowledge of the above “evils”, a situation where the boundary between the worlds of adults and children is clear. Cross argues, however, that innocence as “wondrous desire” is in the process of taking over the dominance of sheltered innocence. Wondrous desire has its origin within the family, in the emotional needs of parents amused by their children’s naïve and spontaneous joy at their encounter with the world. Through this children bring emotional satisfaction to parents (Cross 2004:14). Cross argues that during the last hundred years the child’s position in the family has changed from being a producer to becoming a consumer and parent “pleaser”. Cross is not the only one who points at the emotional needs children have increasingly
knowledge, when preteen boys are focused in the media, it does not concern sexuality, but rather drugs and violence. This is the view of Barrie Thorne who suggests from the US:

…in our culture even at a young age, girls are sexualized more than boys, and female sexuality, particularly when “out of place” or actively associated with children, connotes danger and endangerment (Thorne 2003:75-76).

The reactions in the media in Norway may be understood as illustrations of similar ambivalence and anxiety surrounding young girls’ sexuality. Public anxiety about lost childhoods, however, is not new. Cook and Kaiser cite an article in Life from 1962:

“Boys and girls: too old too soon” reads the headlines of a magazine article. It features white middle-class girls, about 11 and 12 years of age, shown wearing make-up, getting their hair done and “making out” with boys on their bedroom floors. They are preoccupied with being popular. The article matches a concern for these girls’ behaviour with a moral outrage directed at parents who appear to be at best indifferent to, and at worst encouraging of, the apparent rush to act and be “older” (Cook & Kaiser 2004, emphasis added).

This quote shows that preteen children already in 1962 were considered as acting “older than their age”. The authors also suggest that the youth’s behaviour must be understood with reference to whatever kind of style that provides popularity among themselves. This is also a recurrent theme throughout my study. The above-mentioned study shows that cultural ideas for acceptable presentations of self for preteen girls have been debated at least since the 1960’s. Nevertheless, the traditional construction of femininities consisting of young girls being sweet, innocent and child-like has never disappeared. Or is this what is happening today? It is a fact that fashion for children has been gendered for a long time, often blue for boys and pink for girls and only dresses for girls (Kaiser & Huun 2002, Davis 1992, Entwistle 2000). It is also a fact that, during the last ten years or so, these fashions and new clothing codes have increasingly mimicked the cool and sexy look of teenage culture, with girls showing more body and bare skin than previously (Isachsen 1994, Cook 2004, Klepp & Storm-Mathisen 2005, Borg 2006). From being primarily a design inspired by chastity, heterosexual eroticism has gradually been introduced in young girls’ fashion. This has resulted in another fact, namely that preteen girls are inspired to dress like teenagers and to imitate these modes of

fulfilled for parents (see Ariés 1962, Coltrane 1998, Døving 2004, Zelizer 1985). In the following chapters I will use “sheltered” and “wondrous” innocence (innocence as wondrous desire) as suggested by Cross.
behaviour. The marketing industry and popular culture are the primary agents in this regard, and the focus is increasingly on “tweenagers” as a new consumer group.\(^7\)

Tweenagers are much debated in the so called “girlhood” studies emerging from feminist scholarship. In general, much girlhood research challenges the traditional view of young girls as sweet, innocent and presumably passive (see Phoenix 1997, McRobbie 1991, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (eds.) 2005, Walkerdine 1997, 2001, Harris 2004, 2005). As such, girlhood studies counterbalance and complicate the sexualisation of childhood issues, in that they also see empowerment and liberation in girls expressing and playing on their sexuality (see Walkerdine 1997, McRobbie 1994).\(^8\)

Put together, these experiences from Norway and the Euro-American interest in similar topics have motivated me to dig deeper and explore the following questions: Is the postulated sexualisation (and thereby disappearance) of (the pure) childhood actually taking place in Norway? If so, how do these processes reveal themselves in young girls’ (and boys’) everyday practices?

I understand the concept of “childhood” to mean the way in which girls and boys live their lives, not only as practice, but also in following with cultural ideas of the “ideal” or “good” childhood.\(^9\) The “Sexualisation of Childhood” denotes processes where adult conceptualisations of sex, sexuality and sexual signs and symbols permeate preadolescent children’s social contexts, (peer) relationships and sexual

---

\(^7\) This term was constructed by the marketing industry and used for primarily girls, aged 8-12 years. The Norwegian TV Documentary *Forbrukerinspektørene (FBI)* highlighted the phenomenon in the Winter of 2006. The “tweenie” is directly related to consumerism (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (eds.) 2005). As such, the notion of “tweenager” represents a relationship between gender and the consumer culture of relevance for the present study.

\(^8\) This may be interpreted as an expression of young feminist girl power, as in the following quotation: “We argue that it is a progression of feminism that younger ‘third-wave’ women (and men) are embracing girliness as well as power” (Baumgardner & Richards 2004: 59). Angela McRobbie, also argues for a “reappraisal of the pleasures of femininity” (McRobbie 1994:175-8). This implies that it is not evident that international feminist girlhood researchers share the Norwegian feminists’ concern about sexualized young girls cited at the beginning of this chapter.

\(^9\) Marianne Gullestad asserts that, ideally, one should never talk about “childhood”, but “childhoods”, because of the local and class based variations (Gullestad 1997). I agree, but use the conventional “childhood” and mark variations when that is relevant for the argument.
practices. This means that the processes observed concern children supposingly behaving as if they had an adult understanding of sexuality “under their skin”, and that this understanding presumably becomes apparent in their peer and romantic relationships. This approach asks for a discussion of the relationship between “junior” and “older/senior” sexualities, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but referred to throughout the study (see also Renold 2005).

Significantly, the question of the sexualisation of childhood should be seen in relation to existing and changing ideas of childhood in society. Therefore I understand the sexualisation of childhood to operate on two levels. The primary level is based in “experience-near” anthropology (Wikan 1991, Geertz 1983) and concerns how girls (boys) present, talk about and experience themselves and their peers as gendered persons and how they interact. This level also includes how they look and dress and which material items and activities they are interested and engaged in. The second level is the girls’ wider milieu, in which different forms of commercialism – such as television, magazines, films, fashion and pop culture – are manifested. This second level includes cultural ideas, for instance on sexuality, as well as of material items which the ten year-olds may or may not adopt in their gender constructions and social relationships. Included in this broader surrounding are different discourses on childhood/girlhood and young children which also encompass possible (hetero-) sexualized gazes. The relationship between these two levels is crucial – a relationship that may be considered to be dialectical.10

In order to explore to what extent, in what way and with what consequences the sexualisation of childhood may exist in the Norwegian preteen girls’ everyday lives, I have studied ten/eleven year-olds and what activities and interests dominate their lives. If a sexualisation of childhood is taking place, the girls’ and boys’ activities and interests will bring this to the fore in one way or another, particularly in mixed-gender activities and in the context of romantic relationships. Therefore my methodological approach has been to engage in children’s everyday practices

---

10 In this study I understand “dialectical” to mean a dynamic, processual relationship between phenomena which has the potential of modifying or changing the phenomena. As such, it reflects the dynamic in the Hegelian dialectic: thesis – anti-thesis – synthesis without necessarily referring to a relationship between oppositions (see Furst 1995).
focusing on aspects of socialisation, gender construction and same-sex and cross-sex peer relationships. By doing “on – and – off” participant observation over a two year period, primarily in two school settings in eastern (Østli) and western (Vestdal) Oslo, I have got to know 71 preteen children of both sexes (40 girls and 31 boys). Some of them I got to know better than others, and the girls better than boys. At the field site in eastern Oslo, about half the children were of non-western cultural backgrounds, which introduced additional challenges and dimensions to the analysis, for instance concerning “ethnicity”. For “ethnicity” to be a relevant theme, however, it demands that people identify with separate groups that are experienced and defined as different both from inside and outside the group. Or in the words of Thomas Hylland Eriksen:

For ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other as being culturally different from themselves. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no ethnicity, for ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group (Eriksen 1993:12).

This experience of a “difference that makes a difference” (Bateson 1973) only emerges in some kind of interaction, for instance when girls wearing hijab and shalwar khamis interact with western-fashion oriented girls of Norwegian origin in the contexts of non-play and play. The study will include discussions of how girls of different socio-cultural backgrounds construct femininities in relation to each other and suggests how this intersects with gender, age, sexuality and class.

In contrast to Østli, the western field site is only comprised of children and adults of Norwegian origin. As the main fieldwork was done at Østli, what happened there forms the core of the study. Events at Vestdal are used for the purpose of comparison and in order to highlight important issues related to the intersection of

---

11 It is important to distinguish between western fashion and fashion elsewhere. Hijabs and other “traditional” garments are also part of a fashion system, but it is different from the western one. Among the girls in my study, it is the western fashion systems that are referred to when I use the terms “fashionable” and “fashion-oriented” girls.

12 In order to introduce a way of classifying the children in my study that may serve integration and go beyond the more conventional categories “ethnic-minority” and “ethnic-Norwegian”, I understand all the children as “Norwegian”. I believe this may stimulate a more egalitarian way of thinking on children and adults with different socio-cultural backgrounds. I do this because most of the children in my research are born in Norway and all go to a Norwegian school which communicates in Norwegian. The children classify each other as utlending (foreigner) or brun (brown) and norsk (Norwegian) or hvit (white) (see Chapter 6). I classify the children according to the terms “non-western” and “Norwegian” background/origin often in combination with “socio-cultural” differences. Of interest is how particular socio-cultural reference frames and understandings influence aspects of gender construction and peer relationships. I thus prefer to use the terms “ethnic” and “ethnicity” as aspects of a relationship as defined by Eriksen above, not as parts of classificatory categories.
gender, class, socio-cultural background, age and sexuality. The field sites and their people are described in detail in Chapter 4.

As a consequence of the debates in the media and the fashion for girls I observed in magazines and shops, combined with some personal observations of teenager-like young girls, I expected to find many of them when I first entered the school yard at Østli in May 2002. I was disappointed. Among the girls in the 4th and the 5th grades (nine to eleven year-olds) not one had the teenage sexy look foreshadowed in the newspapers and other media. I saw tendencies and symbols of teenage identification, but also many traditional games and play activities. In my field notes from the first weeks, which included a day of outdoor activities, I wrote: "The girls and boys run about playing cops and robbers, building huts, and playing games like Mummies and Daddies. Where are all the teenage-like girls envisaged by the media?"

After the fieldwork is completed these first impressions still hold. I have not, however, changed the main research questions as a result of my experiences in the field. On the contrary, in the following chapters I argue that, despite the heavy stress on older/senior (hetero-) sexuality in the media, advertising, popular culture and through these sources also in children’s contexts such as sports and school settings, the girls (and boys) I got to know have no older sexuality “under their skin”. This means that the opposite sex and romantic relationships of the girls and boys included in this study are dominated by child-like or junior (hetero-) sexualities and different forms of traditional play and sport activities. The chapters will elucidate the complexity in the relationships between the girls’ presentation of self and the different social contexts they engage in. This complexity makes it impossible to answer a simple “yes” or “no” as to whether the sexualisation of childhood is occurring. The answer is rather “yes” and “no” depending on the events and social contexts involved.

As already indicated, I have chosen to discuss questions about an assumed sexualisation of childhood by focusing on different aspects of socialisation, gender construction and peer relationships with a leading interest on the intersection of
gender, age, sexuality, class and socio-cultural background. In the following chapters I will also discuss the following related questions: In what ways are girls socialised and engaged in the construction of gender? How does this relate to different aspects of commercialised culture, particularly the fashion industry, popular culture and sporting contexts? What do girls and boys play and engage in, and how do they relate to one another in different social contexts? How do they understand their own and their peers’ bodily representations, and finally, is there a congruence or gap between their subjective understanding and the interpretation made by seniors?

The chosen theoretical concepts and perspectives in the coming chapters aim to resonate with “the natives’ points of view”, or more precisely, with my interpretation of the girls’ and boys’ “experience-near” understandings of gendered persons, relationships and events. As a consequence the study argues that gender emerges from the anatomical body as male and female, and is further constructed as femininities and masculinities being more or less relevant in various forms of relationships, interactions and social contexts. However, femininities and masculinities cannot be approached isolated from each other: “the forms of femininity taken up in girls’ friendships cannot be sequestered from how girls experience boys and masculinity” (Hey 1997: 72). As such, what does “doing” girl and femininities actually mean? In an attempt to go beyond gender stereotypes, I take as a point of departure that a person with a female body that experiences herself as a girl, “does” girl or “femininities” and one with a male body “does” boy or “masculinities”. I discuss this theoretical position in detail in Chapter 2. One central argument in my study is that ten year-old girls construct fashionable and kul femininities without experiencing sexual symbols in fashion, clothes or bodies in the

---

13 In feminist and girlhood studies it is also common to study the intersection of “race” with the mentioned dimensions (see Walkerdine 2001, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (eds.) 2005). I do not find that relevant in my study, but I sometimes refer to skin colour as brun or hvit.

14 Clifford Geertz has taken the concepts from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. “An ‘experience-near’ concept is one that someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An ‘experience-distant’ concept is one that a specialist of some sort or another use to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims” (Geertz 1983: 57). In the present study all experience-near concepts, book titles and subsections will be written in italics, nothing else, such as kul (The Norwegian word for ‘cool’).

15 The concept is discussed in Chapter 2.
same manner as older people. I suggest this is primarily so because they have “unfinished” bodies and different sexual, cognitive and bodily experiences (Shilling 1993). Put another way, preteen girls’ “experiential structures” 15 (Rudie 2007) are different from those of adults which may lead to a discrepancy in how the same young girl’s bodily representation is understood, for instance as kul, sexy or maybe both. My approach to the study of gender encompasses the person and the body as both “being” and “becoming” and shows how the circuits and some options of femininity change in dialectical relationship with how the body matures and reaches puberty. This way of thinking is inspired by a developmental discourse because the empirical situation challenges me to do so. As such, this is a position that, as I will show, I share with both the girls themselves and their parents. The complexity of the relationship between maturing bodies and cultural practices constitutes the heart of the matter in an examination of a possible sexualisation of childhood, as the research will convey that the girls’ own understanding of clothing-fashion codes and sexuality change as they grow older. Their changing perceptions and experiences make them turn towards other cultural practices and may, even, inspire them to construct some new practices. 16

**Outline of the study**

The project consists of six parts (Introduction; Methodology; Girls and material culture; Peer relationships; Norwegian girlhood past and present) and fourteen chapters. Part I (Chapters 1 & 2) presents the themes and research questions to be discussed. Chapter 2 discusses the most important theoretical concepts and approaches to be applied and thus positions the study theoretically.

Part II (Chapters 3 & 4) presents the fieldwork and methodological challenges in addition to a presentation of the people the study is based on. Part III (Chapters 5 & 6) starts by discussing the relevance of family history, class and household economy

---

16 In my study, “practice” is often used synonymously with “activities”, but is inspired by theories of practice that emphasize agents, processes and how cultural production and reproduction takes place through interaction (Ortner 1984, Lidén 2000, Rudie 2007).
for the themes in the research. Chapter 5 continues with the presentation of the different most common organized paid activities the children engage in, family negotiations and gender models for “doing” girl and boy in the different social contexts. Chapter 6 presents and discusses Norwegian gender stereotypes, the children’s social classification system, the issues of peer power and hierarchy. It continues by focusing in detail on the relationship between parents and the girls concerning appearance and material items in construction of gender.

Part IV (Chapters 7 & 8) discusses how clothes and other material items found relevant are experienced and perceived by the girls in their doing of femininities. The chapter includes a description and analysis of a shopping trip with the most popular girls. Chapter 8 follows with a description of another shopping trip with some of the girls who aspire to inclusion among the popular. Then I present a preliminary concluding discussion of the ten year-olds understanding of the *kul*, related to the images of being “sexy” and sporting activities.

Part V (Chapters 9 & 10 & 11 &12) starts by describing in detail the most common everyday activities the children engage in, with emphasis on same and opposite-sex interactions in different social contexts, such as school lessons, forms of non-play and play. Chapter 10 discusses in more depth issues of friendship and particularly the “mysterious” phenomenon of popularity. Chapter 11 also discusses friendship relationships, but with an explicit focus on how cultural priorities and financial resources intersect in relation to some girls’ experience of belonging and integration in Norwegian society. The last chapter in Part V describes and discusses how femininities relate to popular culture and magazines. It presents a detailed analysis of the context of romance, how the children position themselves as girlfriends and boyfriends and how this practice is acted out.

The first chapter in the last part of the study, Part VI, concludes the discussion started in Chapter 8 of the girls’ understanding of the *kul* and the “sexy”, and how this relates to the understanding of seniors. It also presents sources in Norwegian children’s sexual socialisation and education. The final chapter in the study then answers the overarching research question on the sexualisation of childhood. Based
on the foregoing chapters, I then discuss possible new clothing-fashion codes; new femininities and sexualities, before I present an overall conclusion.
Chapter 2: Theoretical concepts and approaches

“Gender” event A, Hudøy Island

The eating routines at the summer camp Hudøy consist of three meals each day and are organised around six long tables with benches for the children to sit on. The children are free to organize the seating and to choose their seats at every meal. Already at the first meal it becomes evident that gender and friendship determine where they are seated. Tables for girls and tables for boys, two of each, one mixed for those who come too late for the same-sex tables. At one meal, Morten is sulking because there is no seat for him at the boys’ tables or by the mixed table; he has to sit with girls only. There is much activity caused by this, and Farou at the mixed table is asked to swap seats with Morten. She refuses, but Anthony says enthusiastically that “I’ll change seat with Morten!” Everybody laughs and says “typical Anthony, he always wants to be with the girls!” Morten and Anthony change places and the situation calms down. Anthony is the only boy in the 4th grade who explicitly expresses interest in and fascination for girls.

“Gender” event B, Hudøy Island

After taking a walk around in the area, I return to our house and find the children very excited, screaming and laughing outside. Mitha comes rushing towards me shouting: “Mari, Mari, Anthony and Akram are wearing mascara!! And now Christel is doing the same to Ivar and Tommy!” It is Christel who arranges the make-up, and the boys walk around with a feminine gait saying “I am a girl, I am girl!” “Come here!” Ida and Marit cry to the boys, “we’ll show you how to walk like a ‘berte’!” And the girls walk about, wriggle their hips, with their head high, flopping their wrist saying “Daa’a!” The boys follow, imitating them. The other children are screaming with laughter. After a while Anthony says he doesn’t want to be a girl anymore, and washes the make-up off. When that is done, he says, relieved “Now I am a boy again! Now I am a boy again!” Petter, who is one of the boys who often plays with the girls, observes the event and exclaims “I shall never, ever

17 The whole Østli School went to summer camp in the middle of June 2003.
18 A berte is a girl exposing extreme femininity; see Chapter 6 for a detailed description.
permit anyone to put make-up on me. I don’t want to be a girl!” (Extracts from chapter 9).

The above events are examples among many of the relevance of gender, or of being “girls” and “boys”, in the everyday lives of the ten year-old children I got to know. They are very aware of the expectations of being a girl or a boy - illustrating both cultural and peer norms connected to gender, which, from their points of view, emerge from the anatomically sexed body in continuous development and growth.

In this chapter I discuss the most important theoretical concepts and perspectives applied in my research. I follow Bryan S. Turner in his argumentation of “methodological pragmatism”: the fruitfulness of theoretical combination if it enriches the analysis at hand (Turner 1992: 57). A combination of approaches may also be called “theoretical complementarity” in that the interpretation of empirical situations may be enriched, or “thicker” in this manner (Geertz 1973). The following sections show how I have furnished my argumentation on girls, bodies and gender briefly introduced in the last chapter.

**Body, being and becoming**

The present study is particularly a study of girls and girls’ bodies much in the sense of “acting people are acting bodies” (see Shilling 1993). Susan Contratto argues for a perspective which situates girls’ (and boys’) bodies, a position of which I sympathize: ”The defining experience of adolescence is physical: puberty as an event and as a process is felt in the body in all sorts of complex ways” (Contratto 1994:374). The children in my study are approaching and experiencing puberty in varying degrees, which makes theorizing the physical body relevant for my research.

The sociological interest and study of the body has increased in the last decades as in other academic disciplines as well as in popular and consumer culture (Bengs 2000, see Davis 1997). Anthropological studies have described “native” bodies, both naked and adorned, because adornment often symbolises gender, age, position and kinship relationships. Bodily display in modern societies also illustrates gender,
wealth and life-style (Turner 1991, 1996). As such, the bodies of young girls, boys and family members at Vestdal tend to show a more affluent household economy than that at Østli. The colours and brands of the clothes they wear indicate class identity and class distinctions, to which I return in later chapters.

For the purpose of my research the relationship between the body, “being” and “becoming” is of special relevance because of the postulated relationship between maturing bodies and cultural practices. According to James et al. (1998) the thinking on children prior to Freud was dominated by a developmental discourse compressed in the argument that “children become future adults” (James et al. 1998: 17-19). Freud also introduced the importance of the retrospective childhood, in that all adults are bearers of their childhood, which affects them in varying ways (see also Gullestad 1996: 2, and Rudie 2007). In general, the study of children has often been in relation to both psychological and sociological theories of socialisation (Kampmann 2003). Although these differ, they have in common a focus on the child as becoming, not being. The becoming child is viewed as an incomplete adult, a being that is on its way to an adult world (James et al. 1998, Thorne 1993, Cook 2004), and is also a view widely shared among parents and children in the present study, as the following chapters will show. The sociological and anthropological research on children initiated during the 1990’s focus on children as agents, as active participants, interpreters and creators of their life worlds, which was termed a new

---

19 Bryan S. Turner, often referred to as the founding father of the sociology of the body (Bengs 2000), asserts that, in contrast to sociology, anthropology has a tradition of studying the body from the 19th Century and onwards (Turner 1991). According to Turner this is because the anthropological research interests centred on different bodily aspects: from the body in relation to ontology of Man, via human beings as viewed by Darwinism, and most importantly Marcel Mauss’ “Techniques of the Body” and Mary Douglas’ preoccupation with the body as a classificatory system (ibid.). Already in the 19th Century anthropologists were engaged in studies of bodies through exploring ritual, cosmology and social structure.

20 Chris Shilling identifies four main reasons for an increased interest in bodies: The rise of second wave feminism and particularly its focus on sexuality and the female reproductive cycle, contraception and abortion; the changing demographic pattern in Western societies (an ageing population); the rise of consumer culture where the body is both a commodity and a focus of consumption; and lastly, the new technological and medical advances which may change previous understandings of the “natural” body (Shilling 1993).

21 This image of the naturally developing child is rooted in the sub-discipline of developmental psychology. According to some authors, developmental psychology appropriated childhood as part of its domain (Kampmann 2003, Bråten 1998, James et al. 1998). It has thus dominated child research for two centuries. Central to psychological conceptualisations is the notion that children are “natural” or “biological”, as opposed to social phenomena, and that biology unavoidably leads to maturation (James et al. 1998).
paradigm of child research (Kampmann 2003, James et al. 1998, see also Berentzen 1980). My study conceptualizes children as agents and does not apply a “stage”-development way of thinking (Engelstad 1987, Bråten 1998, Butkatko & Daeher 1998). However, I acknowledge that physical bodies change with age and time, which has implications for how childhood sexuality is to be approached and analyzed. As such, I find theoretical perspectives that focus on the materiality of the body most interesting for the task at hand, of which Alan Prout is a relevant representative because of his criticism of how social constructionism approach children and the physical body.

In *The Body, Childhood and Society* (2000) Prout discusses both bodies and children. He writes:

> Whilst it (social constructionism) undoubtedly provided a necessary, useful and even essential counterpoint to biological reductionism, helping to create a conceptual space within which to think about the non-biological correlates of both the body and childhood, social constructionism has proved too narrow in its focus. The nub of the issue is the manner in which social constructionist accounts of childhood and the body tend to exclude (or at least de-emphasize) the possibility that social life has a material as well as a discursive (or representational) component. In contrast, the chapters in this volume show, in various ways, the possibility of apprehending **childhood bodies as both material and representational entities** (Prout 2000:1-2, emphasis added).

Put differently, Prout asserts that social constructionism does not take seriously the notion that human life and bodies also include materiality. In this he follows Shilling’s idea that the human body is socially and biologically unfinished at birth and develops in both aspects in the course of the life cycle (Shilling 1993, see also Shore 1996). Therefore he argues for viewing the child as both being **and** becoming.

For this purpose Prout draws on Latours’ concept of “hybrids”: Children are hybrids of culture and nature, their bodies are hybrids, just like social life in general. The concept of hybridity thus collapses the distinction between nature and culture: human bodies are both, which is the stance of my study as well. Bodies are constructed through an unending interaction of material and non-material resources (Prout 2000:15), which in my research most importantly includes the relationship between maturing bodies (“biology”) and cultural practices (“culture”). This relationship includes some sense of becoming because the body develops and grows
which is culturally interpreted and thus acted upon. As the following chapters will show, the ten year-old girls’ maturing bodies are understood to be dialectically related to cultural notions of sexuality and dress.

Body, sex and gender

The present study shows that empirically there is a strong relationship between sex and gender in that babies born with penises are classified as “boys” and those with vaginas as “girls” shortly after birth, which have consequences for how others relate to them from the very start (see Chapter 6). As such, gender is inscribed in babies’ bodies from the moment of birth and even before. The analytical distinction between sex and gender was established in the 1980’s and much argumentation followed (Moi 1996, Moore 1999). Stated briefly, the discussions varied as to if, or how sex related to gender in which anthropologists referred to ethnographic varieties to show that sex could never determine gender (Moore 1988, 1994, 1999). Judith Butler argues that “sex is as socially constructed as gender” (Midttun 2007:12, my translation), which has ramifications for the relationship of body, sex and gender in that the existence of material, anatomical bodies is undertheorized. This is why I don’t follow the post-structuralist approach of Butler on the body which I will return to soon. As such, I follow Toril Moi in that post-structuralist

---


23 Today, through ultra-sound screening, most parents seem to want to know the sex of their baby before birth. The sex of children seems in no way to be irrelevant (personal communication with midwife Liv Brun, Moss Helsestasjon).

24 Some babies are born androgynous, with variations of both male and female genitals. Usually these are operated and transformed into females, and raised as such. Later some of these experience themselves as boys in a female body (Almås & Benestad 2001).


26 For instance, Judith Butler collapses the relationship between sex and gender by asserting that “the distinction between sex and gender is no distinction at all” (Butler 1990: 7). In an interview in the Norwegian magazine Vagant she says she prefers to consider thoughts as movable (bevegelig) and of gender and identity as fluid and without a ‘core’ or essence (Midttun 2007:10). Likewise, she prefers to talk of the individual rather than ‘the woman’, and asserts that “the female gender identity – as the state of Israel – should never have been established” (ibid.). I find her way of thinking ‘good for thought’, but too experience-distant for my purposes in this research.

27 In a discussion of sex and gender it is worth noting that the Scandinavian languages have only one term for sex and gender, namely kön, kön (Danish, Swedish) and kjønn (Norwegian). For analytical purposes in Norwegian therefore, a distinction is made between biological kjønn (sex) and social kjønn (gender) (see Widerberg 1998). I do not oppose that sex is socially constructed through the terms used to describe the body. My point, however, is that a female and a male body are not (and probably never will be) described by the same terms because they are anatomically different.
theory on the body fails because of its conceptualizations of sex/gender as collapsed into each other. Moi holds that Butler’s books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) are “two intense attempts to make the sex/gender divide fit into post-structuralist theory” (Moi 1996:22).

The core of the matter is that feminist post-structuralist theory has no satisfactory answer as to how to integrate material (anatomically sexed) bodies when biological bodies only are understood as socially constructed (Moi 1996, Moore 1999, 2007, Bigwood 1991). In *Vagant* Butler explains her understanding of the materiality of the body:

In my thinking the body is material, but still constructed, and that is why it is part of culture, history and society. As such the body is concrete, material and historical. This again means that the body matter is not naturally given. Power produces materiality, a discursive materiality, just like performativity is discursive (Midttun 2007:13, my translation).

And later in the same magazine:

The theory of materiality that I work with is about materiality – matter – as an effect of power. I don’t consider materiality as something specific connected to a special body (ibid.).

I regard this way of thinking difficult to apply in analyzing materially sexed bodies; Butler has been criticized for losing the body for fear of essentialist critique (Bigwood 1991, see Furst 1995). According to Moi, the post-structuralist research results in works with a “fantastic level of abstraction without giving us the concrete, situated and material understanding of the body which these theoreticians declare their aim is” (Moi 1996: 54, my translation). Again I agree with Moi, and argue for an inclusion of the experiential material body in the study of gender. Therefore there exist two reasons why my study is only partly inspired by feminist post-structuralist theory. First, I find it necessary to integrate a better perspective on material bodies in order to answer the overarching research question on the sexualisation of childhood as defined in Chapter 1. This is because the sexualisation of childhood eventually includes “older/senior” heterosexual practices performed by persons with pre-pubescent bodies. Second, I find Butler’s understanding of the sexed body to be too abstract and experience-distant to how the girls and adults in

---

28 I emphasize “only” here, because I partly follow the conceptualization of socially constructed bodies. My position of bodies being culturally interpreted resembles it being socially constructed. The difference between my approach to bodies and that of Butler and other post-structuralists is that I include the body “matter” as a biological working entity by way of growth and maturation.
this study experience and talk about their own and other people’s bodies.²⁹ Her studies concern grown women, not young girls and children, which may inspire different ways of conceptualizing gender. The girls in my study experience their “growing” bodies related to their constructions of gender (“She has budding breasts but I have not, therefore she, and not I, can wear a bra”). I do not find Butler’s understanding of (sexed) bodies sufficiently grasps that empirical phenomenon, but her gender perspective have other fruitful potential which I return to soon.

In order to meet a possible critique of essentialism and to be able to grasp analytically intergenerational differences in the interpretation of young girls’ fashionably adorned bodies, I find the notion of the “ambiguous body” fruitful. This is because the experiential body is conceptualized as both subject and object, as elaborated by, among others, Elisabeth L. Furst (Furst 1995, see also Moore 1994, 2007). The issues of eroticized heterosexual male and female gazes are examples of bodies as objects, but not necessarily subjects.

Furst draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his conceptualization of the “irreducible ambiguity” (ureduserbare tvetydighet) of bodies (Furst 1995:24), arguing that “the body is never just an object, it must also be

²⁹ I find that Moi’s work on gender resonates with that of Henrietta Moore on gender and bodies with which I also sympathize. This is because of the latter’s argumentation in “Whatever happened to women and men” (1999) in which she holds that we should not give up on the sex/gender debate. The boundary is unstable but they cannot be collapsed into one another (ibid.). As Moi, she too argues for bodies being the site of gender studies (Moore 1999), but the two differ in that Moi does not take the sex/gender divide as point of departure, but goes “directly” to the experiential body (Moi 1996: 72).  
³⁰ Furst’s understanding of the body has much in common with the work of Moore. The latter is, like Butler, inspired by post-structuralism in her understanding of the (gendered) subject, but as should be clear by now, they diverge on how they understand the gendered body (Moore 2007). Butler understands this as fundamentally cultural, while Moore situates gender in the material body. In her books A passion for difference (1994) and particularly The subject of anthropology (2007), Moore presents a theory of the subject based on Lacan’s rereading of Freud’s psychoanalysis, feminist (post-structuralist) and anthropological theory. She puts much emphasis on desire and the working of the unconscious for understanding subjects and subjectivity, which will be slightly touched upon in my study (see Moore 2007).

³¹ Regarding the relationship between essentialism and social constructionism, I find the argumentation of Diane Richardson convincing and supportive: Although essentialism can usually be interpreted as implying a reductive or deterministic theoretical approach, the term essentialist is not unproblematic. As Diana Fuss (1990) and others have pointed out, essentialism and social constructionism, with which it is usually contrasted, are not two distinct and opposing positions. These are relative and not absolute terms (though I would suggest it might make more sense to talk of theories as being more or less essentialist than more or less constructionist), and it may be more helpful to think of a social constructionist/essentialist continuum along which theorists may be placed (Richardson 2000:53, emphasis added). This implies that essentialist “accusations” may be common and that many studies include some traits of essentialism. The present study is no exception.
understood as a subject, permeated by existence” (ibid.:24).  

In *Mat—et annet språk* (Food—another language) she too argues against the common post-structuralist anti-essentialist understanding of the body by holding that essentialism is avoided by the introduction of the term “ambiguity”. This is because living bodies are never just biology or objects; only a dead body is. Living bodies are subjects and objects at the same time: “When the body is understood as nature and culture, biology and consciousness, it can not be referred to as essentialism” (ibid.:48, my translation).  

The body is understood as a source of experience and subjectivity, and gender is viewed as located in the body. The reading of phenomenology by Furst highlights the embodied social agent as an individual that both is and has a body which is of relevance for the coming chapters (Furst 1995, Turner 1996). Of interest is how the individuals experience life events through their bodies (see also Bengs 2000).  

In the following I try to take the experiential body as point of origin in the discussions of gender construction and peer relationship. By “gender construction” I understand the process by which girls (and boys) construct themselves (or are constructed by others) as gendered subjects by different forms of “work” done on the body. I also include the sex/gender relationship because anatomical sex is a commonsensical and thus an experience-near concept of the children and adults I got to know. I need, however, to elaborate on the notion of the experiential body, which leads me over to first, a discussion of gender construction and then gendered bodies as situated in “experiential spaces”.

**Body, gender and relations**

*Doing gender*

When girls and boys construct gender, they do this in relation to other people, both peers and seniors. One of the influential new gender approaches developed during the 1980’s with relevance to my research, was to conceptualize gender as something

---

32 How to study and grasp other people’s body experiences is a complicated methodological issue, which I return to in Chapter 4.
persons do, discussed by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman in “Doing gender” (1987). They argue that “gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (ibid.:129). Their argument is that gender is “produced” and “reproduced” in recurring everyday interactions, resembling forms of routine, based on cultural expectations of how people categorized as “women” and “men” should present themselves and behave. They argue that gender is learnt in interaction by how behaviour is responded to by the other (ibid.). Their argumentation resembles that of “impression management”, although they do not use that term (Goffman 1992). The importance of West’s and Zimmerman’s work concerns both gender understood as process, and gender as relationally constructed.

Their way of thinking is developed further by Butler, who has had a special international and cross-disciplinary influence on gender studies through the deconstruction of categories and a conceptualization of gender as performativity generated in discursive practices, known as “performative gender theory” (Butler 1990, 1993, McCallum 2001, Moi 1996). As such, gender is created through discourse and is citated through repetitive performances which are regulated through compulsory heterosexuality, or a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990). Change in gender performativity comes about by unsuccessful citation, as a form of subversive strategy (ibid.). My study is inspired by Butler’s concept of gender performativity as a development of “doing gender”. The theory of performativity and other post-structuralist work have inspired queer theory, in which it is argued that there is no need for the concept of gender at all. In queer theory, gender is not the issue, but the way people live their sexuality, and the position has greatly influenced gender theorizing in the 21st century (Lorenzten 2006, Eng 2006, Moore 1999, 2007, Midttun 2007, Eriksen, Fagertun & Ødegaard 2007).

It is suggested that Butler’s critique of compulsory heterosexuality, or the heterosexual matrix have had a more widespread influence on the development of

---

33 Butler is much inspired by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva but also by Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. In addition I find some parallels to her thinking in the work of Goffman concerning “gender display” as a kind of performance (Goffman 1976, Butler 1990, 1993, see also Moi 1996, Moore 1999).

34 Butler is often considered as the “origin” of queer theory. The truth is that she wrote Gender Trouble (1990) in parallel with the start of the queer movement in the US at the beginning of the 1990’s. After the release of this book and Bodies that Matter (1993), these books have formed the backbone of much queer theorizing (Midttun 2007).
feminist theory than the theory of performativity (Midttun 2007, see also Renold 2005). 35 This matrix points to how power and patriarchal structures influence gender and identity constructions and is referred to throughout my research. In *Bodies that matter* (1993), Butler changes the term “heterosexual matrix” to “heterosexual hegemony” because she wanted to make it more malleable. 36 Many feminist youth researchers have shown how “compulsory heterosexuality” impact on gender relations among young people (see Griffin 1985, 1993, Lees 1986, 1993). My research is inspired by these studies and shows how heteronormativity organizes and influences Norwegian ten year-old girls’ gender construction and peer relationships (see also the section later on “junior” sexualities). 37 The dichotomous sex categories “girl” and “boy” are deeply internalized, which also concerns the notion of heterosexuality, indicated by the examples in the beginning of this chapter.

**Experiential structures and experiential spaces**

The way girls and boys construct and do gender is inspired by relationships and experiences in their everyday lives. Ingrid Rudie argues for a perspective on socialisation and gender construction as a lifelong history of personal experiences by combining theories of cognition, bodily practices, experience and sociality (Rudie 2007). Her interests concern as much continuity as change, issues which also are implied in the research questions of sexualisation and disappearance of childhood presented in Chapter 1. She understands cultural reproduction as occurring in a continuous intersection of existent structures and new experiences which demand creativity and decisions. These processes bring to light contrasts between easily changeable and more permanent phenomena in society (ibid.). Rudie argues that the gender systems include examples of slowly changeable cultural elements, which she previously has characterized with Gregory Bateson’s concept of “hard programming” (Rudie 1984:16). According to Rudie, the slow-changing

---

35 It is worth noting that West & Zimmerman discussed this in their mentioned article from 1987, by asking the question: “What is the relationship between doing gender and a culture’s prescription of ‘obligatory heterosexuality’?” In other words, Butler is not the origin of obligatory heterosexuality as an academic theme. Adrienne Rich probably introduced the term and the theme in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (Rich 1980). Radical feminists go so far as to claim that “heterosexuality is not, as it appears to be, masculinity-and-femininity in opposition: it is masculinity” (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson 2004:10, emphasis original). I don’t follow this extreme interpretation of heterosexuality, as the chapters will show.

36 [http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm](http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm) (21.08.07)

37 This does not necessarily imply that I take heterosexuality as “natural” or for granted (see Epstein, Flynn & Telford (2003) for a “queering” of heterosexuality, or Richardson (2000).
characteristics are particularly existent in gendered practices related to family and everyday life (Rudie 2007: 91). 38 These characteristics are internalized in children before language and reflexivity and become part of their personal “experiential structures” or incorporated bodily practices. As such, the ways the young girls in my study do gender reflects and are inspired by their experiential structures which relate continuously to the wider society and is formed by this relationship and participation in “experiential spaces”.

Rudie defines persons as “learners and bearers of culture – being formed in a lifelong process – when moving through different experiential spaces and acquiring relational and other competences” (Rudie 2007:91, my translation). I read this understanding to imply persons with experiential bodies (more on this on the next page). The person is a bearer of both cultural stability and new adaptability – or of both continuity and change – and is a “cultural formation that circulates in the world” (ibid.). Sociality is thus the core of socialisation. Related to the themes in my study, it concerns young girls and boys learning and experiencing “culture” by relating to persons and things in their surroundings and different social contexts, including how to construct and do gender. This perspective resonates with that of Prout mentioned earlier, that humans are “constructed through an unending

38 In a similar discussion on continuity and change of “psychological gender”, Nielsen and Rudberg (1993) differentiate between “gender identity” (“I am a woman and that is why I am as I am”) and “gendered subjectivity” (“I am me and I am as I am”) (ibid.: 119, my translations). The second presupposes the first and is directly related to cultural expectations and notions concerning doing femininity (or masculinity). On the other hand, gendered subjectivity concerns how the child becomes a subject through early socialisation processes, related to the achievement of autonomy and intimacy during childhood. The gendered subjectivity is developed through relationships to primary caregivers in family and kindergartens and is surely influenced by cultural notions on being a girl or a boy. Nielsen and Rudberg hold that the gender identity is more easily changed than the gendered subjectivity, which is more stable (ibid.). In other words, they argue that it is more difficult to change aspects of doing gender related to autonomy and intimacy learnt in early childhood than the widely shared cultural ideas related to gender identity as parts of the overall society. As such, their perspective harmonizes with that of Rudie’s (and Bateson’s) “hard programming”, and resembles reading gender as habitus (Bondevik & Rustad 2006).

39 The concept of “experiential structures” resembles Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” understood as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions………” (Bourdieu 1977: 82-83). I prefer to use the former because it is clear and complicated enough for my purposes. In addition I want to underline that I read the “structures” of this concept to not imply rigid, unchangeable structures, but rather incorporated experiences in a dialectical relationship of a person’s earlier experiences and new ones.
interaction of material and non-material resources” (Prout 2000:15), which also may be read to imply how gender is constructed.

Rudie conceptualizes “experience” by the concepts of body, space and relation (kropp, rom, relasjon) in the sense that bodies move in experiential spaces (erfaringsrom) and into social relations (Rudie 2007). She draws on Paul Connerton’s concepts of “inscribed” and particularly “incorporated” bodily practices (Connerton 1989), the latter resembling the dispositions of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.40 As did West & Zimmerman (1987), Rudie puts much emphasis on interaction. Relations are essential parts of a person’s primary experiences as they become incorporated before language and reflection. A newborn baby soon communicates these relations as bodily signs and sociality. As such, relations become materially based, which has implications for how Rudie studies gender. I read her to understand gender as an incorporated practice, a practice that becomes incorporated by relating to others in gendered experiential spaces, in other words by doing gender over time. This latter way of thinking resembles gender as repetitive performance (Butler 1990).

Rudie further argues that the concepts of person, experience and sociality may contribute to an understanding of how gender is reproduced (Rudie 2007: 92): First of all, related to my study, the bodily experience will be gender-specific (as a girl or a boy). Then gender will also be prevalent as contrasting bodily signs to be symbolically interpreted in interaction, for instance only girls wearing dresses and skirts. Thirdly, the experiential spaces are usually gendered or gender-segregated, as the Hudøy example above illustrates. Lastly, the experiential spaces shared by women and men are differently experienced by the persons, both between men and women and between different men and different women (ibid.). Playing football may be experienced differently as a girl than as a boy, because football is traditionally a masculine arena, and girls do not usually want to be perceived as masculine rather than feminine (see below and Chapter 5). As in the work of Moore, difference rather than sameness is highlighted. Rudie thus understands gender as

40 In How societies remember (1989) Connerton presents an argument on social memory as habits and incorporated practices, but does not use or refer to Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”.

---

27
differentiated, relational and as bodily practice, which will be drawn upon in the following.

In sum, the above discussion of gender and bodies have highlighted gender as doing (performance), but also as incorporated practice and thus situated in material bodies. Girls and boys do gender in social interaction. Nevertheless, they are also males and females with corresponding gendered bodies because a sex category is put on them even before birth (i.e. a certain sex). Children normally know that they are a girl or a boy from about two years of age (Butkatko & Dachler 1998, Gregor 1987).

Therefore, an experience-near approach calls for acknowledging a relationship between sex and gender and thus also a relationship between gender as being and as doing. As such, the present study combines a perspective on gender as part of experiential structures and incorporated practices formed and expressed in interaction and sociality.

As the following chapters will show, my study is inspired by the theoretical perspectives of Moi, Furst, Moore, Butler and Rudie. This is because they separately and in “theoretical complementarity” offer approaches to gender and gender construction based in (the interpretation of) the material body. As such, these perspectives form the backbone of how I theorize the dialectical relationship between maturing bodies and cultural practices. Studying gender as process and relation situated in material sexed bodies serves as an alternative to how Butler’s theory of performativity, queer theories and feminist post-structuralism in general often have been applied. However, as shown, the approaches in my project share some post-structuralist conceptualizations. These are gender as process (but situated in a material body); focus on the heterosexual hegemony; multiple selves and subject positions; and “junior” and “older/senior” sexualities. The last two perspectives, in addition to the concept of “social context”, will conclude this chapter, fulfilling my “theoretical complementarity” approach.

**Multiple selves and subject positions**

The activities and self-presentations of the girls I got to know change according to situations and social contexts. Moore, like other post-structuralist or post-modern
inspired researchers has argued for the stance of decentred selves, multiple selves or multiple identities acted out in different social contexts.\textsuperscript{41} Her understanding of the subject makes the point that:

The basic premise of post-structuralist thinking on the subject is that discourses and discursive practices provide subject positions and that individuals take up a variety of subject positions within different discourses (Moore 1994:55, emphasis added).

One distinction between “modern” and “post-modern” or post-structuralist conceptualizations of the self, is that the former reads this as having a core, while the latter views the self as fragmented, as Moore above (Solbrække & Aarseth 2006, see also Lorentzen & Muhleisen 2006, Halsaa 2006). \textsuperscript{42}

Moore’s theory of subject positions implies that a single subject can no longer be equated with a single individual. Each individual is a multiply constituted subject, and “take up multiple subject positions within a range of discourses and social practices” (Moore 1994: 55). This theoretical stance opens up for studying intracultural variation and different ways of doing girl and femininities. \textsuperscript{43} Catherine Ewing’s understanding underlines the above argumentation:

…in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly. At any particular moment a person usually experiences his or her articulated self as a symbolic, timeless whole, but this self may quickly be displaced by another, quite different “self”, which is based on a different definition of the situation (Ewing 1990: 251).


\textsuperscript{42} Related to this, Cecilia McCallum discusses the “partible self” approach in newer feminist approaches in comparison with the Melanesian “dividual” as discussed by Marilyn Strathern (1988), and argues that they “seem to sit uneasily together. This is because the ethnographic analysis of personhood uses a distinct epistemological angle from that applied to the ‘partial self’ in the feminist literature” (McCallum 2001:168). The first is studied through the ethnographic method, the second through reflexive discourse. Therefore McCallum fears that the “indigenous point of view” is in danger of being lost in the process of analysis (ibid.:168). Keeping this in mind, and being sensitive to her points through the emphasis of experience-near concepts, I still find the approach of multiple selves and subject positions relevant for the present study, as will be argued below.

\textsuperscript{43} In a similar vein, Julia Kristeva writes about subjects as “heterogeneous” (Furst 1995:40).

\textsuperscript{44} This understanding finds some resonance with Erik Erikson saying that people strive for an experience of sameness and continuity in their identity constructions (Erikson 1963/1993: 261).

\textsuperscript{45} In post-structuralist work the term “subject position” is used in relation with the term “discourse”. My study do not apply discourse analysis, but uses “subject position” in relation to the term “social context” as defined below. But because contexts overlap and include different sub-contexts and situations, the relationship between “subject position” and “social context” is not 1:1, but fluid and often analytically unclear.
Ewing argues that the person usually experiences some sense of “wholeness”, despite that the actions from the “outside” may be understood as contrasting identities. 44

I understand Ewing’s term “self-representations” to resemble “subject positions” and “identities”. As such, I read each variant of “doing” girl and “femininity” (or “masculinity”) as one subject position. Davies and Harré (1991) argue that looking at interaction in terms of subject positions is more dynamic than “Goffmanian” role analysis, which is more formal, static and ritualistic (Goffman 1992, see West & Zimmerman 1987). I find “subject position” to be more flexible, to have more potential of differentiating a role through its close relationship with situations and social contexts. As such, in a situation with both parents and friends present, a “daughter” may position herself differently depending on her understanding of expectations from the persons interacting with her.45 In a later publication (2003) Davies points to the problems above and thereby underlines the position in my study:

Of course taking oneself up as a boy or a girl is not a simple, linear process. How one “does” masculinity or femininity with one’s parents, say, may differ profoundly from how one “does” masculinity with one’s friends, or from one friend to another (Davies 2003: 2).

This stance integrates the understanding of persons as “multidimensional” or “dividable” in that different femininities (and masculinities) exist, may oppose one another and be activated in different situations and contexts. For instance, the girls I got to know switched quickly between the subject positions of being kul (in interaction with peers) and being a conscientious pupil (in interaction with teachers) in the context of school lessons (see Chapter 9). Most importantly, the perspective underlines that each girl positions herself in multiple ways, doing many femininities depending on situation and context. It also points to the issue of difference, that doing girl has many expressions, and may be hierarchically organized (see Moore 1994, 2007, and Hey 1997:28). Samantha Holland says:

The difficulties lie primarily in the fact that the term “femininity” is a concept which refers to a set of gendered behaviours and practices, and yet which is fluid and not fixed,
and can mean as many different things as there are women (just as there are as many “masculinities” as there are men) (Holland 2004: 8, emphasis added).

Holland points to two important issues of relevance for my research. The first concerns what is implied in “gendered behaviour and practices” when doing femininity (ies). I read it to include both how the body is dressed, and how the person behaves, moves and talks. Therefore doing femininities vary with both style of dressing and general behaviour which do not always resonate with each other. In my study “subject position” thus includes both aspects, surely making it problematic to pinpoint the fast switching of positions when change of clothes is not possible, for instance in the classroom relating to both peers and teachers. This makes analyzing the switching of subject positions in certain contexts challenging, which will be shown later.

The second important point from Holland is her indication of there being a direct relationship between women (girls) and femininities, men (boys) and masculinities, which challenges the collapse of the sex/gender divide made by Butler and other feminist post-structuralists. I find the argument of women and men consisting of “more and less” femininities and masculinities (see Connell 1995: 163) to be reasonable but analytically inadequate regarding change. This is because deciding what is the one or the other demands static normative reference points, or essentialist categories, of what “masculinity” and “femininity” consist of including aestheticizing the body by way of particular adornment (Russell & Tyler 2002). These reference points are likely to be stereotypical gender models like “boys are rough, tough and strong” and “girls are sweet and kind and love dressing in pink” prominent in the society. 46 For instance, if (feminist inspired) girls are doing activities associated to boys in their struggle for gender equality (such as playing organized football), their aim is to change that activity to also be associated to girls and femininity. To interpret that activity as “girls doing masculinity” cements rather than transforms the gender divide, and makes change in cultural understandings of “boys” and “girls”, “masculinity” and “femininity” difficult to accomplish. Therefore my point of departure seeks to go beyond the gender stereotypes and starts with the question: What does “doing girl” or “doing femininity” actually mean?

46 See Chapter 6, page 103 and page 104 for pictures of advertisements highly inspired by gender stereotypes.
When girls and boys engage in the same activity, for instance football, are they performing masculinities, femininities or is gender at all relevant? In what ways do aesthetic and material items inform the construction of different femininities (and masculinities) at Østli and Vestdal? Is it at all possible **not** to do gender? As introduced in Chapter 1, I argue that gender is always relevant to some extent, a position I discuss below.

In this study I take as explicit point of origin that a person with a female body who **experiences** herself as a girl, **“do”** girl and one with a male body **“do”** boy. This does not imply any biological determinism in how gender is performed, in that “the body is experienced and shaped by masculinity and femininity, and not the other way round” (Moore 2007:11). I read this to be another way of expressing that there exist a dialectical relationship between physical bodies and cultural practices. In a similar vein, Kirsten Drotner presents the term “cultural circuits of femininities and masculinities” (Drotner 1991:158) which I understand to include dynamic options of doing girl and boy. The important point is, however, that it is **not** arbitrary which bodies are subjected to the doing of girl and the doing of boy, which is decided by the anatomy of the bodies as either male or female. If the decision was arbitrary, the debate on the sex/gender divide would probably not exist and the gender systems would be very different. Whether a person is “feminine” or “masculine”, however, is decided as such by the other persons involved in the interaction, that is femininity and masculinity are relationally understood. Femininity and masculinity are also analytical concepts (Holland 2004, Reay 2001).

---

47 I am aware that it is impossible to completely avoid stereotypical gender models in a discussion of femininities and masculinities. But my position downplays and tries to go beyond these stereotypes.

48 I emphasize **“experiences” herself as a girl** because of those instances when persons with female bodies experience themselves as boys, and try to act and pass as boys, and vice versa. The experiences of mismatch between biological body and the way the child has been raised as a boy or girl, illustrate that biology is not irrelevant in experiences of gender (Almås & Benestad 2001). These cases most often refer to androgynous children “transformed” into girls through surgery and medical treatment and do not include those instances where girls experience themselves as girls but find boys’ activities more fun or attractive. My way of thinking also opens for the construction of additional genders based on anatomical deviations from the “norm”.

49 I justify this stance of “essentialism” by arguing that the categories “girl” and “boy” are strongly experience-near concepts among the children and adults in my study, (as in other countries). This position underlines how my research involves the materially sexed body in the study of gender, which is a stance I believe to be implicit in much gender research. This is simply because femininity is first and foremost associated to people with female bodies and masculinity to those with male bodies.
which in my study resonate with experience-near conceptualizations of being a girl.\textsuperscript{50}

My way of thinking on femininities (and masculinities) is inspired by the preteen girls’ experience-near conceptualizations of being girls, which may reflect the specific Norwegian situation concerning gender and gender equality. This is so because I understand that the girls in my study are proud of being girls, and do girl also when they engage in traditionally masculine activities like football (see Chapter 5). Research from the UK and US show a somewhat different picture in that girls and boys draw clearer distinctions between girls’ and boys’ activities and tend to experience more prestige related to boys’ activities (Carlsen 2007, Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005, Reay 2001).

Gender “trouble” is illustrated with cross-overs, when a girl prefers to do activities with boys, associated to boys, such as playing war and climbing trees. Such girls are often labelled “tomboys” or \textit{gutte-jente} (boy-girl) in Norwegian and are usually widely accepted. Most importantly, \textit{gutte-jente} is still read as a way of “doing” girl, not of “doing” boy by people in her surroundings, even though they may interpret her and her activities as more masculine than feminine. In the opposite situation boys risk the label of being gay, or of being a “sissy” if they play only with girls and show much interest in “girls’ things”. As such, I believe the empirical situation usually shows the impossibility of ignoring biological sex categories in discussions of gender construction. Of special interest is how femininity is expressed when girls engage in traditional masculine activities, and whether this differs or not to how boys do masculinity in the same contexts. I will use a case from research done on twelve year-old children by Randi Wærdahl to illustrate my argument (Wærdahl 2003).

Wærdahl analyzes identity work among a group of twelve year-old children living in a rural community in Norway. This group includes only one girl, Elise. As a consequence, Elise spends most of her time with boys, engaging in their activities. She shares their taste of music, participates in their games on equal terms, but finds

\textsuperscript{50} I discuss the relationship of girls, “doing” girl and femininities in detail in Chapter 6 in connection with the ten year olds’ social classification system.
it important to underline that she is a girl, not a boy, like the others. Therefore she wears jewellery, dresses and short skirts – in other words, traditional material items associated to femininity. Bodily appearance and adornment thus become one way in which femaleness may be expressed when girls participate in masculine arenas, and vice versa.

My study illustrates the importance of gender boundaries, and that gender stereotypes and dominant femininities serve as the backbone for young girls’ gender construction in most social contexts. However, taking sex categories and the subjective experience of belonging to the one or the other as point of departure on which gender is culturally learned and performed – implying that girls do femininities and boys do masculinities – makes it possible to go beyond and somewhat away from the gender stereotypes if the aim is gender equality and perhaps gender “neutrality” (Muhleisen & Lorentzen 2006: 280). The debates on the sex/gender divide and how it is best theorized, is, according to Moore, “not really a theoretical one, but rather a kind of territorial war waged over the sexed body” (Moore 1999:157). In this research I prefer to bring this war to an end by acknowledging the sexed body as point of origin for anthropological gender studies of Norwegian children. 51

In order to make this way of thinking fruitful, I focus on the relations between the different femininity (and masculinity) subject positions. It follows from this that my project is to explore the options of doing girl and how they relate to each other and to doing boy. Why are some subject positions existent, relevant and acted out and not others? How to understand the change or expansion in femininity options during my two years of field work? It also follows from my way of thinking that the crossing of gender borders is not read as “trouble” but as change, as a strategy for multiplying or modifying the existent gender subject positions of both girls and boys. In Butler’s terminology, I understand crossing gender borders as a subversive gender performance (Butler 1990). Change occurs if this is repetitiously performed by an increasing number of persons, and of interest is how gender crossing influence the relationship between femininities and masculinities. As such, Drotner asserts that

51 This argumentation does not necessarily hold for other countries out of the western hemisphere.
today, the cultural circuits of femininities and masculinities mix more than previously (Drotner 1991: 158). I find the metaphor of “circuit” fruitful because, theoretically, if girls and boys engage in more and more similar activities, the circuits will also overlap more, and perhaps eventually become almost one.

In addition to the girls’ positive experiences of being girls as described above, Holland (2004) and West & Zimmerman (1987) have inspired my argument. The latter argue that persons cannot avoid “doing” gender if they live in a society in which sex categorization is relevant and obligatory. Norway represents such a society. Here babies are classified as male or female as soon as they are born, there exists institutional gender segregation in public places concerning lavatories and also in most school contexts, as will be shown. In a similar vein, Vigdis Broch-Due, Tone Bleie and Ingrid Rudie argue in Carved Flesh, Cast selves (1993):

We need to deconstruct the dualism of man/woman and see that the cultural construction of gender – and the structuring role of gender relations in symbolic and social processes – means that all relationships are “gendered” relationships whether they involve subjects of same or different gender (Broch-Due, Bleie & Rudie 1993:2).

In other words, they claim that doing gender is also present in same-sex interactions. Gender is thus always present because the existence of sex categories generates social expectations of how to be a culturally predictable girl or boy in most interactions (West & Zimmerman 1987). The actual expressions, however, vary in relevance and intensity from hardly existent to very prevalent depending on the social context. It is now time to explore that latter term.

Social contexts

The discipline of anthropology is traditionally understood as comparative and holistic, but classical holistic studies are difficult to accomplish in urban, complex societies (Howell 2001). The concepts of “context” and “contextualisation” have over the years become central in anthropological methodology in an attempt to meet the holistic ideal, particularly related to modern, complex societies. The concept of context has been theoretically discussed by, for instance A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (1992). They assert that “it does not seem possible at the present time to give a single, precise, technical definition of context, and eventually we might have to accept that such a definition is not possible” (Duranti & Goodwin 1992: 2). At its
most imprecise, “context” is understood as all dimensions surrounding the phenomenon being studied that may become relevant for interpretation.

I have constructed an analytic understanding of the term “context” in order to make sense of and organise the empirical events my study is based on. Particularly Chapters 9 & 12, about children’s everyday activities and different forms of play, have been organised according to social contexts. In order to make the contexts comparable and give them the same level of abstraction, I have chosen the type of interaction around a certain theme to be the organizing principles of a social context. More precisely, each social context is organized according to “practice similarities”. 52 The (social) contexts thus vary according to which persons interact in what ways and around which themes. The social context of family consists of inter- and intra-generational interactions (and thus situations) between family members concerning consumption and cultural codes. Regarding paid leisure activities there are many contexts which vary according to who interacts in what way in relation to football, dancing, participation in the school brass band and other activities. In Chapter 9 the organizing principles in the context of play are peer interactions with formal rules concerning play activities, while in the context of non-play they are peer interactions without any formal rules. It is thus the empirical situation and the type of interactions (and the research questions) that in the end differentiate between the many social contexts, but strict boundaries between contexts are impossible. For instance, interactions concerning romance may even occur in the school context or when doing mixed-gender sport activities, as the chapters will show. But in short, a social context is made up of focal event(s) and field(s) of action within which the events are embedded (Duranti & Goodwin 1992: 3). Such events are for instance girls and boys interacting in ordinary play or in playing football.

Rudie’s concept of “experiential space” discussed previously enriches the above understanding of social contexts. This is because each context is filled with specific

52 This understanding resembles that of “discourse” loosely understood as “socially organised frameworks of knowledge and meaning” (Renold 2005:3), but is primarily inspired by Wittgenstein’s terms of “language games” and “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein 1997). For the task at hand in my study, I find the application of “social context” as presented above fruitful and abstract enough (see Helle-Valle 1996 for an in-depth Wittgensteinian-inspired construction of “social context”).
experiences that become part of the person’s experiential structures. According to Rudie, the experiential spaces are often gendered or gender segregated, and they are shared by girls and boys and are differently experienced, both between boys and girls and between different boys and different girls (Rudie 2007). As such, “experiential space” and “social context” are overlapping and mutually enriching concepts.

“Junior” and “older/senior” sexualities

In a discussion of gender construction, femininities and the sexualisation of childhood it is necessary to comment on the relationship between children and sexuality. Freud believed that newborn babies were born without sociality, but driven by selfish drives and instincts (Bråten 1998). His terminology for these drives is “libido” (the drive of sex and survival) (Engelstad 1987, Bukatko & Daehler 1998). As such, Freud thematically introduced sexuality into the lives of children and argued that the human being develops in psychosexual phases: the oral phase (0-1 year), the anal phase (2-3 years), the phallic phase (4-6 years), the latency phase (5-12 years) and the genital phase (from 13 years) (Bukatko & Daehler 1998). The latency phase is particularly interesting for my research because it concerns children of the same age as those I got to know, and because Freud postulates that in that age-group, the sexual drives are reduced until the onset of puberty. His views on children’s sexuality challenged the notion of childhood innocence, which is based on notions of children’s asexuality (Gullestad 1996). Gullestad says:

Although Sigmund Freud’s ideas about children’s sexuality have not been generalized – childhood is popularly regarded as a stage of sexual innocence – his emphasis on the significance of early childhood experiences has been generalized to such an extent that it is now a commonplace understanding in the Western world (Gullestad 1996:2).

Gullestad mentions an important point here, in that the notion of children as sexual beings is widely accepted among professionals working with children, but still childhood is popularly understood to be a period of sexual innocence (Røtnes

53 “The period from about six to eleven years of age when libidinal energy is suppressed and energies are focused on intellectual, athletic and social achievements appropriate to the adult years” (Bukatko & Daehler 1998:21). This implies, however, that some sort of sexuality is present also in this phase, a position I follow in this study in the name of “junior sexuality”. That is, when I write about children and sexuality, it is in the sense of “junior”. In addition, I understand “sexuality” to be biologically based but whose arousal is culturally learnt (see Thorne & Luria 1986:176).
Paradoxically, Freud’s notion of the latency phase may have given nourishment to the perception of innocent, asexual children, because of the general influence of Freud’s thinking on childhood matters, as just indicated by Gullestad (Gullestad 1996). The discourse of children as sexual beings and the discourse of childhood being lost seem at first sight to contradict each other, but the issue is really a widespread understanding of child and adult sexuality as being of different kinds. That is why I defined the “sexualisation of childhood” to be processes where adult conceptualizations of sexuality permeated children’s sexuality and practices. In her study of preteen children, Renold does not use the concept of “latent” but “junior” sexuality, implying that their sexuality is not “latent” but “active” (see Chapter 3). As indicated in note 53, I am inspired by Renold’s work in that children are not asexual but “do” junior sexuality, and in showing how heterosexuality works in organizing the experiential spaces of the girls (and boys) (Renold 2005). This means that mixed-gender relationships and interactions may sometimes be interpreted as (hetero-) sexual despite no “sexual” practice being involved (such as kissing, holding hands). This will particularly be discussed in Chapter 12.

As my ambition is to keep the analytic concepts as close as possible to how the girls and boys perceive and experience their gendered bodies and peer relationships, I emphasise that this study understands sexuality related to preteen children as “junior” sexuality and different from “adult” or “older/senior” sexuality. I discuss this methodological issue further in the next chapter. The importance of this distinction also becomes clear when gender and sexuality is understood to be rooted in material bodies (Shilling 1993, Bents 2000). Inspired by a developmental discourse, I seek to show that the onset of puberty and the bodily changes this brings about does have implications for how the girls (and boys) do gender and sexuality. 55

---

54 Cross asserts that the debates surrounding children’s innocence are contradictory and ironic. The debates are ambivalent, in that “we want kids to be kids, and yet we force our young into early adulthood when we introduce them to the consumer market” (Cross 2004:13). This resembles the moral paradox mentioned in Chapter 1. I believe Cross goes right to the heart of the matter by highlighting the ambivalence and contradiction in cultural ideas on children. Part of the problem is concerned with what innocence is, “we forever look for threats to innocence, and yet we are not sure what innocence is” (ibid.:13). In a similar vein, Cherland writes that “our culture eroticizes little girls and declares them innocent, finding pleasure in the image of the innocent little girl who entices the predatory practices of male desire” (Cherland 2005: 110).
Most importantly, this position does not imply biological determinism, that the physiological changes must generate a change in gender construction and (hetero-) sexual practice. Eventual change in practice is a result of how the bodily changes are interpreted by the girls and boys themselves and by other people in their surroundings. This stance is underlined by Thorne in the following citation:

But even when striking physical changes, like spurts of height and the emergence of breasts, are under way, they are shaped by social practices and cultural meanings. Cultures organize the life cycle in different ways (Thorne 1993:137).

In other words, bodily changes matter, but they matter differently according to time, culture and context. The main difference between junior and senior sexuality, however, concerns the quality of physical intimacy and the persons involved: from platonic to sexual practices and sexual intercourse between a private couple, not as part of a collective peer group, as the study will show.

I find it fruitful to think of sexuality as a continuum: “junior” at one end and “senior” (adult) at the other. In this sense, the “sexualisation of childhood” as defined previously concerns processes in which older sexuality permeates junior sexuality and has implications for girls’ gendered bodies, peer and other relationships. As such, I deviate from Renold’s approach in that I do not follow her intention of queering the generational binary adult/child (Renold 2005). Rather, I argue that it is important to keep in mind the differences between junior and older/senior sexualities and the generational differences concerning sexuality. Thorne writes that adolescence involves “the shift from the relatively asexual gender system of childhood to the overtly sexualized gender systems of adolescence and adulthood” (Thorne 1993:135). In a similar vein I thus argue that sexuality is different in the world of children than it is in the world of adults, which the study discusses as one aspect of the “intergenerational gap of interpretation”. Some subject positions and ways of doing femininity may be associated to older sexuality by the girls themselves and older people, or just so by older generations. This gap in

55 I had the possibility to observe this, because I spent time with the children over a two year period. When I finally completed the fieldwork, the children were turning thirteen years old. In addition, I observed and interviewed children a year and four years older than the ten year-olds.

56 However, I believe it is very difficult to approach the theme of childhood sexuality without being normative in one way or other. Is it ok or not for children to play sex games, masturbate, touch each other’s bodies in special places in kindergartens and schools? (Dagbladet 16/10-2007). My study does not answer such questions, but explores how preteen girls experience and relate to the issues of older sexuality in their surroundings.
interpretation lies at the core of the sexualisation of childhood issue. In the next chapter I discuss methodological problems concerning the present study.
Part II: Methodology
Chapter 3: Fieldwork and methodology

It is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives’ games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in the conversations. I am not certain if this is equally easy for everyone – perhaps the Slavonic nature is more plastic and more naturally savage than that of Western Europeans – but though the degrees of success varies, the attempt is possible for everyone (Malinowski 1922/1984:21).

Fieldwork “at home”

Malinowski’s ideas concerning fieldwork can still serve as fruitful guidelines in the construction of ethnographic knowledge. But doing fieldwork “at home”, in an urban context, in a complex post-industrialised society is definitely different from Malinowski’s field site. One not too old anthropological debate in Norway discussed methodological problems in doing fieldwork “at home” (Howell 2001, Rugkåsa & Thorsen 2003). The point of departure was the possible implications for the discipline of anthropology when an increasing number of anthropologists did fieldwork in their “own backyard” (Howell 2001). Researchers saw an increase in anthropological texts based more on interviews than participant observation, and asked if it was possible to study complex industrialised societies with an ethnographic toolkit (Rugkåsa & Thorsen 2003). Two problems were particularly elucidated. The first concerned the problem of getting access to private spheres or backstage situations. It is easy to make an appointment for a two-hour interview, but not to stay in or hang around a group of people or families day-in and day-out. The second concerned the problem of first observing and then transforming the familiar into something exotic (ibid.).

The problems raised are relevant and were experienced in my fieldwork as well. Still, I argue that it is possible to have Malinowski’s notions on fieldwork as ideals also for “native”, urban anthropologists. We can try and “join ourselves in what is going on. We can (try to) take part in the natives’ games, we can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in the conversations” (Malinowski 1922/1984:21). The accomplishments of these ideals demand first and foremost patience and time, as in all types of societies.
It is difficult to do anthropological fieldwork in private homes in Norway because of people’s reservations against intrusion in general (Howell 2001, Gullestad 1989, 1997). This task is not made easier when the topic is as sensitive as in this study. Children, and particularly young girls; sexuality, family income, priorities concerning children and childhood are all vulnerable or sensitive issues in Norway. Therefore methodological reflections are even more important than in not-so-sensitive studies. That is because trust is essential for the production of reliable knowledge. This includes first and foremost reflection on the researcher’s role and behaviour in the field and, more precisely, problems in connection with ethics and the detached and/or involved anthropologist.

It is easier to say or do something “wrong” that will close you off from further contact in fields with high sensitivity than in others. It takes time to get to know people so well that you find it appropriate to ask if you can study their family and their children by just hanging around. I believe that is why so much anthropological childhood research in Norway is done in kindergarten or school settings, out of the private family sphere. In addition, a lot of children are gathered at the same time in these settings, making the study of interactions easy. This is the “philosophy” behind the methodological approaches in this study. In addition, I have studied children in many school settings that also included parents, for instance one week of summer camp one year, three days of camp the next, football matches and end-of-term arrangements. I was also invited to a birthday party and on three shopping trips with the children outside of school, and three visits at the youth club. Some of the girls also made me take them to an Idol arrangement in town and to the football tournament the Norway Cup.

In addition to carrying out participant observation amongst the 4th (5th) graders, I had structured conversations in groups of maximum four, with all the girls and some of the boys. I also had structured conversations with groups of girls a year older and in groups of girls and boys four years older. This I did at both schools in order to enrich the context of teenage culture. The teachers in the 4th (5th) grade at both schools were

---

57 One reason for this is that each administrative community (kommune) is informed of every new birth and offers free health care to newborn babies and toddlers. The maternity centre’s (helsestasjon) personnel report to the child welfare institution (barnevern) when there is reason to suspect child neglect or abuse. Another reason is the risk of being suspected of incest.
interviewed as well. All conversations were taped and transcribed by myself. Previously I had interviewed 25 families in the Østli area as part of a Nordic research project on household economy and consumption patterns. Of these, 9 families have children in the 4th (5th) grade, and are thus parents of the children I got to know. This means that the study is based on participant observation and the structured conversations of a total of seventy-one 4th (5th) graders, seven 6th (7th) graders and twelve 9th graders in Oslo, which makes up a total of 90 children (57 from Østli and 33 from Vestdal). In addition to these, parents in 9 of the households of the 4th (5th) graders and 3 teachers have been interviewed (see Chapter 4). The analysis and generalisations are thus made on the basis of these people and participant observation in different social contexts and situations.

Regarding the problem of “analytical distance”, or first observing and then making the familiar exotic, some useful strategies have been proposed in the literature (Wadel 1991). One is to “hang around” over time and do “naïve observation” (ibid.), which consists of looking at everything as potentially interesting. A similar technique is to try and observe with the “eyes of a stranger” (ibid.). In short, this is what I have tried to do in studying preteen children’s gender construction and peer relationships – by writing down in detail their appearances, interactions, activities and friendship circles.

Implicit to this study is an interest in continuity and change in girls’ gender construction and peer relationships. In these discussions I draw on existing literature, informal conversations with older people and partly my own childhood memories. As such, memory is sometimes used as a methodological device (Draaisma 2004, Haug 1997). For better or for worse, my memory, incorporated practices and thus experiential structures influence how I interpret the childhoods of today (see also James 1993). I have discussed memories with others in my generation, including “interviews” with the three teachers, in order to make sure that what I refer to is not untypical.

58 The project is called “Vulnerability and consumption in the Nordic welfare states” (Bonke, Borgeraas, Døving, Hjort, Hohnen, Montesino, Rysst, Salonen 2005).
The study of children as a sensitive group

The present study aims at describing and interpreting particularly young girls’ everyday life and practices and the meaning they attach to it by doing participant observation in different social contexts primarily connected to the school. It was vital to get access to and positive response from the girls and family members in studying childhood experiences and consumption patterns. I wanted to “hang around” and observe interactions in as many social contexts as possible, in addition to having stories told “right from the heart” as narratives. In the following I shall first discuss how I entered, worked and constructed knowledge in the field.

Successful fieldwork and knowledge construction among sensitive groups is dependant upon gaining and maintaining a trustful relationship, which demands more than merely making an appointment for a two-hour interview. 59 Extended anthropological fieldwork is an ideal frame for gaining trust in that the researcher and researched necessarily get to know each other. Philippe Bourgois considered this methodology to be essential for knowledge construction among drug dealers in New York, where he spent hours hanging around on street corners (Bourgois 1995). The sensitivity connected to drug-dealing is obvious. However, a sensitive study in general – in Norway at any rate – concerns topics which relate directly to personal and intimate relationships and to peoples’ private lives. Self-respect, self-worth, identity construction, self-presentation and issues of life and death are involved. Studying children is methodologically challenging in that the atmosphere is dependent on more trust than with older people. In any event, I believe the chance of them running off, of being silent or give “yes/no” answers is greater.

The sensitivity in this study first concerns the uneven balance of power between an adult and researcher, such as myself, and the girls and boys; as such it is ethical in nature. Secondly, sensitivity concerns the families’ experience of ability (or inability) to raise well enough behaved children for them to be positively accepted into Norwegian society. Thirdly, it also concerns the family’s ability to purchase what the girls want or associate with group pressure; that is, what they and their

59 Of course, anthropologists do not usually base their analysis on time-scheduled interviews only, but lack of time combined with more research in western, urban settings have led to anthropological research of this kind as well (Frøystad 2003, Howell 2001).
family see as “needs”. All these factors concern their self-worth, self-presentation and the experienced possibility for belonging to the aspired social group. Such reflections made me very careful when I first contacted the schools.

I telephoned the headmasters, presented the project both in oral and written form, and emphasised the obligation of confidentiality, anonymity and discretion on my behalf. The headmasters found the project interesting and contacted the teachers in the 4th grade, who agreed to let me join the classes. Then a letter was written to the parents, and again confidentiality, anonymity and discretion were stressed. In addition, it was emphasised that I should not evaluate them as parents. I attended class meetings for parents and informed them of the project face-to-face. I believed that seeing me and talking to me made it easier for the parents to accept my research. In addition, by being present I got an impression of the parents’ concerns and interests in connection with their children’s upbringing. All in all, my efforts resulted in both parents and teachers consenting to the fieldwork.

As all anthropologists know, “fieldwork” is not a method in itself, but a frame around different methods, one of which is participant observation. In the next part of the chapter, I will therefore describe how I managed participant observation among the children. It is possible to observe people and activities without speaking, but almost impossible to participate in activities without some communication through words. Anthropological knowledge construction is a result of dialogue and some sort of mutual understanding between the researcher and the researched. This corresponds to the view of children as competent agents, to be discussed in Chapter 5 (James et al. 1998, Lidén 2000; Brembeck et al. 2004). I am aware that the idea of intersubjectivity or mutual understanding is problematic, but I still find it a methodological ideal.

**Participant observation and observational participation**

As the term “participant observation” indicates, the method consists of both participation and observation, which involve different subject positions. Emphasis

---

60 I discuss the relationship between “needs” and “wants” in Chapter 5.
61 I believe this is particularly so in modern, literate societies, or in situations in which the language is common to all.
on the one or the other part has varied in the history of anthropology, with the varying emphasis placed on participation (Holy 1984), in the last decades often as “embodiment” (Csordas 1988, 1999). The idea is that the researcher participates (“with her body”) in activities and/or verbal conversations, and positions herself as trainee/pupil/colleague or discussion partner. The researcher can furthermore observe dialogues/discussions and position herself as “listener”, or she can observe activities and position herself as “onlooker” (Wadel 1991). My roles in the field have elements of all these characteristics, which is a typical anthropological position. However, researchers vary according to which roles, methods and techniques they use and combine; how they interact with the researched; what they observe; how they do their “interviews” and how they understand the relationship between observation and participation. These variations are related to the researchers’ different themes, theoretical interests and epistemological positions, and illustrate the impossibility of separating theory and observation. This has implications for how they interpret what is going on. For instance, I tried to reduce the distinction between myself as observer and the observed. Instead of just sitting in the back of the classroom observing and writing notes, I engaged in their activities by moving around and looking at their work, to help out when necessary. In other words, dialogue and participation instead of mere observation was tried out in practice.

Thomas Csordas argues that the researcher’s body becomes a tool in the research, for instance regarding reflexivity. Bringing the body into method such as a “twinge in the gut” or “gut feeling” adds a new dimension to fieldwork as communication and dialogue, in that communication through body language (i.e. not only spoken language) and observation of bodily expressions are also included (Csordas 1999:184). The researcher’s body as a tool also implies placing the researcher in the text in a self-conscious way by explicitly elucidating the dialogue between the researcher and the researched (ibid.). The following chapters bring extracts of transcribed conversations as empirical illustrations and to back up my arguments, and thus reveal the quality of my reflexivity for all to see. Closely related to the idea of “embodiment” as a methodological tool, is the use of memory, which consciously or unconsciously is part of our reference frames (see James 1993, Hey 1997, Draaisma 2004). In Female Sexualization (1987) Frigga Haug and colleagues
explicitly use memory in knowledge construction by presenting memorized stories about young girls and the importance of hair (Haug 1987).

Awareness of this made me try to interpret how the girls used their bodies to denote friendship or exclusion, such as rolling their eyes. It also made me look for signs that said I was not wanted around, even when they said it was ok. I experienced one situation where some girls were telling one another secrets about something. The expression on their faces as I approached said “this is none of your business” and off I went. Put differently, attention to body language emphasises the distinction between what is said and what is done (see Malinowski 1922/1984).

This leads me over to a discussion about knowledge construction based on language only or on language in combination with participant observation. One widespread method is discourse analysis, or the interpretation of spoken language. This research is most often based on formal interviews (D’Andrade 1992, D’Andrade 1995, Strauss & Quinn 1997, Potter & Wetherell 1987). Maurice Bloch is critical of approaching mental processes and understanding of “the other” through spoken language. According to Bloch, anthropologists (and other scientists) cannot describe peoples’ thought processes and meaning constructions solely through what they say, since language is an inappropriate medium for evoking the non-lineal organisation of human cognition (Bloch 1991/1998, see also Strauss & Quinn 1997). His suggestion is to apply the method of participant observation much as first outlined by Malinowski. In order to grasp the natives’ points of view, we have to do long-term “intimate” participant observation, or rather “observational” participation, because it is primarily the participation that should function as the basis for knowledge construction (Bloch 1992/1998, Holy 1984). By participating closely with the people under study, it is Bloch’s view that we internalise their knowledge, which we then can activate through introspection (ibid.). It is thus through introspection that we experience “a twinge in the gut”, or “gut feeling” (Csordas 1999:184).

If the researcher reacts and behaves more or less as the informants in given situations, her interpretations of their everyday life probably become more valid (Holy 1984). This was a methodological stance taken by William Corsaro in his
study of pre-school children, in which he aspired to participate as much as possible as a peer (Corsaro 1997). Keeping the insights of Bloch and Corsaro in mind, I tried to participate as much as possible while being aware of the impossibility of getting their childhood experiences “under my skin”. As an adult, it is not possible to see and understand the world as children do, only partly and through careful interpretation.

In spite of Bloch’s scepticism, he also uses language in his research but views this as secondary to the more important participation, as “merely purpose-specific periphery to the foundations of conceptualization” (Bloch 1992/1998:25). It is most researchers’ contention, including mine, that it is unsatisfactory to study and understand people’s everyday life without including spoken and/or written language. As will be shown later, the structured conversations included in this study bring important insights to girls’ gender construction and peer relationships. In the interpretation of certain actions and activities, this study also draws on participant observation of interactions and behaviour patterns. This seems particularly important in studying children who may be less capable of explaining what they do and why, compared to older people. An experience-near position therefore seems well-suited to the study of young children, which I will discuss in the following.

The study of children from “their points of view”

The last decade has seen a decrease in established gender studies by Norwegian anthropologists (Eriksen et al. 2007). Eriksen et al. (2007) suggest this is because many political feminist battles are considered won, 62 and most interestingly, because of how gender has been theorized and deconstructed in this period (for instance post-structuralist stances and queer theories). As such, their argumentation resonates with Moi who, as shown in the last chapter, criticises Butler and other feminist post-structuralist understandings of gender and body (Moi 1996: 10). Moi argues that post-structuralist theory seem to be the only relevant theory in much gender research, both internationally and in Norway today:

62 For instance concerning gender equality, that women today realize their citizenship and public roles in the same degree as men and have equal pay for doing the same job (which is not yet an overall reality).
The intensity in the theoreticians’ absolute postulations and the frequent occupation with the dangerous (but apparently irresistible) dichotomies, makes me feel they live in a sort of mechanical universe, in which one is saved or lost forever. I have especially noticed that post-structural theoreticians often declare that we must look at a phenomenon from a special point of view, or that they in practice take for granted that certain intellectual presumptions or procedures are obligatory. There is some lack of freedom about this. I hope my analysis of body and gender shows that we have more theoretical alternatives that these theoreticians seem to believe (Moi 1996:12, my translation, emphasis original).

In this study I have adopted those gender approaches that I find resonate well with the empirical material and analytical tasks at hand, not as a result of an obligation to stick to certain theoretical feminist traditions (see Holst 2005). Renold’s study from England on Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities (2005) may, however, be read as an example of looking at children from what Moi calls a “special point of view”. Renold’s work is of special interest for my research because she studied the same age group as I did, namely girls and boys in the 5th (and 6th) grade(s). She writes that her project is a “radical attempt to encourage thinking ‘Otherwise’ about preteen children by queering childhood” (Renold 2005: 9):

That is, paying attention to the multiple and contradictory ways in which sexuality is constitutive of both the subject “child” and the social and cultural institution of “childhood”. “Queering childhood” involves not just the queering of sex/gender and sexual binary oppositions such as male (masculinity) and female (femininity) and heterosexual/homosexual, but also the generational binaries adult/child and sexual/asexual. More specifically then, queering childhood pushes us to identify and think Otherwise about (and thus trouble) the (hetero-) gendered and (hetero-) sexualised nature of identity categories such as “girl”, “boy” and “child” and foregrounds the heteronormativity of children’s childhoods more widely (ibid.: 9, emphasis added).

I read Renold’s attempt to think “Otherwise” as an example of queer-inspired and feminist post-structuralist thinking on young girls and boys which have some methodological implications. This is particularly so if the aim is to study children from “their points of view” to be discussed below.

Similar to Freud, Renold uses the term “sexuality” in an inclusive manner “referring to both sexual practices/activities and sexual identities and the varied and diverse forms they take” (Renold 2005:182). 63 One implication of her project on thinking “otherwise” about the generational binaries “adult/child” and “sexual/asexual” may be read as an attempt to bring sexuality into the foreground of the lives of children

---

63 This resembles the way Sigmund Freud understood sexuality, as one of the most important drives in the development and life of human beings (Engelstad 1987).
by queering (sexual) “innocence”. As such, she agrees with Freud in that children are sexual beings. Is there a possibility that the project of “queering childhood” goes beyond and violates the children’s own experience of childhood activities? For instance, do terming platonic romantic childhood activities as “sexual” actually sexualise activities not experienced as such by the girls and boys themselves? If so, this resonates well with the overall aim of queer theory to bring forth “sites and places not usually associated with sexuality” (Renold 2005:9), here in preteen children’s peer relationships. As such, it can be argued that Renold “sexualises” a ten year-old boy by calling him a “stud” because of his popularity with the girls and because he is continuously engaged in girlfriend relationships (ibid.:136). A “stud” is not an experience-near concept for the children, it is constructed from an adult’s point of view. The children’s understanding is quite different: One of the girls in Renold’s study says the mentioned boy has many girlfriends because he wants to be cool: “Todd always needs a girlfriend so he can be cool“ (ibid.: 136).

I hold that “stud” is an experience-distant concept, but that is has some connection to the girls’ experience in that the boy in question attracts them. However, Renold’s interpretation of this boy’s popularity with the girls shows that queering the generational binaries adult/child and sexual/asexual challenges her aim of discussing the “place and performance of gender and sexuality in children’s childhoods from the standpoint and experience of children themselves” (Renold 2005:2, emphasis added). Being a “stud” is not how this boy or his peers understood the situation but is an adult’s interpretation. Terming the boy a “stud” may be read as an attempt to view grown men and preteen boys in terms of age-undifferentiated sexuality as a consequence of queering the generational binaries adult/child and sexual/asexual.

In a similar vein, Renold argues that the girls in her study want to be fashionable and “sexy”, but that is not a term they use (cited in her text anyway). They want to be fashionable and not too tarty or not over the top (ibid.: 49), which I find difficult to interpret as a wish on their part to be “sexy”. 64 I therefore hold that Renold’s queer

---

64 One general problem with Renold’s book, is the impossibility of knowing if the terms in quotation marks are constructed by Renold or uttered by the girls and boys. This concerns the term “sexy” which is not present in any of the transcripts. So is the term “girlie-girl”, used as if this is an experience-near category among the girls (Renold 2005: Chapter 3). This is a methodological problem which sometimes makes it difficult to consider the validity of her interpretations.
perspective has a methodological problem as well as an ethical dimension and is a perspective I don’t follow. As already indicated, this is because my study aims to be methodologically grounded in experience-near anthropology which means the analysis of girls’ (and boys’) gender construction and peer relationships generate from experience-near or emic concepts and categories (Geertz 1983, Marcus & Fischer 1986, Pelto & Pelto 1978, Wikan 1991).

From this follows that I aim to keep the connection between emic categories as close as possible to the experience-distant, or analytical concepts and perspectives, and according to Geertz, the difference between the emic and the etic concepts are best understood as one of degree, not polarity (Geertz 1983: 57). Put another way, I aim to keep close the distance between empirical categories and analytically constructed concepts. On this issue, I particularly follow the arguments of Cecilia McCallum after studying gender in Amazonia, who opposes many post-modern approaches of gender because they do not ”fit well with the view from the ground” (McCallum 2001:3). She argues that:

….an anthropology sensitive to gender should incorporate indigenous ideas and concepts into the work of theoretical construction. Anthropological theory must humbly trace its own route through, not beyond, ethnography (McCallum 2001:4, emphasis added).

I read this to say that anthropological theory should be based on experience-near concepts and conceptualizations. The present study is thus constructed on how I perceive the preteen girls’ (and boys’) understanding of gender and gender relations, and has McCallum’s and Malinowski’s citations as methodological guidelines. However, I will interpret their experiences and everyday practices in the light of the heterosexual matrix, whilst at the same time being sensitive to and in dialogue with, their own experience-near concepts. This leads me over to the last section about ethics in child research.

**Reflexivity and ethical considerations**

Interpretative science has always produced knowledge through the bodies (and heads) of the scientists, but seldom, in the case of anthropologists at any rate, do they describe their methodological steps in detail (Holy 1984, Pelto & Pelto 1978). Both in explicit and implicit manner, intentional use of the subjectivity (and
bodiliness) of the researcher is applied in construction of knowledge, a theme I will discuss below.

Elements from different works on knowledge construction may function together as a methodological approach to the study of sensitive groups. I understand “reflexivity” to mean “the use of the ideas of ‘bodiliness’ to vitalise awareness on how one’s own behaviour (verbal and bodily expressions) is perceived, interpreted and responded to in communication”. By “communication” I understand “symbolic exchange of ‘something’ ”, which is the core element in any interaction with or without words. Some researchers report additional forms of “exchange” in order get access to the wanted “field”. How did I apply these insights in my fieldwork?

In order to get access to the field sites, I tried to activate “reflexivity in the communication process” when I met teachers, parents and children, which in practice meant being responsive and sharing experiences from everyday life. I tried the strategy of over-communication of similarities, such as problems relating to parenting and job situation, and the under-communication of differences (Gullestad 1989, Wadel 1991). As a middle-class woman of high education, I was aware of class as a possible barrier when communicating with people at Østli, while making it easier at Vestdal.

Once access to the field sites had been achieved, I started participating and talking to the children and the people in the area. I hired a little flat at Østli where I stayed part of the week for six months. I wanted to get an idea of the life-experiences that made up the children’s experiential structures as early as possible. When I met the children for the first time, I presented myself as a researcher wanting to write a book about how it was to live and grow up at Østli and Vestdal. I said everything they did was of interest. They found this exciting, and did not mind me sitting at the back of the classrooms observing, writing notes or walking around. During breaks, I joined them outdoors, sometimes participating in their activities, such as skipping, ball

---

65 Valerie Hey writes: “My fieldwork effectively involved a series of complex trade-offs. In the course of the study, the girls and I developed an implicit microeconomy of exchange and barter. The girls provided access to their social lives in return for certain tangible goods: my attention; advice; sweet money; access to a warm room; or absence from lessons (Hey 1997:48).
66 Of course, you only get in touch with some of their experiential structures.
games or just standing talking to them. Most of the time I let them lead the conversation thematically, but also used the opportunity to ask questions concerning family relations, shopping habits, leisure activities and the like, in other words “interviewing” them while participating. During the outdoor breaks I also observed and talked to children belonging to other school classes and through this recruited some of the older children for interviews in a more formal setting, with an interview guide.

When inside classrooms, I observed how the children presented themselves, how they related to each other, who were friends and how they communicated. I also spoke informally with them if the occasion permitted. Sometimes I helped out with the schoolwork. Once I stepped in as a teacher for a day. During swimming lessons, I swam with them and helped to tidy the girls’ hair and sort out clothes and other stuff in the wardrobe afterwards. When they had outdoor school in the woods I went about watching their activities, participating if allowed to, such as building huts and collecting insects and flowers.

At the beginning of the fieldwork in both settings, I spent some of the breaks with the teachers, not only the teachers of the 4th (5th) grades, but the whole teacher team. I spoke to them about the school milieu, how they regarded this today compared to ten-twenty years ago, and also formally interviewed the teachers of “my” classes. I got to know many of the teachers at Østli fairly well, mostly because I joined the school twice at summer camp. Here I also related to the parents who had come along as helpers, some of whom I had interviewed on household economy and priorities (9 families) as mentioned earlier.

In order to participate in some of the children’s activities without imposing on them the feeling of intrusion, I found the notion of “empathy” useful (Wikan 1992). As I understand it, empathy is the ultimate characteristic of involvement between researcher and researched, and as such the opposite of the detached positivist researcher. Unni Wikan finds the notion essential for mutual understanding, but in the conception of “resonance”, which presupposes more than one person. The concept can be understood to include both empathy and communication as exchange:
(Resonance) fosters empathy or compassion. Without resonance there can be no understanding, no appreciation. But resonance requires you to apply feeling as well as thought. Indeed, feeling is the more essential, for without feeling we’ll remain entangled in illusions (Wikan 1992:463).

I believe “resonance” to be a fruitful concept in order to obtain successful communication, because it can be conceptualised as part of reflexivity. Likewise, Maruska Svasek argues that emotions have always been intrinsic to the construction of anthropological knowledge, both during fieldwork and “writing up” (Milton & Svasek 2005). In trying to grasp the children’s points of view I tried to maintain the idea of empathy and resonance as a guiding idea. Many times I tried, more or less successfully, to stop and sense their reactions to me being there. Being sensitive, or empathetic, is a prerequisite for ethically satisfactory research, and sensitivity and ethics are two sides of the same coin. But this in turn rests on trust, which Elizabeth Tonkin suggests to be a better term than empathy as a guideline during fieldwork (Tonkin 2005). This argument corresponds to how this chapter started: gaining trust as vital for knowledge construction (particularly among sensitive groups). In sum, I tried to activate both the notion of “trust” and “resonance” during my fieldwork.

If my relations with the people I got to know did not include some degree of trust, they would not share their experiences with me. I tried to get them interested in exchanging “something”, and again went about overstating similarities and understating differences in order to break down the barriers. As an adult, it is impossible to think and feel like a child again, and it is here that the conceptualisation of bodiliness may be useful. My own childhood experiences are incorporated in my body, they are part of my memory and experiential structures, and may be activated while participating with and observing the children. During this process, I experienced some of their everyday practices, which became part of my reference frames and bodily experiences and may be activated for interpretation through later introspection (see Draaisma 2004). The methodological challenge of bodiliness is to try and make explicit how the researcher’s bodily reactions might influence the way she asks questions, understands and interprets the everyday

---

67 Concerning the importance of memory for knowledge construction, Hey writes: “Episodes like the one cited are so consonant with both the more negative memories of my own girlhood as well as my data that I am completely convinced by the power of imagining and memory as sources of social and cultural comment” (Hey 1997:20, note 5).
practices of the researched. In so doing, the researcher is positioned in the text, as I am positioned in the text in the conversation transcripts and some activities.

My interpretation of the children’s body language was vital in the continuous process of reflexivity and ethical considerations, and as the relationship is very asymmetrical regarding power, the possibility of exploitation was present. It was important to continuously remember to respect their integrity and to not try to pose questions that might be personally embarrassing or too intimate. One question in the guide “Do you know the meaning of the word ‘sexy’?” “Can you tell me what it means?” is a case in point. I always prepared them beforehand by saying that they would probably find the question weird, but that it was important for the research. I emphasised that they did not have to answer, and some embarrassment did occur, but in most cases the situation passed with just a little giggling (see Chapters 8 & 12 & 13).

I thought that if the people (children and parents alike) were given the impression of being “spied” on, the relationships might be terminated and information blocked, at least the narratives. In order to avoid that, sensitivity was needed as to how the individuals experienced the situation, for instance by being aware of their bodily and facial expressions. This was relatively easy with the children: If they did not like me being around, they told me so, directly or indirectly. Interpretation of body language is just as important regarding the parents, who out of general politeness, might not want to offend the researcher. Being reflexive and doing research that is ethically satisfactory thus becomes interconnected.

The combined approaches I have presented have hopefully resulted in interesting and valid knowledge on Norwegian preteen girls’ gender construction and peer relationships. As time went by, and I spent two to three days a week at the schools, the girls and boys got used to my presence and did not take any notice of my writing notes and asking questions. And as expected, some girls and boys were better informants and were more interested in relating to me than others. It was my ambition to communicate and relate most to those children I experienced as dominating the children’s social landscape, and those I experienced as having an eye for interpreting the social climate. Some of the girls at Østli looked upon me more as
A similar approach outlined in this chapter may be used (and is used) in the study of all sensitive groups as in anthropological fieldwork in general. Reflection on how mutual understanding develops in dialogue, continuously trying to reflect on one’s own personal behaviour in the field and how it is responded to, and making that as explicit as possible, is a way of neutralising the researchers’ influence on the research process. This procedure is called “being a sociologist on oneself”, and presupposes immersion with the informants (Hastrup & Ramlov 1988, Wadel 1991). I have outlined an approach for doing participant observation among vulnerable groups and have shown how this became relevant for my research. The next chapter presents in detail the field sites and their people.
Chapter 4: Field sites and their people

Notions of girls, boys and childhood are valued differently by different social classes and socio-cultural groups. Therefore this study includes children and families with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Two financially contrasted field sites dominated by families with children were selected in Oslo. The first area I attended is situated in the eastern part of Oslo (Østli) which is not as affluent as the western part (Vestdal). These districts were selected because of the great variations both in income level and in the class and socio-cultural dynamic of the households both inside Østli and between Østli and Vestdal as a whole. This makes it possible to discuss the intersection of gender, age, class, socio-cultural origin and sexuality related to young girls’ gender construction and peer relationships.

Østli is socially, economically and culturally heterogeneous. The district is an old working-class neighbourhood of Oslo, and is still dominated by families with relatively little education and low income levels. Nevertheless, all social classes are represented, and Norwegians who have spent their childhood there, often move back after their education is finished (Rysst 2005a). The people I got to know enjoy living in the area, which they experience as a kind of village (bygd). The housing structure and standard is mixed, with high rise blocks, villas and apartment houses of variable sizes and prices. Because it is possible to get an apartment for a reasonable price, the district has seen an influx of immigrant families in the last decade. This has resulted in a socially and culturally heterogeneous milieu, which also is apparent in the schools in the area.

In contrast, the chosen Vestdal district fares best in Oslo on all welfare indexes such as unemployment rates and social security services (Statistisk Årbok for Oslo 2001). The district is also economically and socio-culturally homogeneous and housing is dominated by villas. Housing is expensive and only people with high incomes can afford to live there. This excludes immigrants from non-western countries, as they generally hold low-income jobs (ibid., Wikan 1995, Gullestad 2001).
The main part of the fieldwork was done from August 2002 to June 2004. The school year in Norway begins in the middle of August and ends on the 20th of June. I started visiting the Østli School in Oslo in late May 2002, at the end of the 3rd grade; the children I got to know were nine-ten years old. The most intensive parts of the fieldwork were carried out during the 4th and the 5th grades (ten-eleven years old). I also spent days with them in the 6th grade, and to round off the fieldwork I spent three days with them at camp in June 2005 (6th grade). Due to the fact that I work in Oslo and they live there, it has been difficult not to visit them every now and again, particularly after receiving a request to do so by text message (sms). Therefore I have also spent time with them in the 7th grade in 2006, first at a school disco party and then at the end of the school year and the end-of-term ceremony. This ceremony is special in the 7th grade, because it marks the end of primary school in Norway. The following year, children change buildings and meet new teachers.

The fieldwork was different at the Vestdal School, where I had my first visit in August 2003, and the most intensive period during winter and spring 2004. The girls and boys were then in the 5th grade and were ten-eleven years old. The field work at this site was also officially terminated in June 2005. But also here I visited the children at the end of the 7th grade and attended the end-of-term ceremony in 2006. The Vestdal children would also change buildings and meet new teachers for the new academic year.

In the following I refer to the children as both 4th and 5th graders, because the fieldwork took place during the 4th and the 5th grades, partly also the 6th (7th) grades. I will differentiate between the children’s age where it is relevant. The important point is that I followed the same girls and boys on and off during a three-year period, when they all were between nine and twelve years old. This long-term acquaintance has made it possible to discuss in-depth the questions concerning the sexualisation of childhood and young girls acting older than their age, as well as the issues of continuity and change in gender construction and peer relationships.
Geographical landscapes

Both field sites are situated in close proximity to the famous recreation area of Oslo: (Nord) and (Lillo) Marka which consists of miles of forest, nicely cared for with narrow roads, paths and ski tracks in the winter season. The distance from the core of the city is about the same for both sites: fifteen minutes by tube. As such, the two sites share some common structural characteristics. The fact that the forest is so close in both settings means that the inhabitants have similar opportunities for outdoor recreation activities. However, I found that they utilise these surroundings differently depending on cultural background and class (see Chapter 5).

The two school areas vary in several dimensions which have consequences for which activities the children are inspired to engage in during breaks. The schools’ topological situations differ; they are situated in different geographical milieus. The school buildings are also built at historically different times. The Østli School is quite old, with a flat, asphalted space in front. In recent years, the area behind the school has been reorganised for play. Here the children find swings and climbing frames, and a small slope for sledging and skiing during winter. However, the Østli School area on the whole is flat. The forest, or Marka, is twenty minutes away on foot, making it close enough for school organised activities, but too far for the children’s own activities during breaks.

In contrast, the Vestdal School is only nine years old. It has only two floors, and is built on several levels, in a terraced fashion. This is because the area itself is hilly and uneven. The school has a large, flat asphalted space in front of the main entrance. This area is usually used by the 6th and the 7th graders. Every other grade has its own house with an asphalted space in front. Climbing frames and swings are spread around the whole school area and the forest is just outside the doors. There is also a small football field open for all pupils to use.

These geographical descriptions of the two school settings indicate that the possibilities for activities during breaks varied to some extent, although the same seasonal activities were seen. The most noticeable difference was that skipping rope

---

68 I don’t describe the schools in detail because they are not to be easily recognized.
and football were more common at Østli, as the bigger asphalted space inspired these activities and made it easier for many to join in. In contrast, it was difficult to find enough space for skipping rope at Vestdal; the activity did not occur often, and the footballers had to move far from their “class” house. As far as I was told and from what I observed myself, few went to the football field during breaks.

I will now give a short presentation of the people who made the analysis in this study possible. This includes the teachers and pupils in two school classes at Østli and one at Vestdal. I have organised the presentation around themes that will be analysed in detail throughout the study, namely age, gender, class, cultural background and circles of friendships and children’s presentations of self. Some children and friendship groups are described more fully than others because they dominate in the chapters to come.

**Social landscapes**

The thesis is based on 71 girls and boys of ten-eleven years of age (40 girls and 31 boys), 47 children (28 girls and 19 boys) at Østli and 22 children (10 girls and 12 boys) at Vestdal. In addition, 7 girls a year older and 12 children (6 girls and 6 boys) four years older were interviewed in groups, which make a total sample of 90 children (57 from Østli and 33 from Vestdal).

**The people at Østli**

**The teachers**

Both the 4th (5th) grade classes had female teachers. Kjersti is the teacher in 4A; she is in her forties, is married and has three children. She has a sporty look, wears jeans and leisure outfits at school and does not use make-up, but does have highlights in her hair. Marie is the teacher in 4B. She is in her early thirties, is single and has no children. She too uses jeans and sweaters of the sporty style, but uses mascara on a daily basis. As such, the teachers are role models for a sporty feminine style.

The two 4th (5th) grade classes have similar compositions regarding gender and cultural backgrounds. Kjersti has 15 girls and 9 boys in her class, Marie 13 girls and 10 boys, which gives us a majority of girls in this age category. 11 out of 24 pupils
in Kjersti’s class, 4A, are of non-western origin, compared to 11 out of 23 in Marie’s class. In 4A, 9 of the 15 girls and 2 of the 9 boys come from non-western backgrounds; in 4B, 5 of 13 girls have the same background, compared to 6 of 10 boys. This means that half of all the ten year-old girls at Østli have non-western backgrounds, whereas only 8 of 19 boys have.

It is primarily the girls of Norwegian origin in 4B (5B), sometimes joined by a few in 4A (5A), that dominate the social landscape of the ten year-old girls, as the following pages will show. As the study primarily focuses on girls, they will receive the most attention below.

The children and circles of friends
Cross-cultural research on young girls and boys holds that girls often seem to make friends in dyads, and that “best friends are a specific feature of female relations” (Hey 1997: 65). The situation at Østli seems to confirm this picture (see also Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Hagevold 2006, Hey 1997, Simmons 2002). Attached to these dyads are ever-changing, and sometimes conflicting associates or satellites. Of the 28 girls, 14 are in stable dyads.

4 (5) B: Early in the fieldwork, the girls making up what I have called group A (Nina, Marit and later Ida) caught my attention because of the amount of activity going on around them, and because they wore teenage-inspired, fashionable clothes. They were very visible in the social landscape. Ida is a stable but conflicting third associate to the more permanent dyad of Nina and Marit. They all have Norwegian backgrounds and live in over the average financially well-off families of the area. Both parents in all three families have some education beyond high school, which contributes to making their household economies stable. 69

Mitha and Farou are friends and often spend time together both in and outside of school. But they are not “best” friends; they do not make up a dyad or a separate group. They have in common that they aspire to being a stable attachment to group A and have African origins. Mitha is a Muslim while Farou is Christian. In addition,

69 As I try to make the children and families not easily recognizable, I will not describe education and jobs in detail.
they both want to live as much as possible like Norwegian girls, a desire their families meet with tolerance. However, Mitha’s family in particular struggles to make ends meet because it consists of a single mother with many children and an unstable job. She is partly supported by the Social security service. Farou’s family is better off because both parents have a regular income.

Group B (Oda, Ellen) share similar family characteristics with group A, are of Norwegian origin and have many of the same interests. Christel is a relatively stable associate to this group, although she also plays with Mitha. Group B aspire to contact with group A, and often associate with those girls during play and in the classroom.

Group C (Synne, Solveig) consists of the last girl dyad in 4B and have Norwegian backgrounds. They are very best friends, are characterized by modesty, childishness and shyness and always stay together. They are different from the other girls in that they play with dolls, pets and toys defined as childish by many of the others, particularly by the girls of group A and B. They dress nicely but usually not in fashionable teenager-like clothes.

Finally, five other girls belong in 4 B, Sulla, Sukunda, Juanita, Samira and Lisa. The first four are of African origin and are Muslims. The first two dress in hijabs and often in shalwar khamis, while Samira and Juanita dress “western”. The last three are all loosely attached to group A or B, although Samira has gradually made a dyad with Anne (in 4A). At the beginning of the 5th grade Lisa with Norwegian origin joined the class, and has over the year become a close associate of group A, particularly Marit.

4 (5) A: Group D (Inga, Clara) belong in 4A. They are similar to group C in that they do not care much about clothes or appearance, but are interested in animals and biology. Inga has a Norwegian background, Clara is of Asian origin, and this dyad is one of the few with mixed socio-cultural backgrounds. They have many unstable associates, mainly from non-western backgrounds.
Group E consists of Mona and Toril. They are of Norwegian origin, and are also very close friends and always stay together. Because of Mona’s great interest and talent in sport activities such as football, they play with many children of both sexes during breaks. Mona is the most popular girl in her class, just as Nina is in hers, but Mona is quieter and more introvert. In the 4th grade she is not as fashion-conscious as Nina, but gradually becomes so during the 5th.

Group F (Miriam, Sasha) is the next dyad in 4A, consisting of two girls of Asian origin, where Prithua is a stable and close associate. It is probably more correct to call this group a triad. Miriam and Sasha are Muslims but they dress more in western clothes than shalwar khamis. Prithua is Hindu and I have only seen her in western clothes.

In contrast, the dyad of group G, consisting of Aila and Sumitra from a Muslim and non-western background, dress in shalwar khamis, including the hijab. This is particularly true of Aila. Sumitra sometimes wears jeans with a tunika, dress or long shirt on top, and thus combines different dress codes, which I discuss later.

Finally, three girls in 4A are loose associates to all of these dyads: Trine, Anne and Elizabeth. Elizabeth is of African origin, is teenage-oriented and is increasingly associated with Sumitra in group G, as Anne is with Samira in 4B. Trine and Anne are of Norwegian origin; they are always nicely dressed, Trine often teenage inspired, and associate to the dyads in unstable ways. In general, however, it is remarkable to note how stable the fundamental friendship circles have been during the fieldwork period.

It is not easy to profile stable dyads among the boys. This may be because I did not observe them as much or spend as much time with them as the girls. Nearest to a dyadic best-friend relationship description are Morten and Yaran in 4A, with Per as a close associate. They play football together in the local football team. The boys from non-western backgrounds in 4B were mostly visible when involved in conflicts, particularly Tommy and Sully. The boys that most often relate with the girls are Morten, Petter in 4A, sometimes Ivar, then Anthony, Nils and Martin in 4B. All of the latter, except Anthony, have Norwegian origin, but all are to some extent
inclined towards teenage culture in that they show some interest in *kul* clothes, pop music and girls.

**The people at Vestdal**

As already indicated, the fieldwork at Vestdal has not been as long and intensive as at Østli. The reasons for this are twofold. First and most importantly, I found the Østli site increasingly interesting and more heterogeneous socially, financially and culturally the more I got to know the social landscape. Therefore I wanted to “follow the loops” that had turned up, which left less time to spend at Vestdal. The reason for choosing two field sites had been the desire to make comparisons and find contrasts along class lines, which the site at Østli also made possible. As a consequence, my presence at Vestdal was more prepared than the first period at Østli because I knew what to observe and ask about in order to collect comparative data. In that sense, the fieldwork at Vestdal was fashioned after what I had, and was, experiencing at Østli.

**The teacher(s)**

The Vestdal School has three parallel classes on every level, but I stayed primarily in one of the three classes in the 5th grade. I did not consciously select one, but I met Inger, the teacher in 5A first, and she invited me in. She is a good-looking middle-aged woman, married with children, and is a model of upper middle-class style and elegance. She lives in the area and her son attended the secondary school across the street.

Inger started teaching 5A in the 5th grade, so she did not know the children when term started in August 2003. 5A at the Vestdal School consists of 22 children, 10 girls and 12 boys, all from Norwegian backgrounds.

I did not get to know the other two 5th grade teachers, a man and woman of around 30, very well. All in all, the teachers at this school showed a more sceptical attitude to what I was doing than at Østli. This was probably so because the school had previously experienced parents’ irritation when their children were exposed to
something the parents did not approve of or thought they had not been properly informed about.

The children and circles of friends
The “best friend syndrome” was less apparent in 5A at Vestdal than at Østli. Only one stable dyad, group A, exists between Ina and Marte. Group B consists of Kari, Helena, Karine and Aleksandra, but the core is not a dyad. The girls in group B are the ones who are most aware about fashion, with Hilde and Thale as unstable fashionable associates. Group C makes up a third constellation and consists of Andrine and Mina, but these girls also play with any of the other children. Both the teacher and the children say the class has a good atmosphere where no one is excluded, but that might not be an opinion shared by everybody.

As at Østli, it was not clear which boys were “best friends”. Håkon and Jon seemed to share some interest in fashionable clothes and football. So did Erlend and Håkon regarding football. Those boys who mixed most often with the girls were Erlend, Håkon, Geir and Anders, the first two sporting a teenage style; they wear kul clothes and engage in “going out with” practices (see Chapter 12). Geir and particularly Anders play with girls on a more neutral basis, and do not seem to care about fashionable clothes or hairstyles.

As a whole the girls in this class look more alike than the girls in the Østli classes. They have more or less the same style, which I will return to later in the study. Among the boys, however, the styles differ more, in that some of them are very oriented towards teenage culture in their way of dressing and styling their hair. More than with the girls, it is the boys who visibly sport expensive brands of clothes and teenage hairstyles. These issues will be discussed in the chapters to come, and I start with socialisation and family negotiations.
Part III: Family and consumption


Chapter 5: The family context and leisure activities

How children “learn” to consume, the lifestyles of their parents, the way that their parents reflexively engage with memories of their own childhood (or biography) and parental readings of material culture all lie at the heart of what can be understood as children’s consumption (Martens, Southerton & Scott 2004:175).

The above quote points to the themes of this chapter, namely the relationship between parents and daughters concerning consumption, gendered bodies and presentations of self. Modern childhoods are commercialised in many respects, which has consequences for family dynamics and consumption patterns (NOU: 2001:6, Frønes 2004, Cook 2004, Cross 2004). Social inclusion and participation, in the form of organized leisure activities, ordinary leisure activities, socializing, clothes and other material items, cost money. Commercialised childhoods thus challenge family budgets and are experienced as doing so by many families. A Nordic research project found that children are prioritized in all kinds of families irrespective of socio-economic situation and cultural background (Bonke et al. 2005). It seems that parents in most families try their best to “keep up with the Jones’s” with regard to children’s needs and wants, in order to avoid them being stigmatized and marginalized. This tendency is also confirmed in other studies (see Kochuyt 2004, Sloth 2004, Ridge 2002). The present research overlaps and includes nine of the same families as in the Nordic project, and would seem to indicate a relationship between the capacity for consumption and a child’s popularity and sense of belonging in the peer group (Rysst 2006). This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11.

There are innumerable theories on the subject of consumption, but this chapter draws on the works of the Marxist inspired Conrad Lodziak, in particular his book The Myth of Consumerism (2002). In it, Lodziak criticizes what he terms the “latest ideology of consumerism” for having put too much emphasis on consumption as an

---

“arena of choice and individual freedom”, on its “symbolic value rather than its material use value” and thus on consumption as the “maintenance and expression of self-identity and lifestyle” (Lodziak 2002:1). Lodziak argues that this reasoning only holds for a minority of people, where the majority is more concerned with consumption as basic needs rather than wants. He says:

To those blessed with a fair measure of common-sense, the culturalist theory of consumption, an elaborate fiction like so many products of an academic world that is cut off from reality, can be ignored as an irrelevance. However, I have chosen not to, primarily because the cultural theory of consumption is politically important (ibid.:ix).

As such, Lodziak’s point of departure in studying consumption resonates with the anthropological ideal of using “experience-near” concepts and perspectives discussed in previous chapters.

Parents play an important part in how their children relate to material objects. As long as children live with their families and don’t earn their own money, they are totally dependent on parents for their consumption. But that does not mean they don’t influence family spending (Ekstrøm 1999). They do, in different ways and by different means. The Norwegian family atmosphere is considered by many to be characterized by negotiation and diplomacy (see Hennum 2002: 69). Independence, the overarching ideal of Norwegian and northern-european child-rearing practices, is presumably best achieved in the “negotiation family” (ibid.). This is a family model which acknowledges that children have their own needs and rights, and that adults are obliged to take their opinions seriously. Norwegian children’s rights are established by law in, amongst other things, the *Barneloven* (the Children’s law) of 1981, paragraphs 31 and 33 (see also Howell 2006). In this manner, the law supports the “negotiation family” as a cultural norm (Hennum 2002). This way of thinking shows that the Norwegian authorities regard children as “competent”. Children who participate and want to decide in matters concerning their own lives is part of the Nordic image of “the competent child”, implying that “innocence” does not mean “incompetence” but agency (see Kjørholt & Lidén 2004, Juul 1995). The notion

---

71 “Consumption” is understood as “all that is consumed”, and “consumerism” to “unnecessary consumption” that does not address needs (Lodziak 2002: 2).

72 “Independence” is understood as able to take care of oneself, autonomous, exceptional and unique-“being oneself” (Sørhaug 1995, see also Rysst Heilmann 2000).
became part of childhood research in the early 1990’s (Brembeck et al. 2004). The idea has its roots in Rousseau’s thinking on children’s innocence, independence and human rights, combined with Nordic rural traditions (ibid.). The Nordic organisation of Ombudspersons for children is based on this notion, and the Norwegian State started to commit itself early on to the welfare of children.

Ideals being what they may, Norwegian families differ as to how responsive they are to their children’s needs, wants and opinions. It depends on the individual family’s cultural background, traditions and history (see below). Some children are affected more than others by the degree of their parents’ authoritarian child-rearing practices. What this means is that parents tend to have a say when it comes to how money is to be spent. Of the girls (and boys) I got to know, no clothes or expensive objects were bought totally independent of the opinions and help of their parents. This has implications for the girls’ perceptions and presentations of self, both in terms of appearance and the organized activities they attend.

How the girls position themselves is dependent on the situation and social context. This means that subject positions are flexible and change from one situation to the next, as every person has multiply subject positions, as discussed in Chapter 2. The girls position themselves in relation to their parents, teachers, siblings and peers, and often differently in relation to different peers of the same and opposite sex. In this chapter, I show that the social context and experiential space of family and the contexts and spaces of paid, organised leisure activities consist of different practices and ways of doing girl (and boy). These may overlap but also remain in opposition to one another, such as being cool, being sporty, being a polite pupil and being a “nice” girl, as the following chapters will show.

The family context includes negotiations between parents and children concerning consumption, firstly regarding the child’s desire for a certain leisure activity and then regarding bodily appearance to be discussed in Chapter 6. As presented in Chapter 2, I find it fruitful to organize the children’s everyday life according to social contexts, which are distinguished from each other by the kind of interactions they encompass. In this chapter on family and individual presentations of self, the family context consists of intergenerational interactions between family members.
with regard to consumption and cultural codes, including how to do gender. This means that negotiations between parents and girls on spending money on clothes, on other material items and on paid, organized activities are included in this context. However, the different leisure activities are conceptualized as independent social contexts with their own experiential spaces, such as the football context and the dance context, amongst others.

Martens, Southerton and Scott (2004) present a framework for empirical research concerning children and consumption, which works as a point of departure. This consists of four themes taken from the sociology of consumption: learning to consume; lifestyle and identity formation; children’s engagements in material culture; and parent-child relationships (Martens et al. 2004). They argue that such a framework enhances understanding of how cultures of consumption impact on children, children and parents, and construct notions of childhood (ibid.). In the following, it is primarily the last three themes which are included in the discussions, which are organized around these questions: Which activities engage the children I got to know and which notions of femininity are present in the different social contexts? What form do the family negotiations take in these matters, and how do they relate to class, gender and cultural background? Before I discuss these issues, I will explore the different dimensions of a family’s social context.

The family as experiential space
Every family has a history that consists of different kinds of capital, be it economic, cultural or social, which are parts of the experiential structures of individual family members (Rudie 2007). Economic capital consists of material objects or judicial guarantees concerning such objects, such as money or property. Cultural capital consists of individual characteristics such as education, upbringing and appearance and social capital of social networks and social relationships (Bugge 2002). I understand “personal” capital to be a combination of these. According to Bugge, it is the uneven distribution of different forms of capital that is the basis for how Bourdieu understands class distinctions and power (ibid.), which is the position taken in my study.
Family history is embodied in individual members and can be identified in appearance, speech, behaviour, manners and taste; they are often habitual and part of family routines and thus related to social stratification, class and cultural background (see Tomanovic 2006). Dispositions for doing femininities and masculinities are laid down in the developing bodies through interaction with family members, peers and relevant others in different experiential spaces. The family, as well as the media and school, contributes to the construction of gendered bodies and to creating different forms of personal capital, such as individual characteristics, material items and social relationships. As will be shown, personal capital influences the girls’ relationships to both adults and particularly peers, in that popularity is related to forms of capital (see Chapter 10).

As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, the children included in my study have deliberately been selected for their different socio-economic backgrounds, or class, in order to investigate how that dimension in intersection with age and socio-cultural background influences gender construction and peer relationships, and thus the sexualisation of childhood. Empirical investigations show that significant class differences still exist in Norway (Gullestad 1989, Lien, Lidén & Vike 1999, Vike 2001, Helland 2005, Wikan 1995) which lately inspired the Norwegian magazine *Sosiologi idag (Sociology today)* to dedicate one issue solely to class analysis. The editors emphasised that despite the changes in working relations, class analysis is still relevant and fruitful. The core of the concept is also today related to authority structures and position in the labour market in addition to education level (Helland 2005). Vike argues that expressions of class in Norway today are not by class segregation, ideological differences and political mobilization, but by “lifestyle, health, individual choices, individual resources and taste” (Vike 2001:147, my translation). Put differently, class is expressed through consumption patterns with intended visible and conspicuous elements, not only habitual and ordinary. And as Bourdieu also convincingly argues in *Distinction* (1995), education is a good point of departure for marking social class and position. Education and taste form the principles of differentiation, in that people with the same educational level have more in common concerning taste than others (Bourdieu 1995). Implicit in this is also the importance of social background in general, which the concept of “experiential structures” encompasses (see Chapter 2). Bourdieu writes:
Research shows that all forms of cultural activity (going to museums, concerts, art galleries etc.) and all preferences concerning literature, art or music are closely connected to education level (measured in education title or number of years) (Bourdieu 1995:44).

As such, some commonalities in taste and style are presumed to exist among people of the same level of education. The cultural and social traditions entrenched in a family’s experiential space have an influential role in shaping lifestyle, taste and preferences. However, financial standing influences the potential for implementation. This also includes spending on children and the way they are presented as boys and girls. Among the people in my study, details of all the parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds are not known except for the parents of the children I got to know the best, to which I will return soon. Therefore when I categorize families as being of one class or another, it is primarily based on the parents’ present occupation. In this I also draw on Lodzian’s important work (2002) because of his conceptualization of social stratification which is more differentiated and illuminating than the terms “middle” and “working” class.

Lodziak refers to Will Huttons’ categorizations of the population of the UK into “the disadvantaged”, “the marginalized and insecure” and “the privileged” (Lodziak 2002: 111-112). The classification is primarily based on how people are connected to the labour market, as unemployed, part-time, temporary, fixed-term contract, full-time and so on, and the consequences thereof concerning income, employee rights and consumption behaviour (ibid.). People in the first two categories have a loose connection, those in the first maybe none at all as unemployed, while people in the second category have decent, but insecure employment. Therefore their consumption is sparse and careful because the future is uncertain. ‘The privileged’ have full time and secure jobs and employment, although not all of them are “rich” (ibid.).

As for the people involved in this study, Østli is traditionally a working-class area and remains so today, although some families with higher education also live there. In general, both income and education levels are relatively low compared to Oslo as a whole, and immigrant families, even though they may have an upper or middle-

---

73 For instance, a family with one permanent, full-time but low-salary job as cashier in a shop will have difficulties making ends meet (see Bonke et al. 2005). In the following I use the term “non-privileged” for the disadvantaged and the marginalised and insecure families, if the distinction between the two is irrelevant for the argument. What is important is the experience and implications having little money has in the non-privileged (and some privileged) families.
class background from their homeland, usually occupy unskilled and low salary jobs in Norway (Rysst 2005a, Wikan 1995, Gullesstad 2001). Most of the families from non-western backgrounds included in my project are not “privileged”, which influences their consumption patterns in that most consumer goods are purchased in low-price chain stores. As such, a family’s consumption pattern emerges not only in the intersection of class and socio-cultural background, but also in gender and age. In passing it is worth noting that the dominant and most popular children at Østli come from privileged families, such as Nina, Marit, Ida, Mona, Toril, Morten and Yaran. This information serves as an introductory indication of a relationship between economic capital and popularity to be discussed later in Chapter 11.

At Vestdal the situation is more socio-economically homogenous, in that families both have a higher education and income level than the average family in Oslo and are thus in general privileged families (Statistisk Årbok for Oslo 2001). The area is particularly known for being home to families in business and IT occupations, more than in academia (personal communication with the teachers at Vestdal). Their consumption patterns show more money in most respects: more expensive housing, cars, holidays, clothes, sports gear, leisure activities and food. In addition, it is common in this area to have a live-in au-pair to look after the children, and also a regular cleaner. There seems to be no doubt that the area predominantly consists of upper-middle and middle-class families (ibid.). The relationship between popularity and high income is not apparent among the children I got to know at Vestdal. I suggest this is because the families are more economically homogenous than at Østli, making other forms of capital just as important (see Chapter 11). But on the basis of education and income levels it makes sense to denote Østli as a working-class area and Vestdal as upper-middle and middle class (Statistisk Årbok for Oslo 2001).

Another relevant conceptualization from Lodziak’s work mentioned previously concerns needs, wants and preferences. As noted above, he criticizes the post-modern inspired “ideology of consumerism” for only focusing on symbolic consumption, on consumption as being only concerned with the freedom of choice and identity construction (Lodziak 2002). It is his contention that consumption is primarily about satisfying basic needs for the majority of people, not preferences and
wants, and that “needs”, “wants” and preferences are concepts wrongly used synonymously:

Underpinning this difference between needs and wants is the recognition that there are universal needs relevant to an individual’s survival and well-being, whereas wants tend to be associated with the mere preferences of particular individuals. Likewise, as sources of our motives, basic needs are altogether more substantial, more enduring, and generally, if not always more powerful than wants (Lodziak 2002:4).

He argues that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the one and the other, and favours differentiating between “basic or survival needs and other needs, desires or wants” (ibid.: 95). He emphasises that a clear distinction is not necessary but a “general distinction that enables most people broadly to establish priorities for courses of action” (ibid: 95, emphasis original). Most importantly, inspired by Marxism, he argues that the relevance of basic needs for analyzing consumption “resides in the consequences of the alienation of labour, and the consequences of employment for our total range of action” (ibid.: 3).

It is my contention that basic needs, needs and desires will always overlap to some extent. A pair of expensive designer jeans may fulfil both basic needs (to keep warm and conceal a naked body) as well as aspirations (a pair of jeans securing inclusion in the peer group). If social inclusion and belonging is considered a basic need, as implied in the relative definition of poverty, the difficulty of any clear separation of the concepts becomes quite apparent. This is because of the relativity and context-dependent quality of needs and desires, but also because some choice is also possible with the cheapest commodities, where colour and style are concerned. This makes it feasible for creating “their own style” to some extent also among non-privileged families. For instance, they can buy secondhand clothes and furniture instead of new. However, this option is only realistic if secondhand is accepted by the social group the family identifies with, including the children’s peer groups. Of the families I got to know, not one shopped in secondhand shops. One father of non-

---

74 Here I understand basic needs as absolute survival needs: food, water, clothes and housing to keep warm. “Needs” are then relative needs, similar to wants.

75 Peter Townsend’s definition concerns poverty as a social phenomenon that must be studied in relation to the material standard of living in society (Stolanowski & Tvetene 2005). He defines poverty as “the absence or inadequacy of those diets, amenities, standards, services and activities which are common or customary in society” (Townsend 1979). Basic needs concern fulfilment of these conditions.
western origin, living in a marginalised and insecure family, said their culture forbade using clothes previously worn by strangers, while passing down clothes among family members was ok. This indicates that cultural codes of suitable clothing are learnt in the experiential space of family, which motivates certain forms of consumption.

The terms “needs” and “wants” are closely linked to Lodziak’s concepts of “necessity” versus “post-necessity” spending, where only the last variant is compatible with notions of priorities and preferences, which again relates to taste (Lodziak 2002). Different tastes have to do with different preferences and cultural capital, as elaborated by Bourdieu (1986, 1995). He argues that the economy puts limits on taste, and introduces the concepts of “taste of necessity” and “taste of luxury (freedom)” (Bourdieu 1986). The first is limited by sparse financial resources, or a “constrained taste” (ibid.), and is in this study connected to the categories of “the disadvantaged” and “the marginalised and insecure” (Lodziak 2002:111-112). The taste for luxury distances itself from necessity and is the taste of the “winners” (the privileged), they have a real choice, a choice “the disadvantaged” and “the marginalised and insecure” don’t have. I interpret Lodziak’s notion of post-necessity spending and Bourdieu’s concept of the taste for luxury to encompass the same phenomenon. How a family presents itself and its members is thus related to the fulfilment of necessities, preferences and tastes, for instance what clothes preteen children wear (to be discussed in the next chapter) and which organised activities children attend after school. In a somewhat different vein, Mary Douglas argues that the consumption behaviour of families can be read as inspired by cultural “hostility” to other life styles. Put differently, a family is clearer about which life style it does not want to signify, than to the one they identify with (Douglas 1996). This argumentation also includes which leisure activities the children are not to attend, or to attend, which is the theme in the next section.

**Leisure activities in Norway and Oslo**

Norwegian children spend relatively few hours at school compared to children in other parts of Europe and other “western” countries. In the first five grades of school, children have approximately 20 hours of lessons per week. Because a
majority of parents work outside of the home, the schools offer children up to the 5th grade extra leisure time at school (*Skolefritidsordning, SFO*). This service is not free and can be compared to the organization of kindergartens. In actual practice, many children with Norwegian background attend the *SFO* in the initial years, but prefer to go home to an empty house alone or with friends from the 4th grade onwards. Children of non-western origin seldom attend the *SFO* because of the cost or because a parent or other relative is at home. This overall situation was the case among the children at both field sites.

As a consequence of these structural arrangements, Norwegian children have a comparatively large amount of leisure time. Hilde Lidén discusses how Norwegian children’s daily routine is organized around the arenas of school, *SFO* and the home, and for some Muslim children also around the mosque (Lidén 2000). In addition, different organized leisure activities also organize Norwegian children’s time (ibid.). Because of relatively few hours at school, it becomes extra relevant to attend organized paid activities in the afternoons. These activities cost money, and the most expensive are individual music lessons and sport disciplines that demand a lot of equipment, such as riding, tennis, golf and skiing. Why some activities are more popular than others at the two field sites in my study may be understood in the intersection of class traditions, parental prerogative, family economy and peer culture. It is also worth noting how attending activities varies according to gender and thus which femininities and masculinities seem attractive.

Lodziak’s views become relevant in relation to leisure activities, because, at a glance, the existence of paid, leisure activities may be understood as examples per se of post-necessity spending (Lodziak 2002). However, if leisure activities are understood as needs, they become part of necessity spending instead. Related to the relative definition of poverty and the empirical situation in non-privileged families, I hold that children stand the risk of being marginalized if they do not possess a minimum of relevant material items and attend some organized leisure activities. Thus these are more correctly conceptualized as needs rather than wants, and thus as necessity rather than post-necessity spending. Spending on children is thus normatively motivated and connected to a sense of shame and morality (Nygård 2005).
In general, at both field sites participation in some minimum number of leisure activities is necessary for social inclusion in the peer group. The most important activities for girls are football, dancing, horse-riding and playing in the school brass band; for boys, football and skiing (all forms). As indicated, which activities are most common and popular in certain areas depends mainly on family preferences and class, in that the expensive and individual activities are more widespread at Vestdal and team activities are more common at Østli. The relationship between economic and cultural capital is thus illustrated but also the relationship between cultural priorities and financial resources, a theme I return to in Chapter 11.

In the following I present and compare the different social contexts of leisure activities at Østli and Vestdal. As noted, the focus is on family negotiations and gender construction and each context varies as to how relevant gender and other differences are manifested. The tables of the distribution of leisure activities serve as a point of departure.

### Østli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid, organised leisure activities among children at Østli</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Norwegian background</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brass band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-country skiing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taekwondo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horseriding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing (Disco)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5A and 5B consist of: 46 children

- Boys: 10
- Girls: 13

The numbers are absolute, not relative, because of the small sample group. In addition, because some children attend one activity and others two to three, the total number of children attending activities does not match the total amount of children included, namely 46 in Østli and 43 at Vestdal.
When the Østli and the Vestdal tables illustrating leisure activities are compared, they successfully indicate not only the class and gender differences, but also how actual activities are generated in the intersection of class, socio-cultural background and gender. In other words, the table indicates the interplay of cultural priorities and financial resources. In general, the Østli children attend more team activities while the Vestdal children attend more individual activities which are more expensive than for instance football. 25 out of 46 children at Østli play football and it is the most

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>5A Boys</th>
<th>5A Girls</th>
<th>5B Boys</th>
<th>5B Girls</th>
<th>Total Boys</th>
<th>Total Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing (Jazz, Traditional)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horseriding</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piano</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing/Painting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down hill skiing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-country skiing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowboard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handball</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ski jumping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choir</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gitar playing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trineter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorcycling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scouts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5A: 22 children:</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5B: 21 children:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I only did participant observation in 5A, but 5B answered the questionnaire. This makes the tables more relevant for comparison, including two school classes at each field site.
common activity for the girls (11 girls). The brass band comes second (9 girls) and horse-riding third (4 girls).

The Vestdal children engage in more varied (Vestdal 22, Østli 12), more individual and more expensive activities. As such, the connection between economic and cultural capital is indicated. As is shown, the most common activity for both sexes in the two Vestdal classes is skiing (both forms) and tennis, not football, although football is the next most common activity, but only among the boys. The most popular activities for the girls at Vestdal are horse-riding (9 girls), closely followed by dance (8 girls), downhill skiing (6 girls), golf (4 girls) and tennis (4 girls).

The social context of football

As the tables show, football is a common activity for both sexes among the children of Norwegian origin but only for boys from non-western backgrounds. For Norway as a whole, the organized football games engage the highest number of girls (Norges Fotballforbund 2005). At Østli only 4 of the 13 girls of Norwegian background do not play for the local football team, a team only for girls. 78 These girls are Solveig, Synne, Christel and Lisa. The reverse is true for the girls of non-western origin: only 2 of 13 girls play. Today, football includes the majority of the boys of non-western origin, but not the girls. Of the girls from non-western backgrounds, Farou and Elizabeth play (they are Christian). No Muslim girls play football (see Chapter 11). In the Østli area it is therefore possible to argue that the compositions of the football teams are in the intersection of class, socio-cultural background and gender. Playing football is thus a very popular activity and the pressure to join is strong among the girls. However, the motive for joining the team is just as much a wish to be included in the social activities and the milieu connected to the football field as a desire to play football (see also Storø 2007, Kjersem 2007). In a study of two Norwegian football teams for girls, Anita Kjersem concludes that the football field is a social “hang out” arena (Kjersem 2007). The football site at Østli is also a highly frequented place for children and teenagers. Many friends who do not play football stand on the sidelines, watching and commenting on the girls and boys playing. Among the ten year-old girls and boys there is a lot of talk and argument about

78 It is usual to establish a team only for girls if there are enough interested girls in the area. That is, they first play with the boys and then organize a team of their own.
football, the matches, and most importantly, about which players are good. Therefore, joining the team is not necessarily a positive experience for untalented players. Mitha said she quit because “she did not like playing football after all”. This is likely to be due to comments about her not being particularly good, as proficiency in sports is often debated and evaluated within earshot of the players. As a whole, the team at Østli is good, they win a lot, and one of the best players is Mona. Nina, Marit, Ida, Toril and Trine are also regarded as good players.

Being good at sports seems to be a powerful asset in achieving popularity. As such, Trine and Mona’s positions and popularity have increased during the time I spent with the children, and are one of the reasons why Mona and Nina have become better friends during the 6th grade. They are both interested in sports, have ambitions, and identify with sporty femininities: the image of the tough and sporty girl. In general, this identification results in them wearing clothes also bought in sport shops, particularly Mona.

At both field sites there exist strong positive emotions surrounding being a good football player, or being good at sports generally. Official Norwegian sport policy includes ideals of looking at child sports as pure play, rather than competition. All participating children are to be inspired to enjoy the activity, regardless of talent. This means that the leaders are to make sure that all children playing team sports, such as football and handball, are given equal opportunities. All children are to play an equal amount of time during matches. This may be a reflection of the Nordic egalitarian ideal (Lien et al. 1999). The ideology of equality is recommended until the children turn thirteen years old. Then the leaders may “top” the team by permitting the best players to play more than the others (note 79). In practice, many sports leaders top the team before the recommended time. This is partly so at Østli, which means the same girls are to be found sitting on the bench every match (for instance Oda and Ellen). According to the teacher Marie in 4B, two of the parents of those children protested, but the “topping” continued. As a result, Ellen quit the

---

79 [http://www.idrett.no](http://www.idrett.no) (13.9.07)
football team, but Oda stayed. One day, when the girls were to participate in a school football tournament, the following incident occurred. 80

The girls are going to the match by tube. Oda is one of the girls running late; the others stand waiting. When they see Oda coming, they all turn their backs on her. This may be so because of the protest and discussion initiated by her parents concerning her sitting too much on the bench, for which the other girls exacted this humiliating rebuttal. The message to Oda seems to be “obey the coach without protest because your football proficiency is not that good”. I suggest the exclusion is instigated by the girls with the most power, obliging the others to conform to the revenge tactic. Oda is very unhappy, but still does not quit the football team.

Occurrences such as these are an extreme variant, but similar episodes occur every now and again, and Oda, in addition to Mitha and Farou, is one of the girls who most often experience something of the kind. According to Margaret Atwood, “Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are lifesized” (Atwood 1989:125, see also Simmons 2002, Hey 1997). The girls included in this study contextually reflect this postulation, as the study will show. In particular Mitha, Farou and Oda want to be kul and included in the popular group, but find it difficult and often have a hard time, such as Oda’s experience demonstrates. The above event highlights the importance of sporting talent for inclusion among the popular, and indirectly promotes the importance of the tough and sporty way of doing girl and femininity also when not playing football.

The femininities generated in the experiential space of football are related to masculinities. Playing football is traditionally understood to be a masculine activity but today is experienced as something attractive and kul by both girls and boys in the Norwegian setting. As cited above, football is the sport activity which engages the largest number of girls in Norway. Compared to countries such as the UK, “where many girls were routinely excluded from the game” (Renold 2005:57). When the Norwegian girls try to join the boys, they have “invaded” this masculine arena and

80 As indicated, I did not experience this event myself. As such, it is less reliable as data than the other stories, but resonates with what the girls told me about ‘topping’ of the team. I also observed the same mentioned girls on the bench during the Norway Cup in 2006.
transformed football into a way of doing girl by repetitive subversive feminine performances (Butler 1990). Over time this has today changed “footballer” into an accepted femininity subject position. From the UK, Diane Reay argues that girls who enter the masculine arena because they want to do boy and distance themselves to the feminine, “cement rather than transform the gender divide” (Reay 2001:163). In a similar vein, Renold argues that among the girls in her study, “sport became a form of resistance to ‘girlie’ femininities” (Renold 2005:57). From a study in an English boarding school, Benedicte Carlsen reports that girls who played boys’ sports overheard comments to the effect that they “look like men and are all lesbians” (Carlsen 2007: 57). In contrast, the girls in my study transform the gender divide because they expand the femininity circuit by not distancing themselves to the feminine in engaging in a traditionally masculine activity. They engage in football as a new way of doing girl. Playing football and engaging in sports does not, however, exclude the Norwegian girls from positioning themselves in other, more traditionally feminine ways, such as berte or kul teenager-girl when outside the football context.

These cross-cultural varieties indicate differences in the relationships between femininities and between femininities and masculinities in the two countries (at least at the different national field sites), in which the Norwegian girls seem to have more options. This again may point to more equality between the genders in Norway than in the UK.

As noted, the peer pressure at Østli to play football is great, and the girls that want to be included in the gang have thus joined the football team for social reasons. This is partly the case with Farou. She is wondering which leisure activity to join, and asks for my opinion:

Farou: What do you think would suit me?
Mari: Ballet? (I suggest)
Farou: Ballet?? Mummy would not agree with you! She wants me to start playing football and become a good football player, or start doing KungFu, which is a combat sport. Mummy wants me to play football because my brother does so, but I think it is boring!! I want to dance Freestyle/disco and become a performer!

81 Renold has a subtitle in her book which reads “Girls don’t do football”……which was the attitude among the children in her study (Renold 2005:57). This is definitely not the case among the Norwegian girls.
Soon after this conversation, she joined the football team, which may be understood to be a result of both parental and peer pressure as opposed to genuine interest in the sport activity itself.

Despite the broad female participation in Norwegian football, the cultural ideas for female gender construction connected to football are still more associated to masculinity than femininity. Much has been written in the Norwegian media over the last ten years about girls being unsuited for football and growing overlarge muscles, making them more like men than women (see Storø 2007). The bodywork while playing football builds muscles that traditionally are not understood to be attractive in women, such as big thighs, bow legs and an ungraceful gait. The reason Elizabeth gives for quitting sheds some light on this issue of football and female attractiveness. She is a very good player, but quit because she got “such big muscles in her thighs and legs”. Her decision may have been taken as a result of discussions at home. Her parents are of high-class Kenyan origin and may want their daughter to conform to traditional feminine values. The models for these are definitely not found in the experiential space of football in which the subject positions are being sporty, tough and a bit cool.

Women and girls’ bodies are often subjected to an eroticized heterosexual gaze while sporting, and football is no exception. The outfits and bodies of women playing beach volleyball is a case in point, in that the Volley League decided they should play in outfits exposing a lot of skin for the sake of entertainment. The suggestion was also forwarded to female footballers, but not accepted by the Norwegian Football League. Therefore they play in outfits of much the same design as men: wide shirts and wide, knee long shorts, but their shirts are more clingy. This manifests the common connotations of female football and masculinity, which in the Norwegian setting also is nourished by rumours of homosexuality. As such, heteronormativity is evidently existent in the experiential space of football (as the suggestion of more feminine outfits also shows) and rumours of lesbianism early permeated that context. The first football teams for women were known to include many lesbians, who openly declared their sexual orientation (such as Linda Medalen).
In the last decade the rumour of lesbianism has been counteracted by an increased number of heterosexual girls joining the sport and playing well. The international football tournament, the *Norway Cup* has contributed in this regard (see chapter 8), focusing on participation for girls and boys on equal terms. The media has also contributed positively by broadcasting and writing seriously about women’s football, and most importantly, downplaying the masculine connotations by promoting them by feminine aesthetic: “The new Norwegian football girls gladly swap football shoes with high heels” (*Dagbladet Sportmagasinet* 7/9-2007). Norway, with its overall official policy of equality between the sexes has thus today managed to incorporate girls in the traditionally masculine context of football, but in the article referred to above, tries to underline that this does not exclude doing traditional femininities. Therefore Renold’s analysis of girls and boys in Britain (Renold 2005), and a recent Master thesis in anthropology from a British boarding school (Carlsen 2007), show that the football context there is much more gender-segregated and associated to masculinity than in Norway today.

The Norwegian experience of female football underlines the possibility of modifying the masculine ethos of aggression and violent physicality prevalent internationally in that social context (Fitzclarence & Hickey 2001). Lindsay Fitzclarence and Christopher Hickey (2001) argue that “In our opinion, too many coaches of football, at all levels, overemphasize the ‘hit ‘em hard’ attitude. It does not have to be this way!” (ibid.: 132). They propose a change from the “bottom up” (in junior boys’ football) by developing respect and responsibility in their players. This strategy resembles the way Norwegian girls have entered the masculine field of football and introduced a “softer” attitude to the game.

Girls and boys playing football in Norway also engage the parents both as coaches and supporters. Ivar Frønes argue that the modern family ideology demands that parents play an important part in their offspring’s leisure time and activities (Frønes 2004, see also Sørhaug 1995, Hennum 2002). Parental participation is fundamental to keeping many of the children’s leisure activities running, both financially and in practice. Working together to collect funds and driving children to competitions and matches, parents make up an essential cornerstone in Norwegian children’s organized leisure activities. At Østli it is Mona’s mother (of Norwegian origin) who
is the coach for the girls’ team, and her father is the primary supporter or referee (Oppmann). The fact that Mona’s mother is a coach known to both the parents and the girls alike, is probably the reason the parents agree to their daughters playing football more readily than if the coach was unknown. Nina’s father is also active in football activities as a coach for the team of Nina’s younger brother. In addition, these parents do sport themselves. Both Mona’s and Nina’s sporting interests are thus probably as much inspired and motivated by family members in the experiential space of family as by peers.

As the table above shows, none of the girls in 5A at Vestdal played football. This may be accidental, since some girls in the other two 5th grade classes play, but may also indicate different gender orientations related to social class. It may be that the masculine connotations of football have a stronger hold in Vestdal privileged upper-middle class families. This may mean that traditional femininities have a stronger position there, creating an obstacle to girls playing football. It is a common activity for the boys, but not as central as at Østli. This may also be incidental, because boys in general are very interested and active in football in other western parts of Oslo, for instance in Heming, FC Lyn football and Stabæk football clubs. As the table shows, the Vestdal boys in general tend to prefer practicing (expensive) individual sports, such as tennis, golf, slalom and other ski activities during the winter season, as do the girls.

The social context of skiing

Norway is known to be a nation filled with snow and ski enthusiasts as corroborated by the saying “Norwegians are born with skis on their feet”. Of course, this is only partially true. Still, Norway has a long history of good cross-country ski athletes and of people using their leisure winter time going cross-country skiing. But as the tables show, the popularity of skiing varies according to economic and socio-cultural background.

At Østli, Nina is the only girl who practices organized skiing during the winter season (Morten, her boyfriend, was the only boy. Later Marit also joined). Nina’s
idol is the leading ski champion Bente Skari. 82 Again the experiential space of family, or more accurately, Nina’s father and grandfather encourage her and take her skiing at weekends. When the children are asked one Monday morning at school to draw something they had enjoyed doing the last weekend, Nina draws herself dressed in ski gear:

Besides drawing attention to her interest in skiing, this picture points at her enthusiasm for certain types of ski gear and brand names, which are written on the clothes: *Norheim, Swix* and *Fila*. She has also written the brand of her skis on them: *Fischer* (her ordinary skis) and *Madshus* (skis for cross-country skating). In general, the gear differs in quality and prices and most prestige is usually connected to the most expensive, particularly that advertised by the ski idols. The drawing shows the importance of having different gear for different situations: one ski suit for competition (*konkurranse dressen min*) and one for training (*treningsdressen min*). The close attachment between Nina and Marit resulted in Marit joining the ski classes with Nina after ending her dance lessons. Nina’s influence on Marit is also indicated in that she drew a similar picture highlighting the brand of her skis (*Fischer*):

82 She was a leading star at the time of the fieldwork. Today she has retired.
Because they are best friends, Marit is permitted to imitate Nina’s drawing. If somebody else had done it, a lot of arguing would probably have ensued because copying, or “parroting” another is deemed socially unacceptable. The drawings demonstrate that skiing activities cost more money than participation in football. The implications of expensive leisure activities for popularity, belonging and integration are discussed in Chapter 11.

Skiing is a more widespread activity at Vestdal than at Østli, and the interest in various sorts of skiing was revealed through talking to the children and teenagers in addition to a questionnaire. The history and experiential spaces of families living in the area are filled with different sport activities, where cross-country and downhill skiing are frequent family activities during winter weekends and holidays. The teenage girls interviewed enjoy skiing so much that they even go skiing alone because they “find it refreshing”. It is not uncommon for children and teenagers to ski every day and participate in competitions during weekends. Entire families are often involved, such as the family of fifteen year-old Sally: All the six family members love skiing, and they go almost every day. The following conversation on these matters between Sally’s friend Caro and myself indicates different family histories and experiential spaces at Østli and Vestdal:

Caro: Very many of the people up here are engaged in sports activities, the milieu is very sporty really. There are very few who never go cross-country skiing. Families that never go skiing are VERY few. Three or four in the whole area. That’s not many, in this I think we are different from other parts of Oslo, maybe it is natural, since many live so far from the ski area (‘Marka’).
Mari: But the people I got to know at Østli live as close to the Marka as you...
Caro: Oh well, then I don’t quite understand….Maybe if your parents don’t ski, and then you (the child) don’t go skiing either.

Caro is correct in that skiing is not so widespread at Østli, and the families of non-western background seldom ski at all (I did not know of any). It is also common that children of non-western origin do not have their own skis, which some experience as humiliating on school ski days. Their parents often do not prioritize skis for their children. As such, the extent of ski activities is surely generated in the intersection of class and socio-cultural background, irrespective of gender. Boys do not own more winter sports gear than girls. Samira at Østli negotiated with her father in order to make him buy some secondhand cross-country skis, she did not possess any skis at all. In contrast, in the case of those like Sally from Vestdal above, expenditure on ski equipment is very high, but as long as it is a family project, the negotiations between the children and the parents seem easy.

The phenomenon of post-necessity spending may seem obvious; ski equipment is more or less expensive, and the expensive sort is found at Vestdal. Sally’s situation resembles that of Nina’s family at Østli, which may be no coincidence in that the latter’s preferences bear witness to the *ss style in their family dispositions (such as brand sporty clothes and pale colours) and lifestyle (such as a big house, two expensive cars and well-filled book shelves). As a whole, family money is more easily spent on “sound” activities such as sports, as opposed to junk food and movies. This is also the attitude at Østli: parents want to encourage sports in their children, in order to prevent them from just “hanging around and getting into bad company”, as one mother put it. 83 Storø reports the same parental attitude from his study of young female football players in Oslo (Storø 2007).

It may be argued that the ways of doing femininities and masculinities in the social context of cross-country skiing today is quite gender neutral, in that the gear and the activities per se do not differ much. The cultural gender circuits overlap to a large extent. Contrary to the experiential space of football, a female cross-country skier does not challenge traditional femininities. However, the gender neutrality is not complete. Reactions arise when female cross-country skiers become too muscular.

---

83 The Østli area has a problem with youth gangs engaged in difference forms of criminal acts.
and masculine. For instance, the heterosexual hegemony and eroticized male gaze have been activated by one of the present leading stars Marit Bjørgen, in that her body shows particularly big muscles in parts associated with masculinity and resulting in broad shoulders and big over arms. She has not, however, been openly suspected of lesbianism because she has spoken about her boyfriends all along. Off piste, the female ski elite, as the footballers, have also shown themselves to dress in a typically feminine fashion (depicted in TV, newspapers, magazines). This brief discussion shows the omnipresent relevance of gender and how heteronormativity works even in spaces of possible gender neutrality. The interpretation resonates with the claim made by West and Zimmerman (1987) that it is not possible not to do gender in societies preoccupied with gender differentiation. This is surely the case in the context of dancing.

The social context of dance

Another attractive physical activity for girls, not boys, at both field sites is dancing, Freestyle/disco dancing at Østli and Jazzdance at Vestdal.84 I perceive dancing to be popular at Østli because many girls express the desire to start taking lessons, but are not allowed to by their families because it is too expensive. Farou and Mitha continuously negotiate at home about wanting to dance. Oda and Marit did dance previously, but quit because of pressure from the coaches to attend competitions. This costs extra money; both participation fee and outfits being needed. In addition, they did not like the new coach very much. Therefore, only three of the girls have danced for some years, and particularly one, Ida, has dance as her main leisure activity. She dances three days a week, in addition to playing football and playing in the school brass band. She is the only girl who attends three different activities a week. At Østli, it is common to attend a maximum of two activities, however many of the children, for instance Farou, Mitha and Samira, partake in only one activity and most of the girls of non-western backgrounds attend none. Dancing participation may thus also be understood to exist in the intersection of class, gender and socio-cultural background.

84 As the table from Østli shows, only one girl actually attended dancing lessons at the time of the enquiry. But two others had danced previously, and many spoke of their desire to start. Only one boy in the whole sample group attended dancing lessons, Geir at Vestdal, but he danced traditional dance, not jazz or disco.
Ida has had dancing lessons since she was two years old, and is today very good. This is a characteristic of her personal capital and gives her an asset in achieving popularity among her peers. For girls, the gender models and aesthetic connected to this dancing context are exposed femininity and being sexy, which seems explicit and necessary to this dancing style. At one competition I attend, I observe an eleven year-old girl dancer with very red lips, blue eye shadow and mascara, dressed in leopard-skin tights, with a bare navel and a short, tight leopard-skin top. One of the coaches wears a shirt with “Sexy” written across his chest, and the accompanying parents take photographs of their girls in suggestive postures. All dancers, of five years and above, use glamorous dresses in competitions. The ten year-olds also wear make-up, whereas they wear ordinary training gear when practising. Then the outfit need not be clingy; it can be “loose”. All in all, the competition setting is not a bad imitation of Las Vegas dance shows, as illustrated by the following picture:

![Three unknown girls after a Freestyle/disco competition](www.lillestrom-dansloft.no)

Through dancing, Ida and the other girls at Østli are acquainted with femininities and aesthetic similar to those promoted by sexualised pop stars, and have personally referred to these with their bodies when dancing, which has become part of their experiential structures. In short, this experiential space inspires subject positions of exaggerated femininity (being sexy), which, once incorporated, may be activated in other social contexts, such as (school) discos.

As Ida started dancing at such an early age, it is fair to conclude that this was initiated and decided on by her parents. Today they are both eager and enthusiastic
about the activity. But playing football is something she has initiated herself, in negotiation with her parents, in that she doesn’t really have time for both dancing and football. I suggest her participation in football illustrates the social importance of this activity in order to feel included by the other girls of Norwegian origin and not risk exclusion from the circle of Nina and Marit.

At Vestdal, all but one girl in 5A attend *Jazz ballet* lessons, “but she will soon start, since we all go there”, said one of the girls. This reveals the peer pressure of dancing, which is similar to the football scene at Østli. And as at Østli, talent and proficiency, here in dance, were discussed and admired. It is also worth noting that the dance is called “Jazz ballet”, not “Freestyle/disco” as at Østli. How the dancing is advertised, may indicate different class origins and cultural orientations. The “Jazz ballet” advertisement says:

We emphasize movement, the joy of dancing and insight in music. Dance exercise gives strength, stamina, coordination and flexibility. The joy of dancing is in focus (www.xxx-dansestudio.no).85

In contrast, the advertisement where the girls from Østli dance “Disco/freestyle”, says:

The biggest dance activity in Norway! Find your training gear and dance to the latest pop hits til you sweat! (www.lillestrom-danseloft.no).

The announcement for the “Child disco” (4-6 years) at Østli says:

Amusing lessons in play and disco dancing. We dance to the latest hits in Hits for Kids. The children find this very cool! (www.lillestrom-danseloft.no).

In other words, the influence of popular culture both in music and dance is explicit and is considered attractive at Østli. Popular music is not mentioned at all at Vestdal, although the girls say they dance to pop music. I suggest that the role of popular culture is not accepted in the same way at Vestdal as it is at Østli. It is not accepted as part of their cultural capital, which supports Walkerdine’s interpretation of popular culture being a more accepted and positive motivation in the working classes in Britain (Walkerdine 1997). Her postulation thus seems to resonate with the Norwegian situation. Classical music and ballet are part of the experiential spaces of families at Vestdal and regarded as suitable activities for children, while this is not usually connected to working-class cultural traditions. However, both

85 I cannot write the whole internet address because of the anonymity. The translations are mine.
“Freestyle/disco” and “Jazz dance” promote eroticized femininities, as do many dance styles, the first somewhat more explicit and physically revealing than the latter. As a consequence of these conditions in Norway, the bodies of young girls in both field settings are exposed to and led into eroticized femininities through their dancing experiences, which, as suggested above, may influence their subject positions in other situations. As subject positions, the dancing femininities for young girls may thus be understood as informed by innocence as “wondrous desire” (Cross 2004), seduction and the Lolita culture (see Bryld 2005). The combination of these dimensions has a more explicit and extreme sexual expression in the disco/freestyle dance all over Norway (and the rest of the world) than other dance styles but is not so in the next experiential space to be discussed below.

The social context of brass band

As the Østli table above shows, playing in the school brass band is the second most common activity among the girls. The institution of the school brass bands has a long history in Norway. On big cultural occasions, such as the 17th of May, the Norwegian Constitution Day, otherwise known as “children’s day”, the school band is central, not only at Østli, but all over Norway. Gullesstad argues that it is a “matter of pride in Norway that children parading with flags, and not soldiers and tanks, are at the heart of the 17th May celebrations” (Gullesstad 1997:20). Gullesstad points to the value put on children in Norwegian ethos, in that they, rather than soldiers, are fronted on such a national day.

The brass band culture was started by William Farre in 1901 at Møllergata School in Oslo, aimed at the families of poor children. It was regarded as a cheap way to get some music education, in addition to creating a sense of community among those engaged. Children marching in the streets on the 17th of May began as far back as 1870, but in 1902 this was led by the Møllergata school brass band. Over the years this has become a Norwegian tradition, and as indicated, was initiated in the working class and was thus originally a working-class activity. It was initially only for boys, but during the 1950’s girls were also permitted, however they mostly joined the drill

---

86 See footnote 6 for a discussion of “wondrous innocence” (see Cross 2004).
87 http://www.adressa.no/nyheter/trondheim/byens_gater/article718944.ece
corps, which is a kind of dancing march in a feminine body-shaped uniform consisting of a short skirts, a jacket and a special hat on top. The boys’ uniform is identical but with trousers instead of a skirt. The girls’ uniform resembles the 1960’s air hostess uniform. As such, the brass band context depicts traditional femininity (and masculinity), rather than that of a modern (and cool) teenager. Today, girls also play instruments alongside the boys, but no boys do “drilling”. The “dancing steps” involved probably do not connote culturally acceptable masculinity.

The brass band activity is organised by parents in collaboration with the school, in that the school localities are used and the brass band often has the same name as the school. Many parents derived pleasure from brass band activity in their own childhood and want their children to experience the same. The parents of Mona’s best friend, Toril, are musicians, and the father is the leader of the band. The band activity is still creating a sense of (family) community in that parents are much needed to assist, and without their help, both practically and financially, the bands could not exist. It is one of the most time-consuming children’s activities for parents, but at Østli both parents and children seem to enjoy the atmosphere as it is part of the family history and experiential structures of family members in many homes. As such, positive emotions towards the activity seem to prevail in many families. The fact that only one boy in the 4th grade plays in the brass band may be coincidental, as the brass band in general is not gender-biased or gender-segregated.

At Vestdal, the brass band at the school has not been met with the same interest and enthusiasm as at Østli. In fact, the school did not have enough interested pupils to make up a band when the school opened about ten years ago. Therefore, they cooperate with the primary school nearby, and together they managed to establish a band. In 5A and 5B, not one child attended the brass band; they had individual music lessons instead. This may indicate that parents and children at Vestdal are not much interested in joining the brass band culture, also because it is one of the most time-consuming activities for parents. One reason for the lack of interest may thus be lack of time. High income is usually connected to demanding jobs, which involve parents working long hours. The children talk about au pair girls and maids as if this is something ordinary in their milieu. This was never a theme at Østli. In addition, if the parents have not themselves played in a brass band as children, this experience is
not part of their personal experiential structures, and thus not manifest in the experiential space of their present family.

**The social context of horse-riding**

Horse-riding is an activity that has trickled down from the upper classes over the last thirty years or so, and has first and foremost become a female activity all over Norway. That is the situation also at Østli and Vestdal, the latter field site having most riders. It is probably no coincidence in that horse-riding is a relatively expensive activity. The drawing below suggests that the horse is a kind of first love object for the young girl, as the interest for horses tends to become gradually replaced by an interest in boys and dating when entering high school.

Of the children I got to know, four girls at Østli (Oda, Ina, Christel and Lisa) and nine girls at Vestdal (but only two in 5A, Andrine and Hilde) took riding lessons, and during the 6th grade two more girls at Østli started (Solveig and Synne). As noted, riding is one of the most expensive activities to engage in, both in terms of the courses and the equipment. Therefore starting to take lessons is a theme for negotiation in the families, as in the case of Christel at Østli. She lives with her single mother and together they made a plan to fulfil Christel’s wish. She only attends this one activity, and is one of the few girls with Norwegian background who does not play football. The decision not to play football was made easier for her in that one of her friends, Mitha, does not play football either. That is, Mitha did play
football but quit, as mentioned before. I suggested she stopped playing as a result of being teased for not playing well enough, and as a result of related conflicts, because in general she very much wants to belong to the popular group. Instead she joined Karate classes as the only girl, besides finding pleasure in watching and accompanying Christel to the riding lessons, together with Petter. These children experienced social belonging and inclusion by being together in the riding context. The femininities connected to the context of riding and Karate are tough and sporty, very tough for the latter, but I interpret the feminine riding model to be more feminine than in football. This is because female horse-riders have existed for a much longer time than female football players, and traditionally had their own riding outfits, such as skirts and a side-saddle.

I did not get to know much about the context of horse-riding at Vestdal because only two of the girls in 5A rode. The other riders belonged in the classes I seldom frequented. However, the organization of the riding contexts is very similar and so is the expenditure and the gear. This means that it was only girls of Norwegian origin from privileged families that had the possibility to participate in this experiential space. This situation is a good illustration of how leisure activities are situated in the intersection of gender, class and socio-cultural background in that only girls of Norwegian origin living in privileged families attend riding lessons.

Conclusion

Of the children I got to know at both field sites, the districts as a whole differ in that, firstly, the children at Vestdal generally attend more activities (maximum 4 different every week) than the children at Østli (usually 2, only one girl attends 3). Secondly, the more affluent housekeeping finances at Vestdal are apparent in the choice of organized activities, where the children in general also attend more expensive individual activities than at Østli. As such, their presentations of self through paid organized leisure activities include stronger elements of post-necessity spending. However, in this upper middle-class district a child may risk some marginalization if only one leisure activity is chosen because the social expectations of doing otherwise. In contrast, at Østli it is more common to attend only one activity, so a child there would risk marginalization by not participating at all. Therefore the girls
wanted to join the football team regardless of their interest in the game. These issues illustrate the importance of contextualisation and the complexity of distinguishing between basic needs, needs and wants, and thus “necessity” and “post-necessity” spending. I return to these themes in Chapter 11. The girls’ interest in and possibility of playing football were read as examples of other femininity options as opposed to the case of their British female peers, indicating a broader cultural circuit of femininity for the Norwegian girls.

Thirdly, the chapter also pointed to gender differences in participation in which dance and horse-riding were the only female activities at both field sites. On the whole, bandy was the only activity which did not have female participants (see the tables). In all the other activities, both boys and girls participated, this being a more common phenomenon at Østli that at Vestdal. These differences between the two field sites indicate class distinctions combined with dissimilar preferences in the choice of individual activities. The fact that high-class individual sports, such as tennis and golf were ordinary activities for girls and boys at Vestdal but were never mentioned at Østli is one indication of this. Therefore the activities the child attends provide a marker of different forms of capital, class identity, socio-cultural background and family preferences and make up each girl’s and boy’s experiential structures.

This chapter has also discussed how girls’ gender construction and subject positions are influenced by family history and experiences, by negotiations in the family and participation in different paid leisure activities. Relevant cultural ideas for doing girl exist in different social contexts of organized, paid leisure activities. It has been shown that notions of the innocent, sweet, tough, masculine, sporty and even sexy girl exist in these experiential spaces and inspire and motivate different gendered subject positions and thus multiple identities. In general, it was suggested that the Vestdal girls are more inspired by traditional femininities through the most common activity of Jazz dance and cross-country skiing, while the Østli girls challenge these

---

88 In other parts of Oslo and Norway, some girls also play bandy. This activity is an example of a sport in which it is not possible to observe the gender of the player when playing. The girls use the same gear as the boys, and the big helmets in addition to the face, leg and knee protections, hide the player’s face and body. As such, it is possible to argue that the bandy context, while playing on the ice, is gender neutral. However, once the game is over and helmets taken off, the girl’s hairstyle reveals her gender which may influence the peer interactions.
by engaging in the traditional masculine activity of football and the more sexualized
Disco/Freestyle dance. As such, these differences give support to Walkerdine’s
claim that popular culture is more endemic to and more accepted in non-privileged
classes (the working class in Britain). The next chapter explores these relationships
and how they influence clothes and other material items used in the construction of
gender.
Chapter 6: The family context and girls’ presentations of self

Me and Ellen were in a shop for clothes (Popin, a shop for women), and there were many clothes that fitted us, and then Mummy and Grete (Ellen’s mother) thought they were rather nice, but they didn’t think we should have them, because we became sort of too grown up. That it became odd.

The above quote is from a conversation with Oda in the 5th grade at Østli and points to the core of this chapter, namely the relationship between parents and daughters concerning consumption, gendered bodies and presentations of self. The chapter is a continuation of the last but focuses explicitly on appearance and clothes. Parents, particularly mothers, and as such family history and the experiential space of family, have an important impact on how children look (see Klepp & Storm-Mathisen 2005, Allan 2005). Therefore, there is no direct relationship between how the girl is dressed and that girl’s independent interest in clothes and own appearance. Often the relationship parents and children concerning clothing consumption is a two way process, in which the girls show variable interest and agency (see Allan 2005). The actual self-representations are results of negotiations in the family, particularly with mothers, which can vary in intensity.

In some families, there are no negotiations at all and the parents (mothers) decide everything. In other families, negotiations are tougher. This points to the power embedded in the relationships between parents and children and to how girl’s agency varies according to that power. Of the children I got to know, not one girl (or boy) decided entirely on their own what to wear, which indicates that in general negotiations and discussions do occur and that parents have the last word (see also Allan 2005). However, the girls vary as to how interested they are in terms of how they look. One extreme case is ten year-old Synne at Østli who said she had no interest in clothes: “Shopping for clothes is the most boring thing of all!” Her mother bought all her clothes.

The interviews with the 7th and the 9th grade girls clearly show how interest and independence in matters concerning self-presentations increase with age (see the next chapter). This finding corresponds with Ekstrøm’s study from Sweden on
children’s influence in family decision-making (Ekstrøm 1999). Her research shows that this influence increases with age, although the children in her study were 13-30 years. This does not mean, however, that children younger than thirteen years old do not influence family decision-making, but that older children do to a greater extent.

The majority of the girls (and boys) included in my research, the ten year-olds, are starting to want independence from parental influence, which escalated during the time I spent with them. This means that the experiential space of family is filled with intergenerational negotiations on how the girls are to position themselves as gendered female bodies. In what ways do parents influence these processes of girls’ self-presentations? I argue that how mothers and fathers want to present their daughters varies according to age, class, style, cultural background and also personal preferences. Which clothes the girls wear and the activities they are permitted to attend emerge in the intersection of class, socio-cultural background, age and gender. In spite of the Norwegian ideals of equality and “sameness” (likhet), there exist class and socio-cultural distinctions in how families present themselves, a phenomenon well described by Gullestad (1989), and Lien et al. (1999) (see also Bourdieu 1995).

**Norwegian gender stereotypes**

In Norway as elsewhere, the first classification of a person is made shortly after birth according to genital type, either as a boy or a girl (Davies 2003, Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Lorentzen 2006). 89 Research shows that parents tend to treat their babies differently soon after birth, where girls inspire a softer attitude than boys, who are treated more roughly (Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Coltrane 1998). According to Bem, children internalise gender schemas when they experience gender as a relevant social category, which most of them do all over the world (Bem 1983, see also Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Ulvund 2003).

Already in the birth clinic, Norwegian babies experience their first material gender demarcation. The crib of the baby soon shows whether the baby is a girl or a boy, as parents and visitors alike decorate the crib with gender specific aesthetic. Pink, red

---

89 A justification for deconstructing the male/female dichotomy, some gender theorists argue, is that some human beings are also born androgynous (Almås & Benestad 2001, Rasmussen 2005).
or light blue things are used to identify the child’s gender, or perhaps a feminine toy, such as a doll is used to decorate the cribs of girls (see also Coltrane 1998, Davies 2003). Similar material gender demarcations are introduced to the child over the subsequent years, when the children are primarily gender-constructed by the people in their surroundings rather than by themselves. Girls and boys learn early on how to think gender through things, in that material (“gendered”) things are used early in their caretakers’ construction of femininities and masculinities. A very young girl’s construction of gender is often an interactive learning process without words, where special material objects become included in how to do girl. Typical examples are hairpins, pink clothes, laces and dolls. Similar processes are at work among boys. According to theories in cognitive developmental psychology, the child is aware of its gender between two and three years of age and by then knows the label of its own gender (Baker Miller 1986, Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Gregor 1987, Thorne 1993, Lorentzen 2006). They learn to behave as girls or boys through interaction with people and things in their surroundings, or experiential spaces, from birth onwards, as West and Zimmerman and Rudie pointed out in Chapter 2 (West & Zimmerman 1987, Rudie 2007). These figures make them think of themselves as the one or the other gender, through the process of impression management, socialisation and interaction. In this way gender becomes an incorporated practice starting shortly after birth (see also Yafeh 2007).

Doing gender is seen to by the parents as women and men, and as mothers and fathers in bringing up their children (Coltrane 1998). Gender construction is a practice which includes existing social norms concerning masculinities and femininities. Scott Coltrane argues that thirty years of feminism has not eliminated gender specific child-rearing practices in the US. He has analysed some widespread fairytales and poems, and finds the following cultural images on gender:

Girls are sweet, cute, and prone to wriggle, giggle, and tattle. They need to remember to keep their clothes clean, are easily frightened, and although generally good, can be very bad. Boys, on the other hand, are rough, tough, and mischievous. They are proud of themselves, take risks, want to be grown up, and like to kiss girls (sometimes against their will) (Coltrane 1998:110, emphasis added).

Although these are stereotypes, Coltrane believes they teach children cultural standards for masculinities and femininities: girls are to be “sweet, cute and prone to wriggle, giggle and tattle”, boys are “rough, tough and mischievous” (ibid.:110). The
heterosexual hegemony and normativity are here illustrated in that it is taken for granted that “boys like to kiss girls”. Important is the way girls and boys experience gender differentiation at home, in their daily interaction with their parents and siblings. Parents are role models and children tend to learn by imitation (Bukatko & Daehler 1998: 440-441, Enerstvedt 2004, Strauss & Quinn 1994).

Related to the themes in this study, the gender models above also concern Norwegian children’s upbringing. This is so because the emphasis on sweet and pretty girls and tough and rough boys accompanied by appropriate aesthetic, is understood as stereotypical femininities and masculinities, to be found in many homes and in literature, magazines (see magazines like Princess, Witch) advertisements. These gender stereotypes have a long history. The work of Viveka Berggren Torell shows how the emphasis on “cute” girls and “tough and cool” boys were visualized in Swedish women’ magazines as far back as in the 1930-50’s (Torell 2007, my translation). In an article in the leading Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet concerning gender in modern childrearing, Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen holds that “Modern Toy shops symbolise gender apartheid” (Dagbladet 6/8-2006, my translation) because the toys reflect traditional gender stereotypes both in terms of colour and the target activities. Girls are offered items for personal adornment and family activities, boys offered games and items for fighting and competition. The shop atmosphere is imbued with the colours of light blue for boys and pink for girls, the latter similar to what Rachel Russell and Melissa Tyler term “girlie” aesthetic: “an abundance of pink, glitter and heart shapes” (Russell & Tyler 2002:627). Nielsen’s reflections are supported by two male researchers in the same newspaper who also emphasise how shops and parents relate differently to boys and girls. The researchers wonder and speculate as to why the commercial gender demarcations have become increasingly stereotypical in the light of thirty years of gender equality on the Norwegian political agenda (Dagbladet 6/8-2006). The following advertisement for the Airport Express Train in 2008 is a brilliant illustration of how traditional gender stereotypes are used in marketing. In addition it highlights the heterosexual hegemony and how children are depicted as “older than their age” in a supposedly “funny” and “sweet” manner, giving support to Cross’s claim that “we forever look for threats to innocence, and yet we are not sure what innocence is” (Cross 2004:13).
The text says: “Sometimes it is convenient to take the next train. PS. Children travel free of charge” (my translation.)

As is shown, the girl is dressed in pink, and the boy in a conventionally masculine marine-officer suit. Similar gender stereotypes were also highlighted by the personell on a recent visit to a Norwegian kindergarten for children between one and three years from privileged families. The teacher reported that one of the two year-old girls was always dressed in varying shades of pink. The father shrugged his shoulders and said it was her mother who did this. She liked pink herself, and dressed her daughter according to her taste without reservation. In contrast, one of the two year-old boys always wanted to wear a skirt, which troubled his parents a lot. According to the teacher, they worried if he would develop homosexuality, again illustrating the existence of the heterosexual hegemony in Norway despite the fact that the political authorities and feminist movement have for decades campaigned for equality between the sexes and sexualities. On the one hand they combat the notion of the nice and sweet young girl, which they believe serves to promote subordination and passivity in girls (see also Simmons 2002). On the other hand, equality between different sexualities is also on the political agenda, making homosexual and lesbian legal partnership (marriage) possible. A hot political issue today is whether homosexuals should be permitted to adopt children on par with heterosexual couples. In 2007 this is not the case.
The above examples indicate that changes in traditional gender models are difficult to accomplish, that they are “hard-programmed” (Rudie 2007) or embedded in the “gendered subjectivities” rather than in the “gender identity” (Nielsen & Rudberg 1993, see note 38, Chapter 2). Parents seem to find joy in creating their child as a typical boy or girl. May this way of thinking have inspired the creation of the following advertisement depicted on the entrance of one of the most frequented shopping malls in the city of Oslo in 2007, “Oslo City”? :

The boy carries a newspaper under his arm, is dressed in traditional masculine clothes, a shirt and trousers, while the girl is knitting. On the other side of the entrance the same girl is holding a rolling pin, while the boy is using the zapper. I suggest the visualizations are possible because many people are believed to smile at how gender relations were in former decades, implying that “times have changed”. But these depictions may unconsciously also serve to reproduce traditional gender differences and suggest that the importance of gender have not declined in the last decades. On the contrary, as noted in Chapter 2, newly pregnant parents want to know the sex of their baby while in the womb. Parents say it is a good thing to know the sex of the child beforehand. They argue that they bond better with the baby that way, particularly the father. In addition, they want to know the sex of the baby in order to buy clothes and decorate the baby’s room in the right colours (Dagbladet 6/8-2006). In the above-mentioned article, Nielsen speculates that parents of today with feminist mothers (and/or fathers) take feminism and equality between the sexes for granted. Therefore they do not see that they (re)produce traditional gender
patterns by stressing their babies’ gender through gendered material items (ibid.). Conversely, the material gender demarcations may not “stick as deep” as they appear to, in that Norwegian socialising strategies in kindergarten, schools and many families have stressed that girls and boys are not to be raised differently (see Hennum 2002). The material gender demarcations, so well illustrated by the advertisements above, may be a reaction to a unisex fashion period of insufficient visible gender difference. The following chapters show the relevance (or not) of being feminine or “girlie” for the girls included in my research (Russell & Tyler 2002). In spite of the promotion of rigid commercial gender stereotypes, Norwegian girls and boys are not “dupes” and increasingly overlap more of each other’s experiential spaces and cultural circuits than in previous generations. I return to these issues later.

**Dress codes, distinction and styles**

All human beings in non-tropical parts of the world need clothes to keep warm. Clothes are a basic need, a necessity. But clothes are made in a variety of styles, of varying quality and price, and therefore also include preferences and have significant symbolic value. The Western fashion system is embedded in the capitalist market economy, in which making profit is a crucial motive. The changing fashion in young girls’ clothes can be understood in this light, illustrated by the marketing engendered term “tweenagers”. This was created as an attempt to draw new groups into the consumer market. It has been argued that it was the French fashion designer Coco Chanel who introduced fashion and clothes as commodities at the beginning of the last century. Bonnie English writes:

Arguably, Chanel’s burgeoning international reputation was bolstered not only by her design prowess: there was general acknowledgment that her great financial success resulted from her ability to respond to market demands. This capitalistic feat achieved by Chanel helped to propel fashion to the fifth largest industry in France in the 1920’ies (English 2007:42).

Chanel’s success is often discussed in relation to what has been termed the “democratization” of fashion: the mass-production and mass-distribution of haute couture imitations which started with the technological development of the sewing-machines and expansion of the market economy. This meant that fashionable clothes
were made accessible to a larger proportion of the population, and are today the backbone of the capitalistic fashion industry (ibid.).

In the following chapters, I draw on general fashion research, such as that undertaken by Fred Davis. In *Fashion, culture and identity* he presents the term “clothing-fashion code” and argues that ambivalence concerning identity construction is “fashion’s fuel” (Davis 1992:19). His analysis of dress and fashion has inspired later works in the sociology of body, dress and fashion (Entwistle 2000). In short, Davis argues that “collective identity ambivalence is an important cultural source of the code changes in clothing that are fashion” (Davis 1992:21). According to Davis these identity ambivalences include gender, status and sexuality which he analyses in separate chapters.  

90 But he is also aware of other identity ambivalences:

The identity ambivalences that have most often found their way into the West’s discourse of dress concern those representations of self that address core sociological attributes of the person, the so-called master-statuses (i.e. age, gender, physical beauty, class, race) (Davis 1992: 26, emphasis original).

Unfortunately, Davis does not discuss the relationship between age and fashion, but his insights will be drawn upon in parts of the study, particularly his postulation of “The dialectic of the erotic and the chaste” (Davis 1992: 79-101). In this chapter he points to the relationship between fashion and gender, just as other scholars have done (see Steele 1985, Entwistle 2000). Most salient to the discussions to come is the connection between fashion and the heterosexual male (and female) gaze(s) (Renold 2005, Holland et al. 2004, more on this in Chapter 7). Fashion for women is not gender neutral; on the contrary, it is primarily designed through the eyes of what males are believed to find attractive in women, regardless of whether the designers are males or females, heterosexual or homosexually oriented (Davis 1992, Entwistle 2000, Holland et al. 2004:156, Richardson 2000).  

91 According to Davis, much has been written on the sociology of clothes and fashion but little on how meaning is communicated through clothes (Davis 1992). I follow Davis in that what is conveyed by clothes must be studied not as a language system

---

90 The literature on “identity” and “identity construction” is vast and complicated. My study focuses on girls and gender, not theoretical issues concerning identity. Therefore I do not discuss “identity” discourses.

91 Many of the most famous fashion designers are gay men such as Giorgio Armani, Per Spook.
with grammar, such as Roland Barthes (1990) tried to do, but as an ambivalent symbol system (Davis 1992, Vestel 2004). Davis argues against ascribing precise meanings to most clothing, because clothing-fashion codes are characterised by ambivalence, context-dependency, class distinctions and undercoding (Davis 1992). Or in the words of Davis:

Clothing does indeed communicate, but not in the manner of speech or writing; what it communicates has mostly to do with the self, chiefly our social identity as this is framed by cultural values bearing on gender, sexuality, social status, age, etc. (ibid.: 191).

The following chapters will argue that clothes mark bodies with style and sexuality related to the body as both subject and object, to be subjectively experienced and interpreted by others. It ensues from this that different generations may interpret the same clothes or items differently both from the “inside” and the “outside”. Clothes are essential to doing gender and to subject positioning according to style and class (see Renold 2005: 44-45). As clothing and fashion codes for women may be read to include a dialectic of the erotic and the chaste (Davis 1992), today this also concerns young girls’ fashion and intergenerational negotiations for suitable clothes (see Borg 2006). As my study shows, buying clothes in Norway includes making choices, even in families with little money because there exist different shop chains offering clothes with low prices. In addition, there are immigrant shops offering cheap clothes in “ethnic” styles, as well as secondhand shops. This suggests that it is possible to create “your own style” even with little money, but it will always be the result of a constrained taste (Bourdieu 1986). Davis describes different milieus of “anti-fashion” which may provide empirical examples, such as the “hippie” or “anti-bourgeois” style, related to being “American leftist” (Davis 1992:163). In Norway the “freak” style resembles the anti-fashion trend.

The cheapest clothes chains in Norway, where many of the subjects bought their clothes, are H&M, Lindex, Cubus and KappAhl. These chains are examples per se of the democratization of fashion (English 2007), and are used by people from all the social classes. However, they were not mentioned at Vestdal, indicating that these did not fit the overall Vestdal cultural notion of suitable clothing. The cheap chains may be understood to first and foremost represent basic needs and necessity spending, an interpretation that corresponds with the finding that families categorised as “disadvantaged” and “marginalised and insecure” said they bought
their clothes there (Rysst 2006). H&M is definitely the most popular cheap chain store in Norway, it is not stigmatised by any class, although the teenage boys at both Vestdal and Østli seldom bought clothes there. “I could perhaps buy a tee-shirt to be worn under another sweater”, said a fifteen year-old boy from Vestdal, who usually bought branded clothes in special brand shops. In the following, three fifteen year-old boys of Norwegian origin from Østli emphasise the irrelevance of cheap shops:

Mari: But H&M and Cubus, do you buy clothes there?
All: No, not anymore.
Carl: When I was younger, maybe. When I was about ten/eleven years old it did not really matter in which shops I bought my clothes.
Mari: But when do you think that changed?
Carl: Well, it is a bit like this now, that it shall be a bit expensive and exclusive and all that. (The other two agree). If someone asks me, where did you buy those trousers? “At H&M”, it’s not cool to say that.
Mari: But do you experience buying pressure, pressure to wear special brands? That it is cool having certain brands?
All: No, if you feel comfortable with something you have bought that have a brand, then…
Mari: So it doesn’t matter which brand, but they have to be a bit expensive? (They are all quiet, thinking about it).
Carl: Everything doesn’t have to be expensive if it is cool, so to speak. Usually you find what you want in the shops you like. So if you find something cheap there, then it’s ok. It’s like that. At least that is how I think about it.

This conversation shows how their opinions of suitable clothes have been modified with age and in dialectical relationship with their maturing bodies. They exclude clothes from the cheapest chains. Carl’s first utterance supports the claim made in my study that all ten year-olds do not have an interest in clothes. Carl says he did not really care from which shops his clothes were bought when he was that age (see also Ridge 2002). However, both the Østli boys and the statement from the Vestdal boy show that the cheap chain stores are not relevant for teenage boys at either field site anymore. In other words, there are negative associations related to buying clothes in the cheap chain stores, irrespective of class. The boys’ idea of suitable clothes is shown to be subject to the same criteria, for instance that suitable clothes are expensive and have brand names, but attitudes vary as to which brands and shops are acceptable.

As such, wearing clothes from special shops is an indication of class in Norway and perhaps in modern societies in general. Davis argues that fashion as distinction of class was much clearer and apparent before the Second World War. This is rather self-evident, in that class demarcations in general were stronger. The combination of
better living standards (in Norway anyhow), mass production and thus the
democratisation of fashion from the post-war years has led to a more complicated
fashion system, but one in which sexuality is constantly negotiated and exclusivity is
connected to price (Steele 1985, Entwistle 2000, Davis 1992).

It is worth noting that it seldom occurs that a teenager of Norwegian origin wears
clothes only from a cheap chain store even in non-privileged families. Family
negotiations seem to result in a prioritising of children’s needs and wants, so that the
child possesses some garments according to the contextual “right” or “correct” style,
in order to prevent marginalisation (Ridge 2002, Nygaard 2005, Rysst 2006, see also
Bonke et al. 2005). From what the boys cited above said, it becomes evident that the
actual shops in which clothes are bought are as important as certain brands. But then
again, certain shops only sell certain brands, which would suggest a connection
between cool clothes and price. This indicates that different social groups do not
share the same opinions of suitable/unsuitable shops to buy clothes in. The shops
function as demarcations of class. Youth at both Østli and Vestdal buy designer
clothes, but the latter usually buy different and more expensive brands than the
former.

The most common popular shops among the ten year-old children and teenagers I
got to know in both districts are JC, Carlings, Voice of Europe, BikBok, Vero Moda,
Lene V, Popin, and B-young which all have more expensive clothes than the cheap
chain stores mentioned earlier. Moreover, the teenagers at Vestdal shop in yet more
expensive shops, where a pair of jeans costs twice as much as the most expensive
pair at JC (that is, more than two thousand kroner). In other words, their
understanding of suitable clothes includes, among other things, greater financial
output than is to be found amongst the Østli youth.

Before I go on to discuss the connection between parental influence, clothes and
girls’ presentation of self, I find it necessary to present the social classification
system of the girls and boys. The labels they use are very experience-near and
constructed from their points of view. The categories are relevant for how ten year-
old girls (and boys) present and understand themselves and their peers. They are
indirectly present in which clothes the girls need, want and wear and thus in the intergenerational negotiations.

The ten year-olds’ social classification system

*The hierarchy of categories*

It is one of the few accepted universals that all human beings engage in mental processes of classifying and making categories of their natural and social worlds. It is (one of) the most important cognitive processes in the construction of meaning and ordering of the universe (see Durkheim & Mauss 1963). Related to the themes in this study, classification concerns different lifestyles and different styles in the understanding and presentation of self. The interesting issues are how the classificatory systems relate to thinking and living with people and things (more in-depth on this in the next chapter). Different social categories inspire the use of different material items in the construction of femininities (and masculinities) and presentations of self. They are cultural ideas for doing young masculinities and femininities, which explicitly or implicitly are activated when parents and girls (boys) negotiate about clothes and appearance. The classifications system points to the likelihood that gender models do not only originate in relation to parents and siblings in the experiential space of family. How to do girl and boy also have its origin in relation to peers (as well as from inspiration from the wider society such as popular culture and the fashion industry, to be discussed in greater depth later) and in the contexts of various organised, paid activities, as was illustrated in the last chapter. Peers become increasingly relevant the older the child gets (Martens et al. 2004, Frønes 1995, Johansson 1996). Joe Austin and Willard Michael even suggest “that the peer group has become the major institution of socialization for youth during the 20th Century and potentially has a greater influence than any other institution“ (Austin & Michael 1998: 6). As such, peers gradually match and sometimes substitute parents as significant others depending on age, situation and context.

The children at Østli first and foremost differentiate between children of Norwegian and children of non-western origin by the metonym of *de hvite* (the whites) and *de brune* (the browns), and there exist few other active social categories – besides de
populære/not populære (popular) and kul/not kul (cool). At Vestdal they only differentiate between populær/not populær and kul/not kul because there are no children of non-western background. In Odd girl out (2002), Rachel Simmons writes that “For better or worse, popularity is accepted by researchers and schools alike as a tool children use to group themselves socially” (Simmons 2002: 175, see also Johansson 1996 and Reay 2001, Hey 1997). The Norwegian children in this study are no exception, as will be shown (see also Hauge 2003).

I find it necessary to differentiate between active and passive social categories, where active denotes the terms just mentioned and which I found to be in use in the children’s daily interactions. This does not mean that the children are not acquainted with other categories; I believe they are in the process of being internalised, and surface every now and again. The ten year-olds are starting to get to know the categories which the older children are more acquainted with. These are all related to how material objects, such as clothes and make-up are used in understandings and presentations of self.

At Østli there thus exist three overarching categorisations: hvit/brun, populær/not populær, kul/not kul which result in six main social categories: the hvite and the brune, the populær and the not populær and the kul and not so kul. Vestdal has only four main categories, the populær and the not populær and the kul and not so kul. The classificatory principles behind these categories are easy and concrete regarding the hvit/brun, but abstract and “mysterious” concerning popularity. 92 Closely connected to popularity is the phenomenon of coolness in that popularity and coolness often overlap. It is often the case that being kul qualifies one for popularity and that the two terms are used interchangeably by the children. The classificatory principles behind being kul are also unclear and very dependent on age and context, but explicitly include some materiality or things related to teenage culture, as this study will show. It is also important to keep in mind the relational aspect; that these categories are defined in relation to one another.

---

92 In ordinary everyday interaction, socio-cultural background and skin colour was not much prevalent. But it surfaced in relation to organisation in space, in conflicts and in out of school, contexts such as birthday parties. I return to that later.
Douglas’s claim concerning shopping, that “people do not know what they want, but they are very clear about what they do not want” (Douglas 1996: 83) also sheds light on the children’s social categories: They know very well what *nerd*, *soss* and *kul* are not. Frønes also suggests that identity can be understood through definitions of who you are not (Frønes 1995). Of the children in my study, being *kul* is not synonymous with being popular, but seems to be a necessary element in the understanding of popularity (more in Chapter 10). Somewhat simpler definitions and concrete categories are found further down the social classification hierarchy and will be described hereinafter as *berte*, *soss*, *nerd* and *vanlig* (ordinary). It is worth emphasizing, however, that the categories are not fixed but fluid and continuously negotiated. As such, this classificatory system can be read as an empirical illustration of Butler’s de-constructivist argumentation for conceptualizing categories as fluid and movable (Butler in Midttun 2007). By logical deduction: When the classifications are understood to be movable, and have previously been seen to inspire different femininity subject positions, the analytical concepts of “femininities” (and “masculinities”) must necessarily also be fluid and not fixed. In real life, this loose structure of categories excludes and includes children more easily according to the whim of the dominant girls (and boys) than the inescapable static categories of *brun* or *hvit*. The children’s classificatory system can be presented schematically as follows:
It is possible for hvite and brune to be classified as any of the other categories, which is why they are placed above on both sides of the figure. In order to become popular, a child must usually be classified as kul, whereas being a nerd or vanlig are not kul and not popular (indicated by whole lines). In the diagram, the berte and soss elements present a dichotomy in their frequent classification as kul; they may also be classified as the exact opposite (indicated by dotted lines, which indicates a looser connection). The berte, the nerd and the soss thus cross the overarching categories and are in opposition to vanlig (ordinary). As such, vanlig may be read as a leftover category of those who are too unlike the others. The first and the third categories may overlap. It is possible to be a berte and a soss at the same time, but not a berte and a nerd. I will now describe in detail the berte, nerd and the soss.

The berte applies primarily to girls and denotes a self-conscious, vain girl, sometimes also called a babe. The English terms “girlie-girl” or “girlie” seem to correspond closely with the berte, but is an identification English girls seem to be explicitly striving for (see Renold 2005, Allan 2005, Reay 2001). 

As such, it carries more positive associations than the Norwegian berte, which is primarily a label assigned by others. A berte wears close-fitting and/or highly fashionable clothes, has styled hair, wears more make-up (if there is make-up at all for girls under thirteen years of age) than is the norm, and has a somewhat suggestive (sexy) physical demeanour. For girls Britney Spears and similar pop and film stars are berte role models; Petter spontaneously said “Britney is a bit berte”. Both the children at Østli and Vestdal say the bertes often proffer limp wrists and say “Daa’a!”, an example of body language expressing exaggerated femininity. The berte category crosses the popular/not popular dichotomy. Although to be very berte usually does not qualify one for popularity, having certain elements of the berte style does.

The berte category has ambiguous connotations connected to it, in that it is not an obvious compliment to be called a berte. The following event illustrates this. One

---

93 The term babe (also used as such by Norwegians) has somewhat more positive connotations than berte, which is considered to be a bit bitchy. Babe is usually a category for older girls. The English term “girlie-girl” seems to be even more positive than berte and babe, as it denotes girls who want to be particularly traditionally “feminine”, not tomboys (Allan 2005, see also Renold 2005). “Girly-girl” is an experience-near concept of the girls in Allan’s study, and “girlie” is experience-near among the girls in Reay’s study (Reay 2001). Some researchers apply the term “hyper-femininity” for the same phenomenon (see Hey 1997:90).
day in class the informal talk between the children is about bbertes. I ask Anthony if there are any bbertes in their class:

Anthony: Yes, Ida is a berte!
Ida: Am I?? No! I have no make-up on! Nina is a berte! (she had lipgloss).
Anthony: Yes, Nina too!

It is evident that make-up and being berte is closely connected in Ida’s understanding of the category, and that it is not particularly flattering to be classified as one. As such, the conception of berte does not explicitly inspire a particular femininity, but may do so subconsciously (Moore 2007). 94 Recently, I heard that overtly feminine boys are denoted as berties too. At summer camp in 2005 some girls peaked into Martin’s toilet bag and discovered evidence of considerable vanity. After examining its contents, Mona declared “oh, he is so bertete!” It consisted of deodorant, shampoo and hair gel. Again the term berte is used for someone quite vain, and interestingly, a term originally applied to girls is here applied to a boy. This illustrates how masculinities and femininities are continuously negotiated in relation to each other, and thus changed and modified through interaction. Hair gel and deodorant have become part of a preteen masculine masquerade, and most importantly, become part of doing boy and masculinity.

Besides the populaer, kul or berte, all other young girls at Østli are classified by their peers and by themselves as just vanlige (ordinary), implying that these girls are nothing special and may have pene (nice), but not kul clothes. The boys are classified as popular/not popular, kul/not kul or nerd/vanlig. The next interesting category is thus the nerd. Of the children I got to know, I only heard the term nerd in connection with boys, but other children have told me that female nerds also exist.

A nerd denotes a child who reads a lot, or has other interests he devotes all his time to rather than socialising with friends. A nerd is often conscientious about school work, does not care about kul clothes or things, and is definitely not numbered among the popular. To be called a nerd is not perceived as a compliment, and none of the ten year-olds I got to know were called nerd. All in all the term was not much

94 Moore argues that the subconscious may explain why not all people conform to the (hetero) normative cultural norms of femininities and masculinities (Moore 2007).
used among them, but by the older children it was. Once Petter used the argument “I don’t want to be a *nerd*” when he had the choice of staying inside or going out during a break in winter time. He went out in the cold because he did not want to risk being called a *nerd* by the other children (because they might think he stayed inside reading or doing homework).

As the figure shows, the third cross-cutting category is the *soss* and the *soss* style, which is explicitly connected to class distinction.\(^{95}\) It denotes children that have an expensive and snobbish style, their clothes being mostly expensive brand-name clothes, and are thus mostly associated with the richer and western parts of Oslo. However, children from other families and children who identify with an affluent style in other parts of Norway may also be classified as *soss*. The children at Vestdal know that they are classified as such, as this conversation with the 7th grade girls Janne, Jeanette and Ingrid illustrates very well:

Mari: You look relatively similar to me, but I guess you find differences among you. How is it in your milieu, do you think of anyone as *soss*, *berte*, *gangster*, *freak* and use categories like that?
All: No….
Janne: We don’t categorize people, we just think about it, sometimes we talk about it, but it is mostly gangs, but it is not that we do it on purpose; it is not that we talk a lot about being a *soss* or a *berte*, but we think about it.
Ingrid: Since most of us in the 7th grade live up here, then most of us are *soss*.
Mari: All are kind of *soss*..?
Jeanette: We are… really we are *snobber* (snobs).
Janne: We live in the *soss* area, we don’t feel ourselves that we are *soss*, but we know that we are, everybody knows that.

The girls assert that they don’t often tell anyone directly that they belong to the one or the other category, it is something that goes without saying. The conversation also shows that the girls are aware of how other people categorise them as a group. In short, they know that in most people’s minds the primary associations to people living in their area is the *soss* style, consisting of affluence, snobbishness, pale colours, expensive brands and the other characteristics mentioned.\(^{96}\) Among the ten year-olds at Østli, none of the children were categorised as *soss* by their peers, and I

---

\(^{95}\) The term is probably derived from “society”, “high society”, that is.

\(^{96}\) I underline that these are the characteristics of the *soss* style at the time of the fieldwork, and may change with fashion trends.
never heard them talk about it either. However, in view of the fact that both the 7th graders and the 9th graders at Østli did, I am sure the ten year-olds are aware of it. As with other categories, they are probably in the process of some kind of internalisation. The *berte*, *nerd* and *soss* are all categories well-known throughout Norway.

With the above experience-near concepts as point of origin, I have constructed the analytical terms “girl-child” and “teenager-girl” as overarching femininities for the discussions to come. Inspired by a developmental discourse, these are understood to be distributed along a continuum of identification with teenage culture, with “girl-child” at one extreme and “teenager-girl” at the other. The different experience-near categories (in italics) are found along this continuum of possible femininities of the ten year-old girls in this study, visualized approximatively below:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Vanlig} \\
\text{Soss} \\
\text{Nerd} \\
\text{berte} \\
\text{Kul} \\
\end{array}
\]

Girl-child---------------------------------------------------------------Teenager-girl

A “girl-child” does not show much interest in teenage culture, and is often classified as childlike and childish by her more *kul* peers. She plays with dolls, often pets, and dresses in traditionally nice and cute clothes for young girls. The categories of *vanlig*, *soss* and *nerd* are placed in the middle because their categorization is not related to “cultural” age: They can be both child-like and teenage-like, but *berte* and *kul* are variants of only the teenager-girl subject position. However, the overall repertoire of femininities consists of these experience-near categories alone or in some combination (because the categories are fluid) in addition to femininities found in the girls’ different experiential spaces, such as in sporty femininity. This results in differences as well as conformity in how the girls in this study do gender, as will be shown. Regarding prestige and hierarchy in the peer group, the most dominant and powerful subject positions are situated at the “teenager-girl” end of the continuum, because of the overlap between a *kul* and a *populær* subject position.
Classification, peer power and materiality

I suggest that popularity is related to peer power, which is based on different forms of personal capital connected to family history and experiences. In this study, peer power is understood as a force inherent in the interactions between children forming these relations according to the taste or view defined by a child or group of children. As such, the definition of peer power is informed by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber. 97 I argue that the kind of power existent in peer relationships is contextual. It is relational, symbolic and involves the use of force of some kind (threats, harassment, teasing, bullying). The popular children also dominate the others without consciously being aware of defining which material items are necessary for the construction of a kul or other possible subject position. Without knowing it, they also play a part in defining which social categories are to make up their social classification system. The other children comply, adapt and sometimes resist but often find their place in the hierarchy defined by the popular. Symbolic (peer) power thus concerns having the possibility to define the world view of the peer group, for instance what is in and kul in a certain period of time, in a certain social landscape. The popular children, and particularly their leaders, have this possibility because of their personal capital. This has implications for which material objects it is worth striving for and for the subject matter of peer norms. As such, they have the potential to change the quality of the interactions in some of the social contexts which highlight how girls’ lives are “invested in the production of certain forms of power and subjectivity” (Hey 1997:23).

As may be remembered, of the children I got to know at Østli, the circle of friends of Nina, Marit and Ida dominates the girls’ arena among the ten year-olds. They are categorized as populær and kul, and sometimes as bertes, by the other boys and girls. This corresponds to how the parents in the two classes understand the situation. It is also their impression that the aforementioned girls are the most

---

97 Bourdieu about power: “For symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu 1996: 337).

Foucault about power: “Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. (Foucault 1976: 92).

popular and dominating. Nina and Marit’s power is apparent because Ida is not always included in their dyad. In the children’s everyday life this manifests itself in what the popular regard as worth doing, thinking or as *kul*. These may be activities, clothes or hairstyles, and are statements the other children relate to in one way or another. What is *kul* in the eyes of the popular becomes part of the other girls’ reference frames for gender construction. Mona-Iren Hauge found the same phenomenon in eastern Oslo among twelve to fourteen year-old girls. What the group of the popular girls said and did, was something the other girls related to in different ways. The girls in Hauge’s material categorised each other according to the dimensions of popularity and socio-cultural background: *de populære* and *de ikke-populære*, *de norske* (the Norwegians) and *utlendinger* (the foreigners), which were partly overlapping categories (Hauge 2003). In addition she found the *wannabes*, those wanting to belong to a group who fail because they don’t understand the codes correctly (ibid.). This categorisation thus resonates with the findings in my study.

I hold that the three popular girls of Nina, Marit and Ida present elements of both the *berte* and the *soss* categories in their presentations of self as *kul*. They are self-conscious, oriented towards fashion shops other than the cheapest chains, have long hair and occasionally wear lip gloss. The “wannabe” *kul* and *populær* try to imitate their style. The popular girls are not directly inspired by the notion of the *berte* but have included the *berte* aesthetic they define as *kul* in their understanding of coolness, such as particular fashion clothes and some make-up. In addition, both Nina and Marit like light colours, such as light blue (Nina) and pink (Marit) associated with the *soss* style, and prefer clothes from shops other than the cheap chains. Another indication of this *soss* inspiration is illustrated by Nina wanting very much the so-called “moon-boots”, which are very common at Vestdal. Trine, who also likes the *soss* style, is the only girl of the Østli girls in this study who owns a pair of “moon-boots”. I return to their different styles throughout the study.

My interpretation of the children’s point of view concerning the *berte* is confirmed in a conversation with ten year-old Petter (Østli) who thinks that all the girls of Norwegian origin in the two classes were *bertes*. He modified this when I ask him to specify who is the most *berte*. Mona, Toril and Trine are the most *berte* in his class, while Nina, Marit and Ida are in the parallel class. Of these again, the last mentioned
come out as definitely “the most”. It is interesting that none of these girls classify each other, or themselves, as berte, which would indicate that gender construction among young children is (often) found both in the realm of tacit knowledge as well as in the possible ambivalent feelings connected to the berte style. This interpretation is again confirmed by Petter when I ask him to describe a berte: “æææ, it is sort of, ææ, in a way it is impossible to describe”. “Just try”, I ask him. He says: “they are those that – æ, it is sort of impossible to describe. But my sister is a berte” (she is fourteen years old). The ten year-old girls I got to know are able to explain more clearly what a berte is, but they do not use the description about each other. They all say that a berte is how I described her above. Both how they describe the berte and the fact that girls do not classify themselves but others as such, is supported by the research done by Klepp and Storm-Mathisen (2005) among young teenagers in Oslo. In their study, girls who wear “very tight-fitting” clothes and who want to look older than their age are bertes. According to these authors, a berte wears clothes understood by others as too sexualised for her age (ibid.: 332).

The lack of many active and prevalent categories among the ten year-old girls in my study (exist in 6 pairs: the overarching brun and hvit, populær/not populær, kul/not kul; to some extent berte and ordinary, and to a lesser extent the nerd and the soss), indicate that this age group has not yet reached that “stage” in their social and cognitive development in which complex classifications are prominent in identity construction. 98 This postulation is inspired by research on older children, which shows that more complicated peer classificatory systems are prevalent (Hauge 2002, Lynne 2000). This indicates that age (because of more experience) and perhaps cognitive development influences the complexity of young Norwegian’s social classifications today. Compared to Hauge’s and my own research, Anita Lynne found the most advanced system, with most categories among her sixteen to eighteen year-olds, also in Oslo (ibid.). Again, Petter supported this postulation: “We don’t think that way (in categories), we are all the same, but my sister Jenny (fourteen years-old) thinks that way all the time!” What he says is not totally correct: His peer group think according to some categories, but not according to as many as

98 Whether this has a biological or social origin is outside the scope of this study.
his sister’s. In other words, and in support of what has been suggested previously about children’s and adults’ different experiential structures and dispositions, Lynne’s findings emphasise that mental classifications and subjective interpretations change and may become more sophisticated with age and experience.

Children’s classificatory systems are not only based on physical material representations (clothes etc.) alone, but also on body language (the berte ‘Daa’a’ for instance) and what they term “personality”. However, material items play an important part. As such, materiality is a necessary element in children’s social classification. Concerning the overarching categories of the *populaere* and the *kul*, the classification system is more polythetic than monothetic in character: It cannot be clearly defined what is needed in order to be classified as *populaer* and/or *kul* (Needham 1975). Sometimes a child may be classified as *populaer* and/or *kul* even though she doesn’t wear *kul* clothes. Then she has something else that qualifies her, some personal characteristics, such as proficiency in sports or a special “personality”. Of the children included in this study, this concerned only one child, Geir at Vestdal. His personal capital consisted of high spirits, a witty tongue, intelligence and proficiency in football and dance. The preceding discussion, however, has indicated that material objects play a positive role in the quest for popularity. I will often return to the relationship between materiality and popularity in the following chapters, particularly in Chapter 10.

The concept of “style” is often used by the children, and is a somewhat wider term than “category”, which is an analytical concept. Bertes often wear tight-fitting clothes, but not all those in tight-fitting clothes are bertes. This means that aspiring to identify with one or the other style or category may be involved in the construction of gender and friendship relationships, such as the desire to be classified as *kul* and *populaer*. Of the social categories presented above, I suggest that it is only being *kul*, *populaer* and *soss* (at Vestdal) that inspires and may motivate action. Nobody consciously aspires to be classified as *nerd*, while the idea of being berte may have some motivational force because it implies that one may

---

99 The utterance “we are all the same” may reflect that the Norwegian ideal of equality and sameness (conformity) is part of the socialisation in Norwegian schools (and homes).

100 The term “aesthetic” may be read to be an experience-distant concept that resonates with “style”. In my study “aesthetic” refers to design, colours and appearance.
become good-looking in some way. The categories differ concerning children’s agency in that it is easier to position oneself and be classified by others as *nerd*, *berte*, *soss* and to some extent as *kul*, but impossible to do so as *populær*. That is a classification which is totally dependent on the others’ (here: peers) point of view and definition.

Related to the social contexts introduced so far in this study, the social categories described above are found in most of them. If a girl identifies with the categories of the *berte*, *soss* or the *kul*, she can position herself as such to some extent when dancing, playing football or playing tennis etc. The *nerd* and *vanlig* are positioned accordingly in the context of family and also when doing some leisure activity with peers or family members. Trying to figure out these subject positions illustrates how fast these may switch from the one to the other. It is possible to position oneself as *kul* in relation to siblings in the experiential space of family and suddenly switch to being sweet, innocent, polite and childish as soon as a parent or other adult demands attention. As noted previously, the same situation arises daily in the school context in interaction with teachers and peers in the classroom, to which I will return later. I will now continue with a discussion of the relationship between parental influence and gender construction in which I understand the dialectic of the erotic and the chaste to be very important.

**Parental influence and gender construction**

*Interest in clothes*

Children’s consumption and shopping habits can not be interpreted independently of those of their parents, whose taste influences and is demonstrated by their children, particularly the very young, as in the examples from the kindergarten and newspaper mentioned previously. Of the girls and boys in my study, none went shopping alone in the 4th grade, but a few girls started doing so in the 5th, to which I will return in the next chapter. This means that, in general, parents and children together, or just parents, buy clothes and other necessary material items for their children. A common pattern is that mothers buy the clothes while the children are at school, a scenario described by Daniel Miller as “making love in the supermarket” (Miller 1998:35). Miller argues that shopping expeditions by mothers and housewives are “expressions
of kinship and social relationships, of care and concern” (ibid.:35), and that
everyday routine shopping may be interpreted as “sacrifice” (ibid.). Miller is
probably inspired by the work of Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, who argues
that “goods are coded for communication” (Douglas & Isherwood 1996: xxi) and
that consumption may be read as a “ritual”: “what we call consumption rituals are
the normal marks of friendship” (ibid.: xxii). It seems that these three authors have
in common the view that consumption is about social relationships and that material
goods communicate meaning and have a role to play in these social relationships.
These insights resonate with how I understand the relationship between consumption
and the people I got to know. Mothers (and fathers) express love and care for their
daughters (sons) by the choice of the clothes they buy, which is often a compromise
between their wish and the girls’. It is important to remember the role of parents in
an interpretation of girls’ appearance, in that it becomes difficult to consider a girl’s
independent interest in clothes by observation alone. Two girls of Norwegian origin,
Anne at Østli and Hilde at Vestdal, who both express little interest in clothes, are
cases in point.

Anne is usually not dressed in cheap chain store clothes or teenage inspired fashion
clothes, but can be said to construct gender with fashionable clothes from “special”
shops for children and from sport shops as a means to constructing “her own
style”. These “special” shops, in opposition to the teenage-inspired ones, do not
aim to construct girls “older than their age” by selling clothes with a design more
chaste than erotic. They are also more expensive than the cheap chains and thus have
a class dimension attached. Anne is interpreted by the other girls as having “nice”
clothes, which do not expose her body in that they are loosely fit. The following
conversation took place when Anne was ten years old. The issue of clothes came up
spontaneously when she was asked about pocket money and how this was spent. She
said:

101 The issue of “my own style” is discussed in the next chapter, but is a common expression among
girls and is often found in fashion and girls’ magazines. The first sentence in the title of my study “I
want to be me. I want to be kul” is constructed as a short version of wanting to have “my own style”.
102 One example is the chain Exit and also Tante Pose (Aunt Pose).
103 In the UK, the term “nice” on young girls is associated to middle-class femininities (Hey 1997,
Reay 2001). In Norway the connotations are more to age, to girl-children.
Anne: Previously it was very much toys, but now I save it, I don’t know what for, just something. If something fun comes about some time. I don’t sort of have to buy CLOTHES, because Mummy buys thousands of them!
Mari: Does she?
Anne: Yeah!
Mari: So you almost have too many clothes then?
Anne: Yes! My cupboard is full and there are thousands down in the cellar and…
Mari: But don’t you like clothes?
Anne: I am starting to get fed up.
Mari: Really?
Anne: I have so many, and then it is no fun!
Mari: So you don’t join your mother when she buys clothes for you?
Anne: Yes, sometimes. But Mummy most often buys such test clothes, and she does that when I am at school.
Mari: But do you like the clothes she buys?
Anne: Yes, I am just fed up about getting so many.
Mari: Is it difficult to use them all then, do you think?
Anne: Yes. Like these days, she is tidying up in the cellar, and she finds so many clothes that were too big for me once, and now I have to try them on, and it takes thousand of hours!
Mari: So your Mummy is fond of clothes perhaps?
Anne: Yes!
Mari: Does that mean she likes buying clothes for herself too?
Anne: Yes, and she likes knitting clothes.

The dialogue indicates that Anne has little independent interest in clothes because she has too many of them and “then it is no fun”. Implicitly she says that she might have been more interested if she did not have a full cupboard, as if it is expected of her to have some interest in clothes. But I doubt she would have shown much interest in clothes had the situation been different. This is so because she does not care much about how she looks in general, besides her hair. She has shown some agency in that she has expressed preferences to her mother so that she buys clothes Anne finds ok. So far, mother and daughter don’t negotiate much about Anne’s clothes because the mother buys clothes they both like.

I suggest her vision of constructing femininity resonates with that of her mother, which makes her happy about the clothes her mother buys. In other words, they seem to share similar notions for suitable clothes for young girls connected to traditional “asexual” and “sweet” femininity for preteen girls. The only trouble for Anne is that she gets too many clothes; she can’t use them all. Her mother’s work includes recommending and presenting clothes for other parents, and in this way she gets cheap access to expensive clothes, such as Diesel. But Anne’s style is not classified as kul by her (kul) peers, her style is more childish than kul. Anne’s family belongs to the privileged (middle) class at Østli, and the mother’s choice of quality
clothes for Anne signals that position to the surroundings. In addition, she likes clothes herself and has a personal style that distinguishes her from women in the area. Anne’s general understanding and presentation of self is thus in the intersection of gender, age, sexuality and white (middle) class. According to the classification schema above, Anne is classified as a *vanlig* girl.

Anne’s clothes fulfil both basic needs (keep her warm and not stigmatized) and wants (though modest in that she shows some agency in how she dresses), but Anne has so far constructed gender under the influence of her mother and her taste. I suggest their relationship concerning clothes is characterized by what Bourdieu calls symbolic power (Bourdieu 1996: 337). In the interaction between parents and children, this implies that children follow their parents without reflection or obvious resistance. Living and moving in the same experiential space of family form, their experiential structures inspire similar tastes concerning clothes. This preference of style is near the chaste “pole” in the dialectic of the erotic and the chaste. Anne does not identify and thus aspires to belong to the more popular and *kul* group consisting of Nina, Marit and Ida. She is not classified as *kul* by the other children, mostly because she does not show any interest in fashion and *kul* things such as pop stars and soap operas on TV. Her clothes are not defined as *kul* by the popular girls, but as *fine* (nice). This is an important distinction, where *fine* clothes conform to a combination of the notions of both sheltered and wondrous innocence in that they are childlike and often relatively expensive, while *kul* clothes depart from definitions of the “pure” childhood altogether. As such, *fine* clothes and *kule* clothes contribute to constructing different feminine subject positions. Anne’s style fits into the picture of nice and traditional girl-child femininity, although she occasionally wears famous *kul* brands (such as Diesel).

Anne’s subject positions and construction of gender through clothes thus corresponds to the notion of girl-child innocence traditionally associated with the middle class. This interpretation resonates with the analysis from UK made by Reay, in which the nine year-old girls classified each other according to the categories of “spice girls”, “nice girls”, “girly” and “tomboys” (Reay 2001:159). The “nice girls” corresponded to traditional girl-child femininities which Reay argues depicts how feminist research has described white, middle-class femininity (ibid.: 159).
The case of Hilde at Vestdal illustrates a similar story as Anne’s, although Hilde’s style and femininity subject positions often are more teenage fashion-oriented and thus *kul*. I noticed Hilde on the first days of fieldwork; she was good-looking, with long hair and big eyes and wore pale or white clothes of a relatively expensive brand, such as *Gap*. In addition she wore a scarf nicely draped around her hair. She seemed self-conscious and interested in looking good, her jeans were tight, a look easily achieved because she was not skinny. As such, her presentation of self exposed both an erotic and chaste impression.

Her classmate Thale did not strike me as being much interested in clothes, although she too was pretty and good-looking. Her clothes did not sport visible brand names, but were usually not from cheap chain stores either. The following conversation with the two girls highlights many themes worth noting (see below) and also illuminates how wrong initial observations can be:

Mari: When you need some new clothes, is it then your mothers who do the shopping without you?
Thale: No, I always go along.
Mari: You always *insist* on going along?
Thale: Yes, Mummy never buys clothes without me going too. It never works!
Mari: It never works?
Thale: No.
Mari: Because then she buys clothes you don’t like?
Thale: Yes. Mummy thinks I am the type who likes having written numbers, for instance “18” or “52” on my back. But it is not like me to wear a nice number on my back!
Mari: No….and what about you Hilde?
Hilde: If she says she is going to buy something, I go with her. But sometimes she buys without me.
Mari: And then she knows that you like what she buys?
Hilde: Yes.
Thale: It is sometimes like that…but..
Mari: (Still towards Hilde) but don’t you care about what you wear? Or do you have the same taste as your mother?
Hilde: Yes, well…(she makes a lot of funny, indifferent faces, which make us burst out laughing).
Thale: Like this one, (points at her sweater), I got that from my aunt, because I am soon as tall as her, but my mother’s relatives are very short, so I have the same shoe size as her, and I get many tops from my aunt…she has the same style as me!
Mari: Your aunt?
Thale: No, her daughter, my cousin. I get shoes from my aunt, and clothes from my cousin.
Mari: So then you are aware that you have a style then?

---

104 I am aware that what is “good-looking” is subjective and culturally constructed. Being pretty in a western context is having a symmetric face, big eyes, long eyelashes, juicy lips and a not-too-big nose. Kylie Minogue and Angelina Jolie are pretty (and sexy) role models. My (methodological) point of departure is how the girls label each other, and from their point of view, Hilde was “pretty”. When I use that description, it is based on the girls’ and boys’ points of view.
Thale: No, but I put on what I get (she seems a bit annoyed by the question). I like this one, it is good (a soft fleece sweater).
Mari: (To both) but are you interested in clothes?
Thale: Not just like that, but I don’t put on blue trousers and an orange top…
Mari: No?
Thale: No, that’s not possible. Mummy agrees, “no, no, you can’t wear that!” Mummy is strict about that.
Mari: About the colours?
Thale: Yes. She says like this: “no, that screams!”
Mari: What about you then Hilde?
Hilde: No, maybe a little…
Thale: Sometimes I put on a comfortable pair of trousers, good fleece trousers, then I put on a fleece sweater, and then they ‘scream’, and Mummy says: “Oh no! They scream!” And then I have to change.

This conversation shows the close connection between mothers and daughters in negotiating and deciding what to wear. In this particular case Thale’s mother exerts more than symbolic power in that she explicitly makes Thale do something in keeping with her will, as opposed to Thale’s own. The power exerted is more of a Weberian kind (as defined in note 97). Thale says “she has to change” if she wears a blue pair of trousers and an orange top; in other words her mother makes her do this by exerting her opinion. The conversation also suggests how cultural codes about correct colours become transmitted and incorporated. According to what she says, Thale learns which colours her mother thinks “go together” and may not or does agree with her. Put another way, she internalises or not how her mother understands correct colours and is inspired by that when putting on and buying clothes later. However, Thale seems to conform to her mother’s opinion in that she does not put on blue trousers with an orange top.

Thale’s mother was much concerned about having the right colours, and clothes that match in colour. Why the combination of blue and orange “scream” (the colours are believed not to match) is probably a matter of fashion and class distinction, and strong colours like orange did not seem to be correct at Vestdal at the time of the fieldwork. In other words, there exist cultural ideas for correct colours related to class. One of the fifteen year-old boys also volunteered that his parents did not approve of orange clothes, “they pay most of the clothes that I want, but not if they are in ugly colours”. Orange was an example of “ugly colours”. In contrast, the “in” colours at Østli were more bright than pale in character. Vilde and Solveig in the 7th grade said “strong colours” were popular, that they were very interested in strong
colours. These colours were more “ugly” than “in” at Vestdal, where pale colours in blue, pink, yellow and white combined with navy blue and red, dominate the “in” scene. These colours are associated with the *soss* style by the children at Østli, in that children fancying and using these colours are categorised as *soss*, (a style rooted in the western, richer part of Oslo). However, children anywhere who dress in the *soss* style are categorised as such by their peers. The children at Vestdal know they are classified as *soss* by children living outside the area, as Janne in the 7th grade said: “We live in the *soss* area, we don’t think of ourselves as *soss*, but we know that we are, everybody knows it”.

The combination and choice of colours is thus an element in class distinction; part of the experiential space of family and experiential structures of family members, which is also confirmed in other studies. Klepp points for instance to the connection between the colour white and the upper class: white riding pants (but the rest of the outfit is black), white golf gear, white tennis gear (Klepp 2004). As such, the dominance of white and pale colours at Vestdal may have roots in the history of class demarcations, a view strengthened by the fact that the cited leisure activities are still widespread at Vestdal and not Østli. Colours and activities thus meet as empirical distinctions of class, as parts of cultural notions among the upper middle-class.

The conversation above shows that the daughters at this age start to develop independent tastes in an attempt to “find their own style”, as in the case of Thale, and that girls vary as to how interested they are in clothes. According to their way of dressing, Hilde and Anne look interested, but are not. Their construction of femininities is thus very much under parental influence, showing the femininity preferences of their parents, and in particular that of their mothers. Hilde’s style is categorised by her peers as *kul* in that her clothes are fashionable and more teenage like than childish, while Anne is the opposite. In addition, Hilde usually wears pale colours associated with the *soss* style. I will now continue with a discussion of the relationship between parents, (interest in) clothes and the girls associated with the *kul* group at Østli. In contrast to Anne, Synne (Østli) and Hilde, the popular

---

105 But Hilde would have been categorized as primarily *soss*, not *kul* by her peers at Østli.
group, in addition to Mitha, Farou and Oda, all say a resounding “YES!” when I ask of they are interested in clothes, and emphasize that the trousers must have “bell bottoms”.

**Intergenerational controversies concerning clothes**

The close relationship and the negotiations between mothers and daughters in the choice of clothes and appearance was a recurring revelation. It was evident that many of the girls experienced a growing interest in clothes and appearance, and an increased desire to decide independently what to wear, or rather what *not* to wear (Douglas 1996, Frønes 1995). The most common criteria of the latter is “‘not childish” clothes, illustrating the connection between aspiring independence and teenage identification. On one of the trips in the woods, I hear Martine asks Christel: “Does your mother put clothes out ready for you in the morning, or do you decide for yourself?” Christel answers that her mother does, but “often such far-out clothes that I don’t want to wear them”. Martine then replies that she picks her clothes on herself, which Nina later affirms for her part as well. In other words, the beginning of independence from parental influence may be read in the girls’ wish to decide for themselves what to wear every day.

Viveka Torell finds descriptions of ten year-old girls’ budding interest in clothes in the women’s magazines from the 1930’s, in which the interest is presented as a “problem” if the girls get too preoccupied with clothes (Torell 2007: 184). It might be the case that this observed interest in clothes and appearance among approximately ten year-old girls is widespread, as seen with Thale above and Nina, Marit and Oda presently. This also indicates that cultural notions of doing girl and femininities change with increased age, and implicitly with physical maturation. That is to say that cultural practices connected to appearance and clothes are related to the cultural interpretation of maturing bodies. The following conversation with Nina, Marit and Oda at the end of the 4th grade is an example of their emerging interest in teenage culture. They are all interested in clothes and fashion and Oda is an aspiring associate to the dyad of Nina and Marit. They are mostly dressed in more or less *kul* clothes bought in shops for teenagers, such as *JC*. The girls share
opinions of suitable shops, clothes and styles and belong to privileged families of Norwegian origin.

The conversation below happens late in the 4th grade, when the girls come with me after school to my little flat in their neighbourhood. I serve fizzy drinks and buns, and all three seat themselves on the couch. I sit opposite them and put the small tape recorder on the table. After testing it out, we start talking about Bratz dolls, a fashion doll, which they like because it has such kul clothes.

Mari: So what then do you mean by kul clothes?
Marit: Jeans, and short sweaters, tee-shirts and skirts…
Mari: So that some of your midriff is visible. Is that kul?
Nina: Yes! (the other two agree)
Marit: And also high-heeled shoes, everything we don’t have is kul.
Mari: All that you don’t have is kul…? So if you were free to choose, you would like to wear such clothes? (as the Bratz dolls wear)
Nina & Oda: Some of them at least.
Mari: But are you not allowed to decide for yourselves what clothes to wear?
All: Yes!
Nina: If there is a sale on, I can decide what to buy, Mummy says it is all right if it fits and all that.
Oda: I am allowed to if I need it, or if it happens that Mummy and I both like it. If for instance I think a pair of jeans is very nice and it has on it such weird things that Mummy thinks are weird, then she won’t buy it, because she thinks it is a bit scary, or something.
Nina: Yes, that’s how it is with me too. Mummy must like it if I am to get it. Sometimes she buys things without me, like now before going to Hudøy. But if she is going to buy trousers and sweaters, I must go along.

Here again parental influence and the importance of approval from mothers is illustrated, an agreement that is not reached without discussions in which girls (and boys) have a tendency to use the phrase “all the others have (or do)” (alle andre har) to persuade their parents. But these girls also want to decide for themselves. Nina’s mother corroborates this at the end of the 4th grade:

It is all right for me to buy clothes for her at H&M but she knows exactly which colours she likes and how the clothes should look. They are not to be pink, she doesn’t like that. I have never had anything pink. She hasn’t either! Violet is all right, but the right colours for her are blue and white, also red. She is concerned about that. I usually manage to buy clothes that she wants to wear.

Nina’s mother’s statement that she “usually manages to buy clothes that she wants to wear” emphasises that Nina is not indifferent to what her mother buys and that they discuss clothes at home in the experiential space of family. This may have resulted in Nina sharing her mother’s dislike for the colour pink, neither of them has any pink clothes. Nina’s mother says that central to the negotiations, besides the price,
are colours and how much of the body is to be shown by tight clothes or little fabric (see also Hey 1997). The conversation above indicates that the girls find showing their midriff to be kul, but do not own such clothes (which the Bratz have). I therefore interpret the dialectic of the erotic and the chaste to be implied in their negotiations of aesthetic with their mothers. In this regard, Oda points to an element worth noting, namely that she thinks her mother finds certain details on some jeans “scary”. Oda’s understanding suggests that she is acquainted with the culturally-accepted notion of the childish girl-child which the putting on of jeans with “details” seems to violate. The girls find the details kul and connected to teenage culture. Why these details are experienced as “scary” has thus to do with the mother’s visions of suitable clothes for young girls. The details on the jeans probably evoke associations for Oda’s mother of her little girl being too grown up. Later on in the conversation Oda gives further evidence to support this interpretation:

Me and Ellen (her best friend) were in a shop for clothes (Popin, a shop for women), and there were many clothes that fitted us, and then Mummy and Grete (Ellen’s mother) thought they were rather nice, but they didn’t think we should have them, because we became sort of too grown up. That it became odd.

This negotiation between mothers and daughters suggests which visions for gender construction the mothers want their daughters to be inspired by. It also shows that the mother’s and daughter’s opinions on suitable clothes, aesthetic and the appearance of ten year-old girls are starting to diverge. Oda understands that putting on too grown-up clothes is not acceptable, and she conforms to that. At present the mother has the last say. In general, reactions such as those by her mother are an illustration of how children are socialised and learn acceptable norms. They also point to the relationship between parental and peer norms; the latter are developed through interaction with significant persons in their surroundings, being both family and peers. Oda is acquainted with the negative associations involved in dressing “older than her age” or, in academic terms, with the developmental discourse concerning proper behaviour for young girls. She has probably internalised the notion of the non-erotic, innocent and sweet girl, and partly that of being kul. At this age it is not usual for children to firmly resist their parents’ wishes, and as long as the parents are paying for the clothes, they have the final say. But increasingly the teenage idea of the kul permeates the girls’ social contexts, and becomes a more dominant part of their reference frames and inspirations, as my research will show throughout the study.
A similar case as that of Oda and Ellen concerns Farou and her mother. She told me her mother had given her five hundred kroner to go shopping for clothes with her older brother. She bought a pair of shoes, a pair of tights and a beige miniskirt with text written across the buttocks. The text said “Discipline”, and Farou said she was hardly permitted to wear it. This was because it was very short and had this text which Farou did not understand was anything to fuss about. Probably the text evoked associations for her mother of older sexuality unsuitable for a ten year-old girl. Farou exclaimed “I don’t understand Mummy! When I very much wanted Bratz dolls she said I was too old, but for the skirt I am too young!” Again the dialectical relationship between material bodies (age) and cultural practices is illustrated, influencing the way Farou’s mother disciplines her daughter.

How the image of the kul gradually becomes part of the girls’ notions of suitable clothes is often accompanied by a growing desire for independence and resistance to parental authority. This point is illustrated in the case of Samira, for whom North African and Muslim culture form part of her experiential structures. In the 5th grade when trying on jeans on a shopping trip (more from the trip in the next chapter) the following incidents occur. Usually her mother buys the clothes without her, but today she has been allowed to come shopping with Mitha and Farou because I am with them. Samira finds a pair of teenage-like jeans she likes very much, but is unsure about them being too small or tight, or that her mother will think them too tight. Her mother’s opinion is thus “with her”, illustrating what Hey, informed by Bakhtin, conceptualizes as “ventriloquism”: having voices in the head (Hey 1997:78). The situation also illustrates the existence of symbolic power in the relationships between children and parents. We agree she could buy the jeans, but if her mother disapproves, they can return it for a bigger fit. The next time we meet, the trousers have been exchanged: Her mother did think they were too “small”, or probably showed too much of her body; in other words, they were too “erotic” for young girls (or Muslim girls and women in general). This pair of trousers did not correspond to the mother’s idea of suitable clothes for ten year-old girls. However, the process of starting to assert independence through choice of clothes is emphasised below by Samira’s mother who also indicates a change in their relations concerning clothes:
Mari: Has Samira been asking for clothes?
Lara: No. It is me who buy her clothes, but it happens that she doesn’t like them now.
Mari: So what do you do?
Lara: Then I will have to go back and exchange them, because we usually don’t go shopping together. When I go shopping, she is at school.

In the majority of families with girls included in my study, this pattern is common, also among the leading kul group of Nina, Marit and Ida, as described above. In other words, mothers often buy clothes for their ten year-old daughters without them being there, but they buy clothes they know they like, which is often a compromise between them, negotiated in the family context. Sometimes the girls join in the shopping, but not always. But as we saw in the case of Thale, a few girls insist on coming shopping for their own clothes. This tendency increased during the 5th grade, to which I will return in the next chapter.

Before ending this section, I will comment briefly on the issue of underwear for young girls, to be discussed further in Chapter 7. This is a potentially controversial point in the negotiations between parents and preteen daughters concerning consumption. There are no other garments that demarcate more strongly the move from a child-like, non-erotic girl to a kul, more grown-up and sexual one, wanting to identify with teenage culture. However, not all underwear for girls does this. The string briefs, or thongs and small bras are special cases in point, introduced by shops every now and again, as mentioned in Chapter 1. It is worth noting that of the girls I got to know from the 4th through the 6th grade, not one girl actually uses string briefs on a regular basis. The 7th graders at Østli do, but the 7th graders at Vestdal still do not use them. They think they will do so the following year. The youngest girls included in the study have not started negotiating for string briefs at home; they express they have no desire to start wearing strings because they seem “uncomfortable”. The associations connected to string briefs are ambivalent or negative and do not inspire and motivate action for putting them on.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented and discussed the relationship between parents and daughters concerning consumption, gendered bodies by way of clothes and presentations of self. I have pointed to themes included in the experiential space of
family that impact on young girls’ presentation of self. Norwegian gender stereotypes, a family’s history, distinction and style and the ten year-olds social classification system all contribute to young girls’ construction of gender. However, the girls differ as to how interested they are in clothes and appearance, but that interest increases with age. As such, the ten year-old girls start to want to decide for themselves what to wear. Today, their wardrobe is either a total expression of their mother’s style or, as is more often the case, a result of negotiations and compromise. The controversial issues concern price and how much body and skin the clothes are to expose. For the girls included in this study, their mothers have the last say, and thus have a profound influence on how their daughters do gender. The next chapter focuses in more detail on how the girls experience and use material items in their construction of gender.
Part IV: Girls and material culture
Chapter 7: The girls’ thinking and living through things

I don’t like shopping at H&M, there is nothing that fits me there, they have this kind of pink stuff and such, which I don’t like. And the trousers don’t fit me either, then I’d have to use such big trousers, which is not very nice. I usually shop at VeroModa, BikBok, but only pullovers there, and at JC there are many nice trousers (Nina, eleven years old, Østli).

This chapter discusses the relationship between people and things negotiated in the families from a “peer angle”, or from peers’ points of view. Nina’s statement above highlights the fact that girls in this age category are becoming interested in clothes and appearance. How are certain objects perceived, used and lived with in girls’ construction of gender? 106 These material items are also symbols both of and in gender construction in that their meaning is ambiguous and interpreted differently by different people. The phrase “thinking through things” 107 draws attention to the relationship between people and things, and is implicit to the issue of “living with things” (see Dant 1999, 2005). I argue that buying and wearing certain material items, such as teenage-inspired fashionable clothes, inspires preteen children to think of themselves as kul and maybe “older than their age”. This chapter also points out how material objects are used in relationship building, which is explored further in Chapters 10 & 11.

Inspired by the phrase “thinking through things”, I shall first outline an approach to grasp how the children use and experience material items in the construction of gender and presentations of self. The approach draws on perspectives from the sociology of dress, fashion and material culture and relates to the children’s classificatory system. On this background, different essential items that are used, experienced and lived with are discussed; first hair and hairstyle then clothes and make-up.

106 “Things” are used synonymously with “objects” and “items”.
107 This is an expression directly borrowed from Henare, Holbraad and Wastel (2007): Thinking through things: Theorising artifacts ethnographically (2007), but also inspired by works of Tim Dant: “Consuming and living with things” (Dant 1999:17-40) and “The sociality of things” (Dant 2005: 1-11).
Dress, fashion and eroticized gazes

As will be remembered from Chapter 6, my study draws on the work of Davis regarding fashion and identity (gender) construction in that the phenomenon of fashion is understood to be related to ambiguity and ambivalence (Davis 1992). Davis argues that fashion reflects these ambiguities, which is well illustrated by the phenomenon of girls dressing “older than their age”. However, the understanding of girls and fashion can be enriched by also drawing on other research, such as that done by Joanne Entwistle, Tim Dant and Janet Andrewes.

In *The Fashioned Body* (2000), Entwistle develops a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of dress which she calls “situated bodily practice”. This perspective explores the relationship between body, dress and culture, in which she asserts that the body is a social entity and dress “the outcome of both social factors and individual actions” (Entwistle 2000: 39). I understand fashion to be one such (ambivalent) social factor, and an important concept in the relationship between dress and the body. Entwistle states that in studying the relationship between the body and the material items put on it, the theme of fashion is essential, because:

Fashion is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies. It is the body that fashion speaks to and it is the body that must be dressed in almost all social encounters. Fashionable dress is dress that embodies the latest aesthetic; it is dress defined at a given moment as desirable, beautiful, popular (Entwistle 2000:1, emphasis added).

I find this understanding of fashion fruitful in that it emphasises that fashion is about material bodies and that the idea of fashion being what is desirable, deemed aesthetic and popular at a certain time corresponds well with how the children in this study understand fashion. Still, Entwistle’s definition is somewhat insufficient for the purposes of my study, and I therefore want to add Tim Dant’s definition:

Fashion is a system of relationships between ideas and values, material things (clothes) and people- who wear clothes out into society (Dant 1999:107, emphasis added).

I read this to include “people” with “bodies”, and thus find his emphasis on the relationship between ideas, bodies, values and fashion to be particularly relevant. This is so because it underlines the issue of cultural values embedded in fashion for young girls (and boys), illustrated by the dialectic of the erotic and the chaste. If young girls’ fashion is an imitation of teenage fashion, it does not represent the notion (values) of the childish, non-erotic and cute little girl-child idealized in the
“pure” childhood. Designers get their ideas and inspiration from “anywhere and everywhere” (Davis 1992: 128), but a new fashion is seldom a dramatic departure from the last (ibid.). Davis says:

It can then be said, as with the arts generally, the reigning mode acts also as constraint on the fashion-to-be. Not “just about anything” is possible. Whatever is proposed must in some meaningful way address itself to what already exists. The point may seem obvious, but it must be emphasized in order to put to rest a familiar thesis, both critical and popular, which holds that fashion is change merely for the sake of change; that any change will do as well as any other provided the public is ready for change (Davis 1992:131).

The special case concerning the themes in my research is that younger age groups are offered fashion previously aimed at older children or teenagers. In other words, new aesthetic and ideas concerning suitable clothes for young girls are communicated through this new fashion, such as “eroticism” challenging “chastity”. The fashion designers create teenage-inspired clothes for young girls and boys as a new trend on the basis of the amount of such clothes available in the shops. Dressing children (and babies!) in teenage-inspired clothes emphasises the ambivalence in gender construction where fashion, sexuality and age are concerned, supporting Davis’ claim of it being “fashion’s fuel” (Davis 1992: 19). In sum, my study thus understands fashion as a system of relationships between ideas and values, including aesthetics of the erotic and the chaste. Fashion is generated by ambivalence and manifests itself as dress defined at a given moment as desirable, beautiful, popular and worn by people (bodies). The fashion system is also related to profit seeking, for instance through the process of democratization of fashion, or mass production (English 2007).

Entwistle’s work on fashion and the conceptualization of “situated bodily practice” are relevant for additional reasons. Firstly because, like Davis, she draws attention to the contextual dimension of body and dress. Why is it acceptable for young girls to wear make-up and fashionable teenage clothes at dancing competitions, discos and perhaps birthday parties, but not in school and in different play activities? Goffman’s emphasis on situational analysis (1959), which Philip Bock terms “positionalism” (Bock 1999) and the theory of multiple selves and subject positions point to much of the same phenomena, namely that people act, are expected to act

108 In spring 2006 H&M offered baby t-shirts with emblems of pop groups, and a new baby shop with the name Kule Kidz opened in Oslo.
and are capable of acting differently in various situations or social contexts, for instance in the contexts of romance and of family (Goffman 1959, Ewing 1999, Moore 2007, see Chapter 2). Secondly, Entwistle’s work is relevant because it explicitly focuses on the relationship between the body and clothes, how the clothes worn influence physical movements. One such example is in explaining why girls wearing tight-fitting jeans are inspired to engage in other activities than were they to wear wide, baggy trousers. Inspired by Entwistle’s work, Andrewes calls the relationship between body and dress “bodywork”, and views dress as a cultural tool both in forming the body and in showing how cultural values are reflected in dress codes (Andrewes 2005). The latter is in line with Dant’s aforementioned understanding of fashion, and a position I adhere to because of the explicit connection between cultural values, clothes and the body.

Andrewes draws on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, and focuses on the relationship between dress and the physical expressions of the habitus. Put another way, a person’s experiential structures from different experiential spaces are visualized in appearance, movement and general behaviour and imply “bodywork”. This is understood to be what the items put on the body do to the wearers and the body (Andrewes 2005). I thus understand the “doing” to include subjective bodily experiences in addition to appearance, movement and gait. The concept of bodywork draws us closer to the theme of thinking through things, in that it implicitly involves a relationship between person, body and thing: the thing put on the body does something with and to that person and its body and other people interacting with that person. In other words, the things involve the body as both subject and object and contribute to what Goffman termed “impression management” which is always implied in presentations of self (Goffman 1959). As discussed in Chapters 5 & 6, the things put on young girls’ bodies have been chosen by themselves or their parents more or less consciously, and according to some cultural ideas of femininities and presentations of self. Wearing the things makes the wearers experience and think about how they present themselves as gendered beings, for instance as ten year-old girls.

In Chapter 2 I presented the issue of the heterosexual hegemony related to the construction of gender of girls and boys. Dominant notions of heterosexuality and
implications thereof constitute the backbone of “the male gaze” (Holland et al. 2004). This gaze is shared by both women and men and is exemplified by parents (and grandparents, see Chapter 14) in the media debates. The impression from the debates is that when mothers do not want their daughters to dress older than their age, their reactions are influenced by how they believe men interpret their girls’ way of dressing (for instance in Verdens Gang 31/03-2005). They fear that older boys and men interpret their ten-year-olds as wanting contact and even sex, should they wear make-up and dress “sexy”. The reactions in the media may be read to support the feminist claim that heterosexuality is substantially influenced by dominant masculinity, or what Holland et al. (2004) conceptualise as “the-male-in-the-head”. Through interviewing 148 young women and later 46 young British men on sexual issues, they hold that:

However hard we tried, we could not find a female-in-the-head to correspond to the male. Young men are not responding to the surveillance power of femininity; they are clearly living heterosexual masculine identities under a male gaze. Young women are living feminine identities, but in relation to a male audience – measuring themselves through the gaze of the male-in-the-head (ibid.:10).

I argue that the girls I got to know are both subjects and objects of the male gaze. As subjects, they are starting to internalize and look at themselves and other girls through a male gaze.109 The leading and popular girls, however, perceive themselves as subjects expressing “their own style”, which often is kul, but they simultaneously and unconsciously give nourishment to the male gaze and are influenced by it. This is so because the fashion and marketing industries are influenced by the male gaze in their construction of gender, or, put another way, are interpreted to be motivated by the ideas of being sexy. Cherland uses the metaphor of Foucault’s panopticon to conceptualize how young girls internalize the male gaze. When they start realizing that they are observed through this eroticized gaze (“the prison guard”), they start to observe each other and themselves through the same gaze (Cherland 2005). However, I suggest that young men are also subjected to a “female gaze” developed in the last decades. Girls’ magazines and advertisements present definitions and pictures of “sexy” and “handsome” boys, which contribute in the development of young girls’ and boys’ ideas about masculinity (and femininity) (Phoenix 1997). I suppose heterosexual boys/men want to look attractive to women, not their own sex,

---

109 The artist Sophie Calle has made brilliant art performance projects in which she is first subject and then object for her own gaze (Calle 1999).
but that their presentations of self also are inspired by what their same-sex peers deem as good-looking. I return to this in the next chapter about sports and in Chapter 12.

According to Entwistle, the connection between clothes and sexuality is not new but what is deemed “sexy” varies with culture and time (Entwistle 2000, Steele 1985, see Chapters 12 & 14). Entwistle holds that “Given that the focus of fashion is the body, it is no surprise to find fashion almost obsessed with sex and sexuality” (Entwistle 2000:187). Already in 1930 the psychoanalytically inspired Flugel wrote about the *Psychology of clothes*, arguing that the fascination with clothes stems from their ability to “simultaneously reveal and conceal the body” which stimulates sexual desire (in Entwistle 2000: 187). According to English, one of the fashion pioneers, Coco Chanel, “employed a lack of gender stereotyping as a seductive principle” (English 2007: 39). In addition to showing the relevance of fashion and seduction, this may be read to illustrate the omnipresence of gender: Seduction is even present by downplaying gender differences. English also argues that the practical success of Chanel’s plain design compared to designers before her was not to “preclude the sovereign aim of being seductive” (ibid.: 39). In other words, seduction and desire were connected to women in their relationships with men, in that early fashion was primarily fashion for women. This illustrates the strong connection between the male gaze and female fashion (Steele 1985, Davis 1992, Entwistle 2000, English 2007).

Fashion aesthetic has included and still includes a dialectic of the erotic and the chaste, which are given dissimilar emphasis in different historical times. In 2002-2004, it is explicitly the erotic that has the highest priority, with scanty and tight clothing, but this expression may change with the tide of fashion, as will be shown in the last chapter. Fashion consists of a tension between the oppositions of the erotic and the chaste and how the balance is expressed communicates something about the wearer’s sexuality, such as their sexual orientation (Davis 1992). However, as will be argued, what the clothes communicate in the case of girls is not always part of their conscious presentations of self and is above all, ambivalent. Two examples of this ambivalence are, first, the “Lolita look”, which is simultaneously both erotic and chaste, and second, girls dressing older than their age.
Hair

In the process of growing up and becoming an independent person, the hair is one of the first things the little girl remembers and shows interest in regarding appearance (Haug 1987, Holland 2004, Faludi 1991, Yafeh 2007). According to Holland “women’s hair has always had a powerful effect and has been used in images and stories throughout history” (Holland 2004:59). Long hair has had a special role as a symbol of female beauty and attraction, and it still has (ibid., Faludi 1991, Yafeh 2007). Not one of the girls in the present study has a boyish short haircut, and their interest in hair is confirmed in the interviews and through participant observation during swimming lessons (see below). Hair is thus a fundamental part of a person’s identity, and engages people from an early age. In some societies a (new) haircut is made as part of transition rituals, of girls and boys growing up, for instance when a Jewish girl marries (Yafeh 2007).

Much has been written about the symbolism of hair as expressions of femininities, masculinities, social position, sexualities, political attitudes etc. (see Obeysekere 1981, Holland 2004, Yafeh 2007). According to the anthropologist Orit Yafeh the demand to cover the hair among female Jews is because “it is viewed as an erotic stimulus” (Yafeh 2007: 530). The relationship between the hijab and the hair of Muslim women also underlines the strong sexual associations of hair in their social contexts. Of the Muslim girls included in this study, only one is very strict about not showing her hair. Her country of origin is Ethiopia, and she always wears a hijab and long dresses. One day in the gym changing room with only girls present, she loosens the hijab and reveals long, thick hair. The other girls look at her admiringly and beg her not to put on the hijab again, but wearing it is for her an incorporated practice and thus routine. Therefore she puts it on again before starting the gym lesson.

In Female Sexualization (1987) Haug and colleagues assert that they were astonished to find how strong the connection was between hair, gender identity and social position (ibid.). The authors present different memorized stories about young girls and the importance of hair. They write:

Hair long ago lost its function as mere protection – in which its usefulness was defined in relation to heat and cold – and has become a symbol of femininity and masculinity – of
potency, in its association with beauty. In this context, cropping the hair against the will of the person concerned becomes a demonstration of power. A wound to that person’s dignity (Haug 1987).

In other words, hair is associated with gender and beauty, and the “in” styles vary with age, time and place. According to these authors, the cutting of hair marks the transition from being a girl-child to being more grown-up. This resonates with the girls included in this study, as will be shown shortly.

“Bodywork” concerning hair is of a somewhat different kind than for clothes, in that hair is part of the body, and has “things” done to it, not the other way around. The options are many: cutting, styling and dyeing. Of the children I got to know, these “things” were done to hair to increasing degrees with age and this was also true of boys. Synne, who as a whole does not seem much concerned with her appearance, one day wears a thin blue stripe in her hair bought at the hairdressers “because I think it is nice”, she says. The stripe stays in her hair for almost a year. The case of Synne is an example of hair being the first phenomenon that girls engage in and want independence in where appearance is concerned. She is not one of the kul girls and shows no interest in kul clothes or clothes in general, as “shopping for clothes is the most boring thing of all!” Aleksandra at Vestdal says she is not interested in clothes, but in sporting her hair in different hairstyles. That the gaining of independence in the case of hair is easier than with clothes may be because hairstyling does not threaten the presumed childhood innocence as much as “sexy” bodies and clothes do.

I accompany the children at Østli to swimming classes in the 4th grade, when they are nine and ten years old. A lot of attention is centered on the hair when the girls are getting dressed. The hair styles among the girls are astonishingly similar: long hair, to the shoulders or longer, and cut straight in a kind of “natural”, non-sophisticated style. Some have a fringe, but most do not. This simple hairstyle also dominates among the girls in the classes at Vestdal. It is interesting and remarkable that all girls at both field sites have variants of this natural hair style. All that varies is the length and quality of the hair and it seems to be the dominant style among young girls of around nine to twelve years old in Oslo (and also elsewhere in Norway). This style also dominates in younger age groups, but not in older ones.
Therefore I perceive this natural hairstyle as symbolizing traditional girlhood and as being part of the cultural visualization of childhood innocence. As such, the doing of hair among ten year-olds may primarily be understood to be expressions of the traditional notions of girl-child femininities, such as being little, non-erotic and sweet. The picture below can be read as an illustration of childhood innocence related to young girls and hair: They play skipping rope and all but one of the girls have this long-haired, natural, girl-child hairstyle: 110

![An image of the imagined 'innocent' childhood](image)

Material items are needed if the hair is to look tidy and styled, and accessories are applied. Hair bands, strings, braces and pins to keep hair from the eyes and face are prevalent. Hair bands are particularly popular at Vestdal, also among the boys, and are symbols of class demarcation in combination with colours, brands, bracelets and scarves. The most popular band, the so called K-band, is bought in brand shops and costs about three hundred kroner (while a similar band at Cubus costs twenty-nine kroner). Two 7th grade girls at Vestdal say they feel great pressure to buy these bands, which are used in all age groups, also in secondary high school. None of the children at Østli wear a K-band (K stands for Koffelian), an element to the soss style which most of the children have not internalised. The exceptions are first and foremost Nina, Marit, Ida, Trine and their associates who include soss elements in their understanding of coolness, as indicated in the last chapter.

110 The picture also illustrates girl-child innocence concerning clothes: loose fitting to permit play and showing little skin and body shape.
My main job while waiting for the girls in the changing room at Østli after the swimming lessons is to comb and make hair into plaits. Much attention and talk centred on who had thick, long, curly or straight hair. “Pretty” hair is thick, long and not too curly. The girls of African background despaired over their unruly hair when it was not done in the classical African small plaits style. Haug and colleagues (1987) discuss how wearing plaits is a powerful element in doing a proper girl-child femininity among the women in their study. They grew up in Germany in the 1940’s and 1950’s, but also in Oslo in 2002-2004 plaits are understood in a similar way. The three African girls usually wore plaits with hair extension, so that the hair looked longer and could be made into one pony tail, more in keeping with the style of the girls of Norwegian backgrounds. All the girls were much preoccupied with their hair, and wanted it to look good – that is tidy – when leaving the changing room for school again.

Doing one another’s hair is an occupation many practices both in classes and at home and is also found in other societies such as on Bonerate (Broch 1991). According to Thorne, this seems to be a typical activity for girls and is a manifestation of affection (Thorne & Luria 1986, Thorne 1993, see also Schofield 1982). On a trip to the National Museum of Arts, the girls at Vestdal all sit and discreetly do one another’s hair while the guide is speaking. This hair activity consists of combing and stroking, making one or two plaits or pony tails, or making a style the girls do not often use. The same observation is made of Mona and Toril; Synne and Solveig at Østli. The activity shows the interest in hair and appearance as such, but is also an expression of affection, intimacy and exploration of femininities between the girls, as the doing of hair usually only occurs between close friends. As such, doing each other’s hair is an expression of homosociality, or close friendship between persons of the same sex (Ambjørnsson 2004). Among young girls it may be interpreted as one way of doing junior sexuality. Hair becomes a “thing” which permits intimacy and plays a part in the building and keeping of same-sex friendships as children of the other sex never were observed or reported to do one another’s hair.

At the end of the 4th grade, two of the leading girls at Østli, Nina and Christel (an unstable associate to the popular group) have new haircuts, not cut very short, but
layered. This is a style common among teenagers in addition to dyeing, usually in the form of highlights. Nina’s mother says Nina has thought about the haircutting for a long time beforehand, should she, or should she not do it? She is not sure if she “dare”. This shows that there is a connection between sense of self, hairstyle and the desire to look good at an early age. From my own childhood I remember I despaired after cutting my plaits off in the 5th grade. I felt displaced and unhappy for many weeks. Nina’s ambivalence and uncertainty about having the teenage cut illustrates her fumbling identification with teenage culture and style, which she eventually succumbs to. The same ambivalence and uncertainty concerns hair dyeing, the girls think and talk about it for a long time beforehand. Ida, Mona and Ellen have highlights in their hair once or twice. This was something Mona did at the hairdressers when her brother of twelve years did the same thing, as did their mother. In this case, the dyeing of hair became part of the experiential space of family, which often is the case when mothers come along and engage in the same activities as their daughters.

Ida and Ellen have also dyed their hair once or twice and their mothers have dyed hair too. Mothers often act as role models for young girls and Ida is among the few girls who answered in the affirmative as to whether her mother was worth imitating (see Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Enerstvedt 2004). But Siri and Kari say they definitely do not want to look like their mothers! I guess it is deemed childish to openly confess that one’s mother or father is an ideal when one is starting to seek independence from parents. But the fact that only a couple of girls say they want to look like their mothers does not mean they are not imitating them unconsciously or that mothers do not gender-construct their daughters in their personal style. Of the girls in this study, mothers and daughters often seem to have similar styles, such as being sporty (Mona, Nina, Ida) and a bit soss (Nina, Marit, Ida, Trine). When girls want some of the same things as their mothers, it may be easier for daughters to get permission. This may be so concerning hair dyeing because it is an expensive activity and a step outside of the world of the child. Parents may oppose this departure, as did Oda and Ellen’s mothers concerning shopping clothes at Popin, referred to in the last chapter.
How the girls do their hair influences how they move their heads and keep their posture: Having long hair hanging loose inspires a tossing of the head which may look *kul* and arrogant, but also helpless and untidy. Haug (1987) cite a story in which the girl remembers how wearing a pony tail made her keep her head up in order to reduce the bumping of the tail. The girl felt a “slight pressure” on her head, but the pony-tail also “made her feel taller, even grown-up” (Haug 1987: 93). In this sense, hair styles, haircuts and accessories are cultural tools which work on the body and form its demeanour. By making these haircuts and colour changes, the girls signal an initial identification with youth culture. Having the cut and highlights are results of internalising youth culture to some extent and act as a symbol of the teenager-girl. When a ten year-old girl’s hairstyle is an imitation of the teenage look, it indicates an attempt at the subject position of *kul* teenager-girl and not a girl-child anymore. The cut and highlights inspire them to think of themselves not as little girls being childish but rather as older, stretching out their hand to youth culture. This transition is initiated by themselves, not their parents (mothers). The hairstyle, pins, hair bands and other accessories emphasize their gender identities as girls, albeit still primarily girl-children, while the dyeing and layering evoke associations with teenage culture. Vilde at Østli (in the grade above Nina, Marit and Ida) is a good example of this change in subject positions. At the start of the 7th grade she had cut her hair in many uneven layers and dyed it to a nuanced blonde. It did not last long before many of the other girls had done the same: Vilde was the most popular girl in the 7th grade and thus has agency with symbolic power. I return to this issue later.

As indicated above, boys are not indifferent to their hair either, and this is more apparent at Vestdal than at Østli. In the case of hair, at the former field site boys seem to be stronger carriers of class distinction than girls. Many Vestdal boys have longer hair than the ones at Østli, a phenomenon visible from the 1st grade upwards to secondary school. Even cut, shoulder-length hair without a fringe combined with a hair band or hair brace is an element of the boys’ cultural ideas of being *soss*, a sign of identification with the *soss* style. The category of the *soss* is a marginal part of the ten year-olds’ active classification system at Østli, but is manifested among all the 7th graders included in this study. The hairstyles of boys were the first observations of difference I noticed when I started the field work at Vestdal. Later,
this gendered difference of class is supported by different styles in clothes as well, as will be shown shortly.

**Underwear**

In what follows, I shall only discuss the material objects I consider to be the most important in the girls’ construction of femininities and relationship building. I will start with the controversial case of underwear. As presented in Chapter 1, the marketing industry tries every now and then to present teenage/grown-up underwear for children, such as bras and string briefs. Other bras offered vary from so-called “tops” or short singlets to mini versions of grown-up, push-up bras. From quite an early age, even before school age in Norway, some young girls wear tops. One of the reasons may be that tops and underpants are bought in pairs, in a set. Of the girls in this study, only two or three wear tops, and the main attitude among the girls is that “there is no point wearing a bra when you have no tits!” This is a common opinion at both field sites. The girls at Østli found it funny that a girl they knew with “tits” did not care about wearing a bra, while another with none did wear one. In other words, it is evident that bras exist as symbols in girls’ gender construction at a very early age, and this is something the girls think about and relate to: At what age and stage in our development is it appropriate to start wearing one? This particularly concerns the “proper” bras, those worn by mature females. It is worth noting, however, that it is relevant to differentiate between the tops which are only worn and directed at young girls, and bras per se, because the norms among the girls for wearing tops or not are not as strong as for the bras. Acting older than their age is connected to the bras, not the tops, and physical maturation thus seems to play a role in how the use is understood by the children. As noted above, they express a commonsense attitude towards this: “Why wear bras when you have no tits??” Implicit in this is an expectation that girls start wearing certain items of clothing according to age, but more in order that it be ok to wear a bra when you have “something” to put into them. None of the girls I got to know put cotton wool inside the bra to fake breasts, a strategy reported among the girls as “utterly silly”, but not unusual. As such, bodily maturation and cultural practices may in the case of bras stand as an illustration of a dialectical relationship between living bodies and cultural practices as to when it is culturally acceptable to start wearing one.
This is not so with the string briefs, which I interpret as being one of the strongest symbols of teenage, as opposed to girl-children’s culture. There is nothing in physical maturation which “requires” the wearing of string briefs. Unlike the bra, string briefs have no practical function, as they are only constructed to show the buttocks and make them look more voluminous. However, both the bra and the string briefs are designed through an eroticized male gaze to make the female body more attractive. The brief is definitely connected to sexuality as it has its roots in prostitution, striptease and pornography. For most adults then string briefs have strong associations to sexuality which makes it into a sexualising material object when connected to young girls (and older girls!). The strong feminine symbolism associated with this type of underwear is also emphasised by Torell from Sweden. In “Adults and Children Debating Sexy Girls’ Clothes” (2004), she analyses a debate on string briefs among children in a youth magazine (Kamratposten). Some of the eleven year-olds find it all right to wear this underwear, while others find it “disgusting” (Torell 2004). The fact that a heated debate was going on about this shows the importance of the garment in the girls’ gender construction and presentation of self. I return to this discussion in Chapter 13. Of the girls in my study, the starting point for wearing string briefs varies and depends on what the most dominating girls in a class or peer group fancy and introduce as kul or worth having. It seems as if this coincides with starting to use make-up on a daily basis, which also is a strong gender and growing up demarcation sign.

As mentioned in the last chapter, none of the girls in the 4th through the 6th grade used string briefs on a regular basis. They think they are uncomfortable and many say they find them “disgusting”. Solveig in the 7th grade at Østli says she was allowed at home to wear them in the 6th grade but “did not dare”. This indicates that the string briefs give associations to something indefinable that has to do with the body and sexuality, that the girls experience them as making the body “older than it is.” Or, to put it another way, that the briefs are cultural tools in adapting their bodies to older sexuality. The girls think and associate donning string briefs with youth culture and older sexuality, and with creating distance from childishness and girl-children’s culture. As such, string briefs become a mediator between the world and contexts of children and adults, of junior and older sexuality. Moreover, the string briefs illustrate the link between the kul and the sexy, a link the ten year-old
girls sense to some extent. Therefore they have not started wearing briefs even though they want to be kul. Most of the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} graders are not yet ready for a sexual transition into teenage culture. This is underlined by their peer norms, because children who violate the norms risk being teased or humiliated, unless, perhaps, the violation was made by the most popular group. They would probably have the power to change practice, but the youngest girls, Nina, Marit and Ida do not find bras and string briefs kul and worth striving for.

The girls that first start wearing bras and string briefs are often the ones categorized as berte by the other children, as was the case in the 7\textsuperscript{th} grade at Østli. Their motivation for starting to wear this underwear is probably a desire to become popular not only among the girls but particularly among the boys. The girls know that string briefs are used to make the bottom, and thus the body, look more attractive. The rationale for the production of string briefs is that the bottom looks better in tight trousers when the edges of the underpants do not show (Torell 2004). As such, string briefs definitely contribute to sexualising the bodies of young girls both from the inside (the body as subject) and from outside (the body as object). Thus I would argue that the experience of “thinking through things” is greatly felt in relationship to bras and string briefs. This is because the girls think about them a long time before they start using them, and many seem to experience a crossing of a boundary when they do so. Again the developmental discourse is drawn upon. As one eleven year-old girl at Østli asked: “When is it time to start using string-briefs?” She herself does not want to start wearing one before she is in the 7\textsuperscript{th} or 8\textsuperscript{th} grade because she too considers them to be “uncomfortable”. By putting them on they try to pass from the world of girl-children into the world of teenagers (adults), which also includes make-up. I return to this theme in Chapter 13.

**Make-up**

The use of make-up, in addition to the underwear, is one of the demarcation signs per se of wanting to move from the status of girl-child to the status of teenager, whether a biological teenager or not. To experiment with make-up is something young girls start doing when playing at home, but some are more interested in such activities than others. Of the ten year-old girls, Karine from Vestdal is the only girl
who explicitly expresses a strong interest in make-up. When she, Karin and Helena are asked what they would spend five hundred kroner on, given the choice, the following conversation ensues:

Kari: Clothes….
Karine: Clothes and make-up…
Mari: Make-up?
Helena: Make-up??
Karine: Yes!
Helena: Make-up?? I don’t have ONE make-up thing!
Karine: I love make-up….
Helena: I haven’t anything!
Karine: I just love it!
Helena: But sometimes my big sister puts make-up on me, because she wants to.
Mari: How old is she?
Helena: She is fourteen, no, thirteen and a half.
Mari: Is she in the 8th grade? Does she use make-up?
Helena: Yes, but only mascara, she doesn’t use anything else. I do believe I will do that too.
Karine: I won’t start with mascara.
Mari: But when do you usually start using make-up then? When do most start in your area?
Karine: I think I shall start in 7th grade. 111
Kari: But you do use it even now every now and again!
Karine: No…
Mari: But you said to me once that you use it when you are going to birthday parties and such?
Karine: Then I put on a little bit…
Kari: But most of us do that…it’s not only Karine. But no one does it when going to school.

Kari points to an important distinction illustrating contextual subject position: They use make-up in some situations and not in others. The Østli girls say the same, although ten/eleven year-olds with make-up other than lip-gloss were never observed either at a birthday party nor the school disco or shopping trips (events to be discussed later). Every now and again I also observed Mitha dipping her lips in a lip-gloss box during lessons, and Oda discreetly doing the same.

The popular older girls in this study start using make-up, including mascara, on a regular basis in the 7th grade, but the 7th grade girls at Vestdal do not. The girls at Vestdal say they do not want to start using make-up yet, they do not find it nice when they are that young (thirteen years old). Thus they too draw on a developmental discourse. Janne says that “it is a little too early, we become sort of… it is not that in at our school, then we kind of get pushed out if we start using make-up. It becomes kind of….’she uses make-up!’ “ Put another way, she asserts that the peer pressure consists of not putting on make-up before at least the 8th

111 When I visit them at the end of the 7th grade, she has not started.
grade. At Østli the opposite is the case where both underwear (i.e. bras and string-briefs) and make-up are concerned. This indicates that the family history and experiences in general at Vestdal conform to the cultural images of childhood innocence for a longer period of time than at Østli, or that there is a greater peer pressure against using make-up (and string briefs) among the 7th graders there. The impression from other districts in Norway is that it is usual for girls to start using make-up in the 7th grade, but that Vestdal is a district that holds this at bay (for the time being anyhow). This is irrespective of cultural background, girls of non-western origin start using make-up as early or late as those peers from Norwegian backgrounds.

The power of make-up in the perception of self should not be underestimated. To start using mascara, eye-liner and lipstick on a regular everyday basis represents a big transformation in the girls’ appearance, which the ten year-old girls will soon experience. They immediately look older and are aware of it. They sometimes capitalize on it by, for example, gaining entry to certain films at the cinema. Putting on make-up signals to the world that “I am a girl but a child no longer” and gives them an experience of this. On this background, it is possible to outline the contents of a “package” of the most important transitional items from girl-child to teenager-girl as consisting of bras, string-briefs and make-up. The items are, alone or together, strong demarcation signs of the transition from the status of girl-child to teenager-girl, where the string briefs may be interpreted as the most controversial but most erotic symbol in this transition. It is worth noting that preteens in other research also draw on the developmental discourse in explaining why they don’t do this or that, indicating that this discourse is relevant in preteen’s lives in many western countries (see Kelle 2001, Johansson 1996, Renold 2005, Adler & Adler 1998, Thorne 1993, Thorne & Luria 1986).

The strong transformative power of make-up and the phenomenon of “thinking through things” is well illustrated by a performance at summer camp in 2005 (6th grade). After taking a walk around, I return to our house and find the children

112 These postulations are based on over-all observations and conversations as a mother of a daughter in the same age-group and her friends, in addition to media debates.
113 This is the same event as “Gender event B” in the beginning of Chapter 2.
very excited, screaming and laughing outside. Mitha comes rushing towards me shouting: “Mari, Mari, Anthony and Akram are wearing mascara!! And now Christel is doing the same to Ivar and Tommy!” It is Christel that arranges the make-up, and the boys walk around with a feminine gait saying “I am a girl, I am girl!” It is obvious that the make-up makes them think of themselves as girls, though playfully and superficially, of course. “Come here!” Ida and Marit cry to the boys, “we’ll show you how to walk like a berte!” And they walk about, wriggling their hips, with their head high, proffering their wrists saying “Daa’a!” The boys follow, imitating them. The other children are screaming with laughter. After a while Anthony says he doesn’t want to be a girl anymore, and washes the make-up off. When that is done, he says, relieved “Now I am a boy again! Now I am a boy again!”

This episode highlights the obvious perceptions of femininities and masculinities among these girls and boys. It is evident that the boys and the girls all understand make-up and “doing” berte as girls’ aesthetic. Although the scenario is in a playful setting, as a form of dramaturgical event with roles proper, the cultural notions behind are clear. When the boys wear mascara and behave like berties, they “play” berte. It is fantasy play used in playing with different gender identities. The play shows how the understanding of berte greatly violates their perception of masculinities. Thus the play illustrates how the children’s “category maintenance work” is activated (Davies 2003). Of course, they all knew the boys were “playing” girls, but the excitement it created is nonetheless worth noting. Petter, who is one of the boys who often plays with the girls, and seems rather secure in his masculine role, said “I shall never, ever permit anyone to put make-up on me. I don’t want to be a girl!” Make-up is definitely still part of their conceptualization of femininities, but things may be changing to also include this in the doing of masculinity (see Drotner 1991). I return to this in the next chapter. However, the present norms for maleness among the boys definitely do not include make-up, although some teenage boys at Vestdal are said to use mascara in some special social situations. However, among boys in general, the regular use of mascara still seems a far-off notion.
It is also worth noting that I never experienced the contrary, that of girls “playing boys” as part of spontaneous play. ¹¹⁴ But if they had, I am not sure the children would have been as excited as above. The reason might be that Norwegian girls today have legitimate femininities which include more forms of traditional or previous masculinities than the other way around, such as being tomboys and wearing trousers and shirts, being footballers and engage in all sorts of sports. Because of the stigmatization, or homophobia, which still seems to exist towards feminine boys, or homosexuals, boys performing activities associated to traditional femininities represent a greater violation of gender norms. ¹¹⁵ Put another way, girls may have more options in doing femininities than boys have in doing masculinities.

**Clothes**

*Fashion for ten year-old girls*

When it comes to ordinary clothes as symbols of female gender construction, it is simpler to say that all clothes made particularly for girls have this function. They all tell the world that “I am a girl”. The interesting path, however, is to find out which variant of femininity the different clothes may be interpreted to construct and how the purchase is to be understood. This argumentation is related to intra-gender difference and to the stance that gender is more or less relevant, also among just girls. What is fashionable and *kul* from the girls’ and boys’ point of view is important in this regard because the understanding constitutes the dominant subject positions which all girls and boys relate to in some way. The “desirable, beautiful and popular clothes” (Entwistle 2000:1) for preteen children in Oslo in 2002-2004 are imitations of teenage/adult fashion. That is to say that different kinds of short hipster trousers, tight-fitting jeans, baggy army fatigues, short tops, singlets and sweaters/jackets with hoods dominate the feminine aesthetic. In addition, more loose-fitting leisure trousers and garments with a sporty look but with low hips on girls are used as an alternative.

¹¹⁴ The nearest exception is girls playing soldiers (see Chapter 9), but today young women are soldiers too. At the end of the school ceremony in 2004 the ⁷th grade performed a play in which boys were girls and girls were boys. The boys playing girls were definitely experienced by the younger children as most amusing.

¹¹⁵ I base this argument on the fact that swear words and teasing among children often include homosexual assaults.
In general, fashion clothes for girls aim and have the capacity to show the midriff and breast cleavage, in that the trousers and tops have low cuts. The eroticized (male) gaze is here illustrated as embedded in the design. A peculiar detail in fashion for teenage girls is the low cut on trousers, which easily makes the underpants visible above the jeans. This is also particularly widespread among the boys, where the jeans are not low cut, but are worn pulled down, as in the gangster and hip hop styles. Here the trousers are almost below the bottom, and show most of the underpants, preferably boxers of “cool” brand like Calvin Klein, Bjørn Borg or Boss. These trousers definitely “work on the body” in that walking normally is very difficult; the boys sort of pull their legs along. For girls the string on the briefs and the bottom cleavage show with just a little bending over, which they try to avoid doing. This posture is emphasised in an advertisement from JC (Jeans & Clothes) on jeans termed The brave. The ad shows three girls walking along with low-cut tight jeans, two of them have invisible strings above the lining, the third has a red one and shows the upper part of her bottom. 116 On the whole, the fashion for girls shows more body and skin than that of boys, who wear baggy jeans and college sweaters with hoods, similar to those worn by girls, but made for boys by different brands (see also Borg 2006).

As noted in Chapter 6, the clothes the girls wear are just as likely to illustrate the parents’ (often mothers’) preferences as their own. Therefore the following discussion will concentrate on those girls that expressed and showed an independent interest in fashion and clothes. At Østli, not surprisingly, this includes the dominating, popular group, in addition to the wannabes, or the ones wanting to belong to this group (Mitha, Farou, Oda, Ellen, Trine, partly Christel and Samira). I understand their construction of gender to be inspired by the cultural ideas of being kul teenager-girl rather than girl-childish, where the older children and teenagers are role models. The classificatory system presented in Chapter 6 functions subconsciously or consciously in this process, in addition to ideas internalized during earlier upbringing inspired by family and images in the wider society (see Chapter 12). Of the ten year-old girls in this study, I argue that it is primarily the above mentioned girls who show an interest in being fashionable and kul, while

others show less interest. The following may be interpreted as a description of on-going activities motivated by the desire to position themselves as teenage-like and *kul*. This becomes apparent on two shopping trips I attend, the first with the popular girls Nina, Marit and Ida, to be discussed below. In the next chapter I describe the trip with Mitha, Farou and Samira (all from Østli). \(^{117}\)

*Shopping with Nina, Marit and Ida*

In the middle of the 5th grade it is not common for the girls to go shopping alone. It has not yet become a theme for discussion. But one winter day I become aware of much secrecy and whispering among Nina, Marit and Ida. They tell me they are planning to go shopping alone next week at the nearest shopping mall. “Going shopping” is a common activity among teenage girls, and something many do as a hobby. It is also gendered: The activity of shopping is usually not a popular activity among boys (or men!). \(^{118}\) Mitha has asked to go with them, but is turned down “‘because they could only be three”. As such, the episode illustrates that shopping is about social relationships (see Chin 2001, Miller 1998). That event among the girls is a typical example of many subtle exclusion mechanisms experienced by Mitha, Farou, Oda and others wanting to be with the popular girls (more on this in Chapter 11). They find an argument which is absolute and closed to negotiation.

When Nina sensed my interest in the shopping trip, she said I could come along if I wanted. I guess this was because it then would be easier to get permission at home to go “alone”, knowing I would not interfere. Nina’s mother later tells me that Nina had hardly slept the night before; she was so looking forward to the event. The girls had planned it for a long time, saving money and expressing the desire for cash as gifts both for Christmas and birthdays. This resulted in Nina bringing one thousand kroner, the others five hundred kroner each (Nina had just celebrated her 11th birthday).

\(^{117}\) I did not attend any shopping trips with the girls at Vestdal, because they had not started going shopping on their own.

\(^{118}\) Jon at Vestdal is an exception as he expressed an interest in going shopping. I never heard any of the Østli boys talk about this.
When the day arrives I drive to the shopping mall situated five minutes away from Østli. The mall is on two floors filled with about fifty shops of all kinds. The atmosphere is filled with popular music, the light is bright and the temperature inside is around twenty degrees. I meet the girls at JC (their suggestion) after school. Before they spot me, I observe them discussing and looking at clothes, holding them out for closer scrutiny. They tell me what they like and don’t like, and take clothes with them to the fitting rooms and try them on. Marit and Nina go into the same “room”, while Ida is on her own. The conversation runs high if the different garments fit, and they move out of the “room” to see how they look in a big mirror close by. This activity may also be interpreted as fantasy play, as playing with gender identities.

The shopping trip results in some purchases. Nina buys her favourite tight-fit MUDD jeans, a singlet for sleeping in size XL, “because mummy said it had to be wide in order to be suitable for sleeping”, illustrating how Nina brings “her mother’s opinion” with her in her head. Ida buys a black tee-shirt with a wide neck, a short green singlet and a white blouse. Marit buys a green wide trainer-like pair of trousers with a rib near the foot. They also ask for my opinion and I answer as best I can. In their discussions, they refer to clothes they have seen in magazines, on other people and to options made by mothers and girls not present. The shopping atmosphere can be described with the words of Elisabeth Chin, who studied African American ten year-old girls’ consumption patterns: “Through their shopping excursions, kids were engaging with their families, neighbourhoods, city, and culture rather than exiting from those social entanglements” (Chin 2001:121). Shopping together is thus a way of building and marking friendship, underlined by Nina, Marit and Ida wearing similar broad hair bands, but in different colours. Before the trip, they had made sure that Ida also had this band, which the other two had possessed for some time. Now the hair band became a symbol of their friendship. Later I observe Oda with such a band too – she had probably bought it in sympathy with the popular group.

For these girls the most attractive shops are those which offer brand label clothes for teenagers, particularly JC, O-N-L-Y, BikBok and Vero Moda. For instance, Nina’s mother says “Nina is in love with JC!” It is evident that the girls have classified
shops according to coolness and thus relevance, where the big chains with the cheapest clothes, like Cubus, Lindex, H&M, were not very popular, although H&M passed. Nina’s explanation for not buying clothes at H&M was also cited at the introduction of this chapter:

I don’t like shopping at H&M, there is nothing that fits me there, they have this kind of pink stuff and such, which I don’t like. And the trousers don’t fit me either, then I’d have to use such big trousers, which is not very nice. I usually shop at VeroModa, BikBok, but only pullovers there, and at JC there are many nice trousers.

The reason why the trousers at H&M don’t “fit” is because the sizes don’t vary in leg lengths, which jeans from teenage shops mostly do. So Nina’s reason for not buying jeans at H&M has a functional basis in addition to the aesthetic and symbolism connected to youth culture, in which H&M is usually not qualified as very attractive. The same classification of shops was explicitly formulated by the girls a year older when I spoke to them about shopping and clothes:

Carla: Often now, like you now have to buy such expensive clothes.
Mari: Do you have to do that now?
Carla: Yes, in a way we can’t buy at H&M, Cubus and shops like that, now that is too silly.
Mari: It is too silly with Cubus now?
(All the five girls in the focus group say together: ) Now it is only BikBok, O-N-L-Y, Vero Moda...
Mari: What about H&M?
Vilde: They have some nice things sometimes…
Carla: If we are to shop in any of those stores, then we shop in the shops particularly directed at teenagers, not very often in the others.
Mari: But when did you start thinking that shops like Cubus and Lindex were too childish?
Carla: At the end of the 5th grade or something.
Solveig: Yes, when all the others started to wear Miss Sixty jeans and Jean Paul.

These girls share more or less the same cultural ideas on how to present themselves; they want to be kul and “in” (following fashion) in brand-name clothes, cheaper clothes are childish or “silly”. They buy their clothes in the same shops as the leading girls in the 9th grade who also say that: “We buy our clothes in Vero Moda, BikBok, JC and sometimes H&M”. So the leaders among the youngest girls also aspire to this, and as mentioned above, the most attractive shop is JC. Material objects from such shops thus become part of the personal capital for becoming popular. Nina likes tight-fitting jeans best; Marit and Ida prefer more loose-fitting cotton trousers and imitations of sport outfits. The girls differentiate between the “tight” and the “cozy” style, two styles that work differently on the body, and which are experienced differently too. The experience of clothes as cultural tools in bodywork is well illustrated in the quotation below:
Nina: Eheh, we have somewhat different styles.
Marit: Me and Ida we like more such comfy clothes...as a matter of fact, I do not like wearing trousers like these (she points to her tight jeans).
Ida: No...such tight jeans, for then I have to walk more like this (wriggles her body), but when I wear trousers like these (loose cotton) I can run and do whatever I want.

This dialogue reveals that Marit occasionally wears tight-fitting jeans in spite of not liking them very much, which illustrates the force of the desire to be fashionable and kul: Tight jeans are definitely cool and brand label designs are the latest fashion. I suggest this is the reason why girls also start wearing string briefs. They don’t do it because they are comfortable, but because they are kul (and sexy) and are part of the “transition package” mentioned before. The material objects are experienced as necessary aesthetic items for growing up and entering adolescence. In addition, they also want to look good, which, as will be remembered, is the argument from the marketing industry concerning string briefs.

It is worth noting that the trousers of both styles cited in the quotation above are bought in teenager shops classified as attractive. This also applies to the popular pullovers most preteen children in Oslo wear in 2002-2004: a college sweater or jacket with a hood. All the leading shops in children’s clothes have these on offer. Most brands have their logo on: BikBok, Marc’o Polo, Peak, Gant, Gap, Diesel, Levis and Jean Paul, to name a few. I observed all these brands among the children I got to know, but only four of the brands at Østli (BikBok, Diesel, Levis, Jean Paul) the rest in the richer west. Underneath the hood sweaters, the girls wear a kind of top, a singlet, some with a low cut in front. The cultural ideas for suitable clothes, however, include different brands at the two field sites. The girls and boys in this study vary as to how much competence they have in recognizing brands as cheap or more expensive. Nina shows some competence as in this comment to Ida: "You have a new t-shirt on! I see you bought it at Cubus!" The cheap clothing chains offer the same type of singlets and hood sweaters as in the more expensive shops, but these are not popular among the girls, at least not with those wanting to be kul and identifying themselves with popular youth culture.

“My own style”

During the shopping trip, Nina, Marit and Ida comment and talk about one another’s choices, and none buys anything the others do not approve of. This draws attention
to another relevant point in this study, namely the girls’ ambitions to “have their own style”. This was also expressed by Thale at Vestdal in the last chapter, and indicated in the conversation about styles above, and is closely related to the issue of “personality”. To an outsider, preteen girls look much the same, as having the same style, but each girl aspires to having a personal style that shows her personality. This is confirmed by the popular girls and their associates, like in this citation from Farou talking about jewelry: “When we were inside a bijouterie store, I wanted pearls, Samira had some other pearls, Mitha the ones that were popular, which I also wanted before, but now I have got my own style!” By this she implies that she bought pearls none of the others had. The issue of “having my own style” is particularly prevalent among the girls a year older (at Østli). The 7th grade girls say that it is not good for any of the girls to imitate everything another wears, unless they are very good friends:

Bennie: If I see that somebody else has a sweater that is very nice, I cannot buy the same, because it is no fun if you don’t have your own style.
Vilde: It really isn’t just about clothes, it’s a bit like this, that you may become a bit more popular if you try out different clothes which none of the others have and things like that. But it really depends more on your personality. If you just say “I don’t know” and “I don’t know” and just follow us when we do something, that’s not ok.
Bennie: But if you are out shopping on Saturday, and then buy a sweater, and become ill and stay away from school the whole week, and I buy the same sweater while you are away, then I am not imitating you…
Vilde: No, but that doesn’t matter, because I know you have your own personality, ok?

Vilde is one of the most popular girls in the 7th grade, while Bennie’s position is frailer. The dialogue reveals that Bennie is afraid of doing something that might exclude her from the popular group, such as buying a sweater somebody else has just bought. Vilde has made it clear that she does not want anybody to imitate her clothes. She has a strong position and power. In this group, conflicts and intrigues have been frequent. The conversation shows how the issue of “having your own style” and “having your own personality” are closely related.

Another way of expressing the above aims is “I want to be me”, which is why the title of this study is “I want to be me. I want to be kul”. The title is an indication of what seems to be a paradox in the conversation above, to be “different” and “same” simultaneously, a contradiction that is not experienced that way by the girls. For them, the process of “finding their own style” or “wanting to be me” expresses a construction of femininities independent of parents in order to recognize themselves
as independent young women. As such, it may be read as the expression of successful socialisation into “independence” discussed previously. Peers also play an important part in this process, therefore wanting to belong and “be kul” is also an ideal. The paradox is that they try to find their own style in continuous negotiation with their (wanting to be kul) friends thus underlining as much “sameness” as “difference”. Things defined as kul, such as teenage fashion clothes, are mediators in the process of finding your own style, but also between girls trying to become kul and populær. The kul items make this more possible, implying that the relationships would not be the same without the things. Being cool and fashionable is thus an activity filled with ambiguity: wanting to be different and individual inside the group but similar to the group perceived by those outside. As formulated by Entwistle: “The individual may want to ‘stand out’ but she or he also wants to ‘fit in’ with a group” (Entwistle 2000:139). Wærdahl calls this phenomenon of wanting to belong and also setting oneself apart from a group “double motivation” or “to be and not to be” (part of a group) (Wærdahl 2003). It is related to what Douglas discusses as identity preferences and hostilities, as presented before (Douglas 1996). In the following chapter I plunge deeper into these themes, or more precisely, I explore in more detail the meaning of the most important items used in the ten year-old girls’ construction of gender.
Chapter 8: Childish, “kul” or sexy

The images, goods, and rituals of a commercialized childhood led very subtly to a fantasy culture from which parents were excluded and which appeared to be anything but innocent. The first clear signs of the cool appeared among older boys in the 1930’s with the appearance of dark science fiction stories and then in the 1960’s and 1970’s, when the cool look of Barbie and monster figures replaced baby dolls and Tinkertoys (Cross 2004:17).

This chapter continues the theme of thinking and living through things with explicit focus on different ramifications of the cool. I present an interpretation of the girls’ understanding of childish (barnslig), kul and “sexy” to be followed up in the last chapters. I argue that a sexy femininity is not an aspiring subject position for these girls, but may be unconsciously embedded in the understanding of a kul femininity. I suggest that this “hidden” idea of older sexuality contributes to a process which gradually modifies their understanding of coolness to include sexuality as teenagers. The process is also inspired by cultural ideas on femininities existent in the girls’ different social contexts, such as shopping and sports. The chapter ends with a discussion of the relationship between the cool, sexy and sporty. I argue that these notions have become inextricably linked through the role of popular culture, pop music and commercialism in different sport contexts. In this discussion I use data from the organisation of the big football tournament, the Norway Cup.

Shopping with Mitha, Farou and Samira

As was the case with the popular girls, the importance of conferring with each other on which items to buy is also evident during the shopping trip with the other group, the wannabe popular Mitha, Farou and partly Samira. I took the initiative for this trip during a holiday week a month after the shopping with the popular girls, knowing they had no plans.

I pick them up by car at the end of the winter holiday week because Mitha expressed a wish to do so, she seldom drives by private car. Her family has no car and no driving license, which is not uncommon among non-privileged families, particularly the most disadvantaged ones. We go to the same shopping mall where I was with the popular group, which is the mall most often used by the people in the Østli area. On our way in the car to the mall, Farou says she “has put on weight during the
holiday”, while Mitha responds by saying she “has lost ten kilos because she has been to a gym studio”. Farou continues the conversation by explaining the possible weight gain by telling us that she “has eaten so much tasty food”. While Mitha and Farou discuss weight “problems”, Samira is all quiet, but then says that she “doesn’t think about whether she has put on weight or not”. During the shopping trip Farou again touches on being fat or slim, which I return to below.

While shopping, many relevant themes thus become apparent. As on the shopping with Nina, Marit and Ida, I let the girls lead the way. They are attracted to most of the shops, from book stores to accessory shops. They discuss and comment on what they found nice, pretty, exciting and kul. They often refer to family members and others they know have an opinion on some of the things in the shops. As such, these girls also have “voices in their head” (Hey 1997) which influence their shopping. As Mitha and Farou have particular aspirations to being numbered among the popular, they refer to them many times during the trip. “Nina likes this, Marit has that”. This reflects a similar observation made by Chin:

In most cases, children were caught up in thinking about family members and caretakers even while shopping alone with me, and these absent people exerted a force on children’s shopping trips that was in many respects far more powerful than my own influence (Chin 2001:119).

Thinking about relevant others when out shopping points to a constrained agency among the girls, and their actual buy is in the intersection of age, gender, class and socio-cultural background. All the girls are aware of the age-setting limits on which clothes to buy. Farou and Mitha live in non-privileged families; they are brune ten year-old girls with a somewhat different body shape than their peers of Norwegian origin. They are much motivated in their shopping by the taste and style of the popular girls, who have Norwegian backgrounds and belong to privileged families. This illustrates the phenomenon of symbolic power: it resides in the relations without the girls knowing it. However, Mitha, Farou and Samira have not internalised the classification of cool and not-so-cool shops in the same manner as the first group: They do not resist going into the cheap clothing chains for clothes, and even buy things there. This is partly so because their family histories are different concerning taste and economy. In addition, these girls, particularly Farou and Samira, often refer to their mothers when deciding what to buy (see also Chapter
6). For these girls, both the popular girls and their own mothers “participate” in the shopping, indicating again these girls’ constrained agency and the symbolic power in their relationships, to be illustrated below. The conversation occurs inside the cheap chain shop Cubus, while the girls walk around looking and commenting.

Mari: Did mummy say something about which clothes you shouldn’t buy?
Farou: No, or like, not such “yucky” clothes…
Mari: But what are yucky clothes then?
Farou: Clothes where you show a lot of the body. But she didn’t say that, but I know she thinks so, I am only ten years old.
Mari: Yes…
Samira: I don’t want to show much of the body either…
Mari: No – but is there anyone in class who buys such clothes?
Farou: Yes, Nina and Ida, particularly Ida, she may even wear a top with a hole in it (points to the back). That does not matter much, but those that show too many yucky parts of the body – I don’t want that.
Mari: But what are yucky parts on the body?
Farou: I don’t know, maybe the thighs??
Mari: The thighs – is that yucky parts?
Farou: Yes, because there are so many people who are fat there, people like me, but I am glad I don’t have fat legs –

What the girls express include reference frames to peers and mothers as well as ideals concerning the perfect body. It points to culturally acceptable femininities including suitable aesthetic and clothes for ten year-old girls. Samira looks at a sweater with a deep neck cut, and says “it is too revealing for me”. Both girls have African backgrounds, Samira is Muslim, Farou Christian. They belong to the working class at Østli, to the category of “the marginalised and insecure”, in that their parents’ job situations are unstable. As such they know that price is important when wanting new clothes. Their families were all well-off in their homelands, but due to wars and upheaval, family members are dispersed all over the world. I suggest their internalised notions of femininities are cultural combinations from both their African origin and Norway, but have in common ideas of erotic innocence and female sexuality inherent to Islam and Christianity concerning young girls. These are values and norms laid down in their experiential structures through their earliest upbringing as part of the experiential space of family, which also concerns Norwegian girls in general.

Farou and Samira (and Oda in Chapter 6) may be understood to have internalised the cultural notions of innocent and sweet girl-children and suitable clothes for young girls dominant in Norwegian society. They conform to the norms by not buying and
wearing clothes that expose the body too much. Put another way, they (or their mothers) buy clothes that are closer to images of chastity than eroticism. The negative reactions associated with violation of the embodied norms make the girls conform. But the shopping trip also suggests that by repeatedly referring to Nina, Marit and Ida and their taste, they have internalised the ideas of being kul as something worth striving for because the popular group has defined it so. Farou, Mitha and Samira’s understanding of attractive clothes thus seems to resonate with the popular group. However, the conversation above also shows their ambivalence to acting kul if that involves “yucky” clothes, clothes that show “yucky” parts of the body. This is a clear indication that older sexuality is not part of their conscious understanding of coolness and that sexuality may be associated with negative emotions and shame. But Farou indicates that body exposure is part of Nina and Ida’s presentation of self as kul, which points to an association between kul and sexy femininities on her part. I suggest that the association is still part of the subconscious because of the positive adherence to being kul but abhorrence to showing parts of the body, “I am only ten years old”. In all the girls’ present life situation I thus argue that it is still contextual if they do girl-child (such as vanlig, soss) or teenage-like femininities (such as berte/babe, kul, soss), the latter substituting the former as they increase in age. 119

The shopping conversation also indicates that Farou has internalised the ideal slim body aesthetic represented in popular culture and discourses on health. When she tries on trousers, she always asks if she looks fat in them, and if she gets that impression, she doesn’t want to buy them. She says:

Farou: I will never ever put on any jeans in all my life.
Mari: Are you never to wear jeans??
Farou: No!
Mari: Why not?
Farou: NO, because I look fat in them.
Mari: In those kind of trousers?
Farou: Yes, because they are made so slim…
Mari: But how do you know that you look fat in them??
Farou: Because I recently bought a pair of jeans, and they were really cut slim.
Mari: Oh, is it the brand or design that is made that way?
Farou: No, look here, see how slim they are, OK, let’s see, I am ten years old. This size should then fit me, 140 cm.

119 As the soss style is more associated to class than age, people of all ages can be classified as such.
Mari: Yes….
Farou: I can’t use them, I use a twelve year-old’s size.
Mari: That is perhaps 154 cm….
Farou: No, this is 152 cm – this is for 11 year-old’s, it’s far too slim, and this is 152 cm, so it doesn’t fit me, it is too long!
Mari: But you can take up the hems…..
Farou: But that doesn’t look nice…

This dialogue points to two issues. The first concerns design and size labelling which makes her feel too fat: The size marked for her age is experienced as too small.120 She becomes frustrated and unwilling to buy any jeans. The next point directly concerns her experience of being too fat. This theme was also initiated by Farou in other situations, such as on the beach on Hudøy Island (more on this in Chapter 12). Mitha is also acquainted with the ideal of the slim body, and despairs because few trousers fit her body shape, with a bigger bottom. The conversation thus reflects one aspect of thinking through things: Jeans are cultural tools in representing their bodies as “slim” or “fat”, and make them experience themselves as the one or the other. The “right” jeans are also cultural tools in that they are items in constructing the desired femininity as kul teeneger-girl, not a childish girl-child. As such, their clothes fulfill both basic needs and wants. They are symbols of certain femininities as well as garments for hiding and keeping the body warm. The girls may experience clothes as their second skin, as a tool for exposing or hiding body parts in addition to the symbolism connected to gender identity.

In their construction of gender as ten year-old girls, I suggest that they have internalised the norms of suitable clothes for young girls which implies that they should not expose certain body parts and skin, which is yucky, but that this changes and is acceptable when they get older. Put another way, the developmental discourse serves as a backbone in their presentation of self. To quote Farou: “I am only ten years old”. This statement reveals the motivational force of the parental and peer norms of ten year-old girls to not expose their bodies. They think that revealing the body is all right when you have reached a certain age, but they don’t know exactly

---
120 The issue of size labelling has been discussed in Norway for many years, or more precisely, how size labelling varies among different brands and shops, such as making size 38 in one shop match size 40 in another. The phenomenon has been discussed in relation to eating disorders and slimming, and Farou’s reaction above shows how even young girls experience it negatively when they have to buy clothes that are meant for older girls. At present, The National Institute for Consumer Research in Oslo is doing a project on the labelling of sizes, called Is Large Big (Er Large stor), (see www.sizes.no)
when that is. Nevertheless, they want fashionable teenage-like clothes which older people may perceive as “sexy”. The girls’ ambivalence is a consequence of the internalisation of ideas both on the innocent and childish girl-child and the *kul* teenager-girl. In short, there are competitive and conflicting femininities for ten year-old girls starting to want independence from the world of childishness. Research by Klepp and Storm-Mathisen on “Reading fashion as Age” also demonstrates the strong norms connected to dress codes and age (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen 2005). I will now present and discuss how three other girls of non-western origin experience and perceive the cited Norwegian dress codes of girl-child innocence and teenage inspired coolness. That is to say, I will discuss how their notions of suitable clothes work in their construction of femininities.

**Non-western femininities**

The girls to be discussed in this section are Sumitra, Aila and later Elizabeth, making up group F (see Chapter 4). The first two are Muslims of Asian origin, while Elizabeth is Christian and African. Their histories also provide empirical examples for the coming discussions on popularity, belonging and integration in that they all live in marginalised and insecure families which have contact with the social security office (see Chapter 11).

Sumitra and Aila are the only girls in the 4th (and later 5th) grade who mostly wear *shalwar khamis* (a long tunika blouse over wide trousers) including *hijabs*. As the picture below shows, the dress does not reveal much of either skin or body shape.  

![An unknown girl wearing shalwar khamis.](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ossupov/812916214/sizes/s/)
Sumitra and Aila do not seem interested in being *kul* at all. But Elizabeth wears western clothes and aspires to having a western, teenager-girl style, although she is particularly attached to Sumitra. These girls highlight well the point of multiple subject positions in different social contexts, of trying to be more “Norwegian” in school and outside of the home, whilst being an “Iraqi” in the family context. They know that presenting themselves as totally Norwegian is impossible whilst wearing clothes from their homelands, but other forms of Norwegian presentation of self are possible (play, conversation, activities, postures and the like).

These cases show the issue introduced in Chapter 2 concerning the implications of both clothes and behaviour as parts of subject positions. Regarding Sumitra and those in her category, non-western clothing has more influence than general behaviour on how her presentation of self is understood by her peers and others. As such, non-western aesthetic restricts their attempts at being regarded more as “real” Norwegian girls, and activates ethnicity in interaction with children of Norwegian origin. Skin colour does this to a much lesser extent, indicated by the way *brune* children at Østli who wear western clothes, both boys and girls, have more friends of Norwegian origin. This may be experienced as frustrating by the girls wearing non-western clothing who perceive themselves as “Norwegian”. This is so because Sumitra’s family has lived in Norway for fifteen years and she and her younger brother are born in Norway. Aila is born in Iraq but came to Norway as a baby. As such, Sumitra and Aila know more about growing up in Norway than about their country of origin and share many cultural ideas for doing girl, playing and other activities with the children from Norwegian backgrounds. Nevertheless, they have also been socialised into the femininities of their countries of origin, making the Norwegian femininities less attractive for Sumitra and Aila. If followed, the girls would probably experience some of these as uncomfortable and even shameful, as there probably exist negative associations connected to acting out some femininities, of which their families do not approve. They probably do not want to risk creating conflicts at home. Sumitra says this about living in Norway with a foreign background and her choice of dress (when they were in the 6th grade):

Mari: How do you think it is to live in Iraq? (She has visited her relatives many times).
Sumitra: I really believe it is better to live there than here, because here, in my class, you have those who are foreigners and those that are Norwegian, and they have other rules than us, they don’t speak the same language as us, but in our homeland they all speak the same
language; it is so nice there, and they all wear the same clothes, all have the same rules, 
there are no Norwegian rules.
Mari: So you feel that when you live here you become different from them because you 
have other rules?
Sumitra: Yes.
Mari: But do you choose yourself which clothes to wear?
Sumitra: Yes, in the beginning of the 6th grade I wore only trousers, but as a Muslim it is not 
good to wear trousers, right, so now I have started wearing a long blouse over the trousers.
Mari: Ok. So when you are a Muslim it is not good to wear only trousers?
Sumitra: It is sort of haram because they are very tight and you show your bottom (she 
laughs).122
Mari: And you are not supposed to do that?
Sumitra: No, so when I asked Mummy if I could wear trousers if I had a long blouse, she 
said it was ok, and then I said I could buy some, and now Mummy has bought lots of tunikas 
for me. And my sisters also hand blouses down to me. 123
Mari: And then you have denim jeans underneath….
Sumitra: Yes, jeans or….

This exchange indicates that some Muslim girls are torn in two directions because 
they grow up with each foot in two fundamentally different cultural experiential 
spaces. But it also shows how contrasting cultural norms for suitable clothes for ten 
year-olds can motivate behaviour. Above all, Sumitra wants to do girl according to 
Muslim norms, which in her case is also a peer norm because she socializes with 
other Muslim girls. 124 Secondly, the conversation suggests that she does not totally 
oppose doing gender the Norwegian way. Her compromise is jeans combined with a 
long blouse, or long hoods resembling the ones lately in fashion. She also wears 
hijab, but not as a strict rule. Sumitra’s mother (family) lets her dress in a 
combination of clothes from two cultures as long as she does not violate their norms 
of respectable body concealment. But Aila conforms totally to the conventional 
variant of suitable clothes from her country of origin, and says that is her own 
choice.

122 Haram means that it is forbidden by Islamic rules.
123 While writing up this study, it has become fashionable in Norway to wear dresses and shirts over 
jeans, just like the Muslim girls have done for a long time. In 2007 tunikas or dresses over jeans or 
tights is a hot street fashion. This gives support to Davis’s claim that ambivalence is fashion’s fuel 
(Davis 1992). I return to this in Chapter 14.
124 I am very aware that “Muslims” are not a homogeneous group. But I have no data on the 
distribution of Shia or Sunni among the people included in my study, only on their country of origin. 
As such, the adherence to traditional ethnic dress such as to shalwar khamis, varies both among asian 
Muslims and among those from Africa. The latter, however, seem to wear long skirts and dresses 
more than shalwar khamis. This indicates that it is each family’s attitudes, rather than religion or 
cultural traditions per se that decide how a girl is presented.
“Cool is the rule”

The meaning of *kul*

Besides the examples already presented of the popular girls’ aspirations to teenager-girls, the following text written on paper and hung inside their private classroom lockers are other illustrations. Nina, Marit and Ida are the only girls who have adorned their lockers in this way. The texts are decorated with hearts and flowers, and Ida has written these words in the order below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Diddel</th>
<th>DOG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss</td>
<td>sexy</td>
<td>CAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiss</td>
<td>cool</td>
<td>Diddeline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The text on Marit’s locker says:

- Coolgirl
- I (love) Y
- Catty
- Miss
- Dog

And lastly, Nina’s:

- Cat
- loved
- Miss Kiss
- Dog
- Nina
- I (love) Y
- Cooled
- girl
- hot dog
- Sexy
- sister
- brother

The words chosen are not arbitrary, they may be read as a mixture of the girl-child culture (*cat, dog, sister, brother, Diddel, Diddeline*) represented most clearly by Solveig, Synne, Miriam, Sasha, Prithua, and the teenager-girl (*love, sexy, cool, kiss, miss, I (love) Y*) by Nina, Marit, Ida and partly Trine. Interestingly, these latter words point to a relationship between the sexy, the cool and love and shows the existence of these terms in the girl’s everyday lives. The present study and particularly the discussion in this section and the next indicate that the relationship between the terms is highly relevant concerning the sexualisation of childhood and the maturation of girls. In other words, it can be argued that this illustrates a relationship between relations: of sexy – cool – love as one relation and girl-children – teenager-girls as another.
As suggested above, the girls of Norwegian origin, Nina, Marit and Ida also contextually position themselves according to the dominant Norwegian notions of girl-child femininities. I suggest, however, that their ideas and norms for suitable clothes are gradually adopting fashionable teenage-like clothes as the only acceptable garments to wear. As such, they are to an increasing degree identifying with everything kul related to peers instead of values in the contexts of family and the “childish”. Above all, they aspire to identification with teenage culture, and even though Marit doesn’t like tight jeans very much, she puts them on because they are attractive in the eyes of peers and older youths. This shows the strong motivational force of the fashionable and kul. Wearing the teenage-design jeans makes her feel more grown-up and she looks more grown-up as well.

The process of changing from a girl-child identification to a teenager identification suggests how the postulation “thinking through things” makes sense and works in the individual. It also points to how people with different experiential structures interpret and understand the same gender symbols somewhat differently. Moreover, the process elucidates the postulated disparity between how preteen girls understand their fashionable presentation of self, and how older people in their surroundings interpret it. In other words, I am again touching the theme brought up in Chapter 1, that of eroticised young girls and the disappearance of childhood. I will now give a preliminary interpretation to be discussed further in Chapter 13. For do the girls dressed in fashionable “erotic” clothes think of themselves that way, or rather, has being “sexy” been a theme at all in their construction of femininities? I argue that it has in some respects, but mostly in the subconscious as suggested above by Farou’s case.

I have argued that the girls (and boys) I got to know at both field sites often used the term kul: things are cool, clothes are cool, people are cool, shops are cool. The conceptualization of coolness is widely shared in the younger generations in Norway (and probably in other countries imbued with western culture). Although the symbols of coolness and being cool has many variants and connotations depending on age, gender, socio-cultural background, class and subculture, in general the phenomenon can be read as being somewhat connected to teenage culture, consumption and something fun (see Pountain & Robins 2000, Cross 2004). How
common and widespread the concept is was exemplified to me in the summer of
2006. In the countryside of Western Norway, many miles from towns with shopping
malls, I bought strawberries from a preteen girl dressed in pink tights and a pink t-
shirt with the inscription across her chest (in English): “Cool is the rule”. The “cool
is the rule” maxim, with all its ramifications, reinforced my overall impression of the
importance of coolness for those children and teenagers in my study wanting to
belong to the “in” people. Therefore I hold that “cool is the rule” for an increasing
amount of children approaching puberty despite, or even because of the fact that
being cool is symbolised by highly ambivalent, multilayered codes that are infused
with meaning. Another concrete example of the importance of the cool came from
one of the girls at Østli. She spontaneously gave me the following drawing depicting
her wish for her peers declaring her to be kul (Thea er kul=Thea is cool):

![Drawing of a girl and the word 'kul' in Norwegian]

The theme of the drawing was her invention; I never introduced the concept, which
thus is highly experience-near from the ten year-olds’ points of view. She did the
drawing in between schoolwork in class. It is difficult not to interpret the drawing as
being indicative of the strong position the image of the cool has among certain
children and in the popular peer group in particular.

Cross-culturally, the concept of the cool has a long history, at least in English-
speaking countries. Dick Pountain and David Robins argue that being cool suddenly
became popular among children of the successful post-depression generation, as an
expression of intergenerational rebellion and attempts at a revitalisation of morality.
However, they hold that the image of the cool today is more of a Weltanschaung for mainstream people, who are deeply conservative and closely connected to the expansion of the consumer society. In their view, being cool is primarily a question of consumption (Pountain & Robins 2000). In a similar vein, Cross says: The images, goods, and rituals of a commercialized childhood led very subtly to a fantasy culture from which parents were excluded and which appeared to be anything but innocent. The first clear signs of the cool appeared among older boys in the 1930’s with the appearance of dark science fiction stories and then in the 1960’s and 1970’s, when the cool look of Barbie and monster figures replaced baby dolls and Tinkertoys (Cross 2004:17).

This extract indicates that when the original image of the cool was gendered, it referred to boys only (see also Torell 2007). According to Torell, the cool boy existed in juxtaposition to the sweet and cute little girl (ibid.: 180). That argument has relevance in the Norwegian society as well. Here the term has entered everyday speech through youth, popular culture and general commercialism, and is used to an increasing degree by all but the oldest generations and in connection with both girls and boys. The fact that both girls and boys position themselves in following with the kul subject position, may be read as evidence of how femininities and masculinities overlap in new ways: Being kul is an option for both, inspired by marketing and consumerism. As such, the kul subject position explicitly reflects the relationship between childhood, gender and the consumer society.

Today, the ten year-old girls in this study diverge from Cross’s presentation of Barbie as kul, whereas the Bratz dolls are, as indicated in the conversation with Nina, Marit and Oda in the last chapter. The pictures below show the dolls’ different images:

Note the text: “The girls with a passion for fashion”!

---

125 I don’t agree that coolness is related to “deeply conservative” people in Norway, but agree to coolness being connected to consumption and consumerism. The kul subject positions of both girls and boys in this study include specific material items such as fashionable clothes. I return to this in the section in Chapter 11: “It costs money to be kul”.

172
A Barbie bride

Barbie seems today too conventional, and it is mostly only smaller girls that play with her. The following table shows the distribution of the dolls among the ten year-old girls at the two field sites:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Østli Norwegian background</th>
<th>Non-western background</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bratz</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbie</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13 girls</td>
<td>13 girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vestdal 5A</th>
<th>Vestdal 5B</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bratz</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbie</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10 girls</td>
<td>13 girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows, the distribution is quite even although the Vestdal girls possess some more Barbie dolls. This confirms to some degree my impression that the Bratz doll was more popular at Østli than at Vestdal, and the table shows no difference for the ethnic dimension. However, the mere possession of dolls does not necessarily mean they are played with, but the girls at Østli had a positive attitude towards the Bratz, but not towards Barbie. Renold documents a similar situation in England regarding Barbie for younger girls: "Interestingly, girls who invested the most in producing their bodies as heterosexual commodities were those girls who viewed playing with Barbies at age eleven as a sign of immaturity" (Renold 2005: 43).
The table’s distribution indicates that the dolls are popular among Norwegian girls and as such may serve as a potential backdrop to their construction of femininities. I suggest that the dolls’ style works in the girls’ subconscious (Moore 2007) and may influence their understanding of kul femininities (Bratz) and femininities as “nice and beautiful” (Barbie). The dolls are an indication of how the marketing industry presents teenage images for young girls’ construction of gender. In my own childhood in the late 1960’s, we played with Barbie dolls when the baby dolls were dispensed with. We were then eleven-twelve years old. Today most girls are finished with the Barbie dolls at this age, but, as indicated, some play with the Bratz. This may all point to a change in aesthetic and dominant ideas of femininities for the preteens, downplaying the role of mothering (baby dolls are “out”), with the focus shifting to individual realization and careers outside of the home (Barbie and Bratz as role models). Based on how I interpret the girls’ experience-near conceptualizations of being kul or of kul femininities, the ten year-old girls’ understanding can be visualised as follows. These different relationships and elements will be referred to and discussed in the rest of the study:

It is worth noting that no individual shares identical associations and (thus units) in their understanding of the kul. This is particularly when it comes to age, gender and
socio-cultural background. But I suggest many of the girls in my study share most of the elements in the figure above, but that individual elements are present too. These may be connected to “having your own style”, at least from the girls’ own point of view. Each element may be understood to be an instrument for achievement of coolness and perhaps popularity; they may be differently mixed in individual girls’ construction of femininities. From a boy’s perspective, I suggest he shares most of these elements of the kul, with the exception of the “slim body”, “shopping alone” and “make-up” categories.

The meaning of “sexy”

The associations connected to being kul for the ten year-olds encompass elements of dominant youth culture and a distancing from the world of children and childishness. Being childish is definitely not kul. The issue of sexuality seems, however, to be a taboo theme; something “yucky” and embarrassing, at least in the proximity of adults. For instance, I once overheard Ida, Nina, Farou and Ellen talking about kissing in class. When Ellen observed me listening, she said to the others: “Hush, there are adults here!” A similar reaction occurred at Hudøy Island when Anthony talked about sexual issues; he was made aware that I was within earshot. This shows that children are interested in their bodies and their friends’ bodies, they are born sexual beings as discussed in Chapter 2 (Gullestad 1996, Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Renold 2005). But I argue that this interest is not the same as senior sexuality (see also Chapter 2, 10, 12 & 13). This interpretation is primarily based on observation of interactions and talking to the children about these matters, particularly the focal-group interviewing of 30 girls and 15 boys below the age of thirteen.

Among other questions, I asked in these interviews if they knew the meaning of the word “sexy”. Most of them answered in the affirmative, but said it was difficult to explain in words. The girls from non-western backgrounds reacted just like the others and answered the same. They have probably learnt about it through TV, films and magazines, just as do many of their peers of Norwegian origin. In a conversation with Mitha, she says this about being sexy:

Mitha: I have an idea of what it is, but in general I don’t think much about it. I don’t think of “sexy” as something I want to be or become in the future. The important thing is that the clothes are kul.

Mari: Do the boys use that label at all?
Mitha: Not often anymore.

Mitha’s statement is worth noting because she aspires very much to being teenage-like. But the issue of “sexy” is usually not an explicit theme. Implicit in what she says, however, is the fact that the term tends more to be part of boys’ language; it is gendered. For instance, when I asked Petter what being “sexy” was all about, he answered “I have no idea. It is just something we say”. Still, considering the fact that the word was written inside the lockers of the three popular girls, it is part of their experiential spaces. Some of the other girls associated opposite-sex attraction to being sexy, such as Mona and Toril: ”It is about somebody who likes you very much and things like that”, and also in the conversation below between Nina, Marit and myself:

Mari: So what does it mean then to be sexy?
Marit: Maybe they want to show off?
Nina: And if it concerns girls, they might want the boys to think they are *kul*, so that they fall in love with them.
Mari: That the girls do such things so that the boys fall in love with them?
Both: Yes.

Considering the strong position of Nina and Marit (and partly Mona) in the peer group, it is worth noting that they are aware of the connection between opposite-sex attraction, being *kul* and love. None of the other children admitted that connection in so direct a fashion. The popular girls, that is to say Nina, seem consciously to presume that a *kul* subject position increases the likelihood of getting a boyfriend and implies being popular. Nina’s statement points to an awareness of a connection between being sexy and being *kul*, but most significantly, she translates the “sexy” into the “cool”. This suggests that the girls are primarily concerned about coolness, understood as flirting with a teenage-like appearance and activities, rather than sexiness per se. This is another expression of the relationship between the relations of sexy – cool – love and girl-children – teenager-girls. However, all of the ten/eleven year-old girls associated the term “sexy” with ideals of the perfect body, rather than with sexual attraction per se. As Farou says “To be really pretty and slim and such, isn’t that what it means?” Therefore, based on the impressions from talking to all the ten year-old girls about the meaning of “sexy”, I interpret their understanding, or notions of being sexy in the following diagram.
As shown, bras and string briefs are elements in their understanding of “sexy”, not of being *kul*, which also involves “exposing body and skin”. I argue that with age and physical maturation the notion of being sexy becomes embedded in their understanding of the *kul* (see Chapters 12 & 13). So when I ask the ten year-old girls if being sexy is something they think about when they buy clothes and dress up, they are puzzled, irritated and annoyed (also Nina and Marit), such as Helena and Thale at Vestdal:

Mari: So you mean “sexy” is about having a nice body. Do you have the impression that it is important to be that?
Helena: No…
Mari: Not for you?
Thale: Hello…come on…we are only in the 5th grade!!

Thale retorted in an angry voice, and I had to explain to her why I had asked the question. 126 However, the conversations support my interpretation that most preteens are not consciously aware that tight jeans and bare skin may be anything other than fashionable and *kul*. “Sexy” is surely not yet part of their verbal language, it is not an experience-near concept such as *mote* (fashion) and *kul, berte, soss* and *vanlig*. Thale did sometimes wear short tops that exposed her skin, which older people may read as “sexy”. In such cases there is a gap in the experience of the girl’s body as subject and as object. However, I suggest that unconscious or unclear sexual references are experienced in connection with the cool, as indicated in Nina’s and Farou’s statements and the writing in their lockers. This suggestion is made because popular culture, pop videos and fashion advertisements are explicitly sexual. But there seems to be a gap between the girls’ subjective understanding of their presentation of self (when this includes “sexy” clothes interpreted from the “outside”) and the understanding in the adult population (more in Chapter 13). The

126 This was because I wanted to find out how much they knew about “adult” things.
subject position of a 
kul feminine implies presentations of the self inspired by berte 
aesthetic (and thus sexy), which fashion designers for girls assist in constructing by 
emphasising the erotic rather than the chaste. Young girls are indirectly influenced 
by the marketing industry in their construction of femininities because when they 
need clothes they have to buy what is in the shops.

Of the girls included in this study, the subject positions of variants on the teenager-
girl image increase in importance with age, while girl-child variants decrease. The 
image of the innocent and childish girl-child is a disposition laid down in the 
experiential structures of young girls from their earliest upbringing as part of the 
dominant attitude in Norwegian society, as indicated earlier. The different 
femininities are acted out in different settings, as situated bodily practice; being kul 
primarily with peers and being sweet and child-like mostly with parents and other 
family members. It is also worth noting that the girls’ own construction of 
femininities is inspired more by youth culture images than by femininities associated 
with the notion of the “good childhood”, and emphasis on girl-children’s innocence 
and vulnerability. The Britney Spears phrase “I’m not that innocent” (in the hit 
“Oops I did it again”) reflects the idea that the notion of girls’ (and boys’) innocence 
is deeply rooted and widespread in western societies, something this song sets out to 
challenge. It also shows the role pop stars and pop songs may have in sexualising 
children, indicating the likelihood of there being hidden sexual connotations to the 
concept of the kul, as indicated above. I argue that older sexuality is further 
advocated in particular sporting contexts, such as in football tournaments. Therefore 
I will now discuss the relationship between popular culture and sports, or between 
being kul, sexy and sporty in relation to the big international football tournament the 
Norway Cup (NC) arranged in Oslo every year in the last week of July.

**Kul, sexy or sporty**

The NC is an event which effectively highlights the more or less hidden connections 
between the notions of being cool, sexy and sporty. In my opinion, this is the case in 
order that children and teenagers are attracted to the event. The tournament is one of 
the biggest of its kind in the world, directed at football players between ten and 
nineteen years of age. Approximately 1500 teams from about 40 different nations
usually participate. The location is the same every year, *Ekebergsletta* in a northeastern suburb of Oslo. During this week, *Ekebergsletta* is filled with people, and football fields. It also has a huge commercial area at its centre. The opening of the tournament, always on a Sunday, features an "Opening Show" featuring famous Norwegian and international pop artists. In 2004 the finalists in the song contest *Idol* (more on *Idol* in the next chapter) participated, and a famous Swedish pop artist, Ana Johnsson, from *Spider Man 2* was an additional attraction. In short, the Norway Cup Opening explicitly illustrates the connection between popular culture and sports. In July 2006, one of the artists promoted at the Opening was Aylar Lie, a former soft-porn star and glamour model who had just tried out her talent as a pop singer. This hit the headlines in the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*, as parents reacted to the choice of Aylar as entertainment for children because of her well-known history. The choice of Aylar illustrates perfectly the connection between popular culture and sports, which the NC also promotes elsewhere, as I will soon show.

The tournament is financed by sponsors and participation fees. Most of the commercial sponsors have their products on offer, and one of the biggest, the Norwegian sports gear chain *G-sport*, set up a huge tent close to the tournament centre. This tent is filled with products for sale from different producers, presenting “special offers” of the most fashionable clothes, shoes and sports gear. At the centre, children and youth can engage in different sport-like activities, such as rock climbing. The ideology of the tournament is based on ideas of solidarity with the poor and on bridge-building between nations. As such, teams from poor countries are particularly welcome and efforts are made every year to collect used things, such as football shoes, for redistribution. The non-commercial sponsors want this philanthropic profile to be promoted too, and have booths alongside the more profit-seeking institutions.

127 http://www.norway-cup.no (23.9.07)
128 I understand “popular culture” as commercialised mass culture of all sorts: fashion, films, music and magazines.
129 www.dagbladet.no (19.7.06)
130 The commercial sponsors: *Dagbladet, Coca-Cola, Coop Norge, DnB Nor, Statoil, Telenor, If Skadeforsikring, G-Sport*. The most important non-commercial sponsors: *Norges Idrettsforbund, Kicking Aids out!, UNICEF, The Health Department and The Social Department*.
Loud pop music is played from every sales booth and dominates the area. Pizza and other fast foods are available in addition to coffee and icecream and fruit stalls. Groups of children and teenagers roam the area; most of them are football players, but some are there just to look and be seen. There are many girls exemplifying the berte or babe category walking around. The tournament is known to be attractive not only for playing and watching good football, but also for making friends and for dating.

As was discussed in Chapter 5, football is an activity that engages a lot of the children included in this study, particularly at Østli. Participation in the NC is very attractive for children playing organised football, and attendance is a great ambition for the girls at Østli. However, it costs money to participate; three thousand kroner per team. Although other teams from Østli participated, the 5th grade girls did not do so in 2004. The NC takes place during the last part of the summer holidays and families with football-playing children from all over Norway go there as part of their vacation. Whole families often camp on the special camp sites besides the football pitches. Others just visit the tournament for amusement.

In 2004 (they were eleven years old) I invited Mitha and Farou to go with me to the NC, as I wanted to see what they found interesting there. The next year Farou sent me a text message (sms) to ask if we could go again, which resulted in me taking Farou, Mitha, Marit and Nina. I will present each trip below.

I pick up Mitha and Farou by car; it is extremely hot, and we drive off to Ekebergsletta. Their hair is nicely done and they are not wearing any make-up, not even lip-gloss. Mitha is dressed in tight-fitting jeans with a black not-too-short top. Farou has put on a denim miniskirt and a pink t-shirt, a cap and carries a pink handbag. Their clothes are fashionable, and as far as I can observe the girls have not put on conspicuously teenage-like clothes for going to the NC. Nevertheless, I

131 Health campaigns of recent years have succeeded in making healthy foods and fruit trendy for children and teenagers. Sports clubs also provide inspiration by underlining the importance of water and fruit (bananas) rather than soft drinks, sweets and junk food.
132 They did not participate in 2005 either, but in 2006 almost won in their age category.
133 In fact, I had never observed the Østli girls wearing any make-up other than lip-gloss, and then only at the school discos. Karine at Vestdal wore red lipstick once to school, but was teased, and did not do it again.
suggest the clothes they eventually do put on are results of reflections on suitability and what makes them feel *kul* enough to go to the *NC* with me. During the car trip efforts in impression management dominate. The girls talk endlessly about things they have done so far in their holidays, about girls they like and dislike and who they have been with. Mitha tells us spontaneously that she has been hanging out with Nina many times and Farou says she has been with Marit. It is obvious that they want to tell each other about being with the popular girls, which emphasises the importance of the peer hierarchy and the symbolic power embedded in the relationships. By telling one another about being with the popular individuals, they experience a moment of inclusion and admiration from the others, who also aspire to this inclusion. The car trip’s discussions also demonstrate the rapid switching of subject positions, although not very overtly. The girls position themselves as *kul* in interaction with one another by name-dropping about who they have been with and what they have been doing. Their language is filled with slang words and they talk in a bragging tone of voice. Towards me, they act more like girl-children than *kul* by not using slang words and answering my questions politely and a bit reservedly.

When we reach *Ekebergsletta*, I let them take the lead, as on the shopping trips. The first event they want to attend is a breakdance show. The pop music there and everywhere is loud, also where they queue up for rock climbing with many others about their age. When their turn eventually comes, Mitha’s jeans are too tight and Farou’s skirt too short for climbing more than a couple of metres above the ground. As such, they experience an aspect of clothes as bodywork in that the garments determine which activities are possible. Today the clothes restrict what they want to engage in; they are definitely not fit for climbing.

We buy some fruit (their initiative) while walking around, and end up in a pizza tent where I order pizza for all of us. 134 During the “meal” we engage in smalltalk and Farou reveals that she wants so much to join the *NC* next year (which they eventually did in 2006). They both talk about their families in their homelands who once had been well-off as if to give the impression of being rich, as opposed to their

---

134 Norway has during the last five years promoted fruit and vegetables as part of the health discourses, and young people are encouraged to swap sweets, junk food and fizzy drinks for pure water and healthy food stuffs. The sport contexts are good examples of this policy (see also Bugge 2007).
being not so well-off today. When the pizza meal is finished we start to walk down to the fairground, but meet *Idol* Sandra (a finalist in the *Idol* competition) and her entourage on our way. The girls get excited and want to follow her, but I say they have to choose between going after her or going down to the Fair (time was running out). Mitha choose the Fair “since they already knew Sandra” from a trip to town a couple of months earlier (description follows in Chapter 9), while Farou is more reluctant. It turns out that Mitha attended the Norway Cup Opening and met another *Idol* finalist, Kjartan, who had recognized her, she tells us enthusiastically. But later she had met Sandra, who did not…. (disappointment on her face). This episode shows their great interest in the *Idol* pop finalists, an enthusiasm they share with many young preteens and teenagers. The *NC* arrangement uses this interest to promote and sell the sponsor’s products and thus increases the chances of making the tournament a financial success.

We go down to the Fair and the girls enjoy the carousels. The Fair is a miniature of bigger and more famous amusement parks, such as the *Tivoli* in Copenhagen or *Tusenfryd* near Oslo. It is also possible to compete at the booths and win teddybears and the like. However, the girls are soon eager to go elsewhere, and our last stop is at the huge tent filled with commodities. Also here the pop music dominates, occasionally interrupted by an announcement over the loudspeaker as to which booth to go to get the best offer. I observe some advertising posters which boast sexy models (*Killah Babe*) and a naked couple on a motorcycle advertising sneakers (*Diadora*):
The material items for sale in this tent all have famous and well-known brandnames for teenagers (and younger groups): Levis, Kappa, Champion, Puma, Nike, Umbro, Bula, Diadora, Bavac, Mudd, Kari Traa, Adidas, Miss Sixty, Killah Babe and Roehnish. In addition to these clothes and sport gear products, the latest mobile phones are on offer. One special booth caught my attention. Two boys in their twenties were selling string briefs for men on the front of which they could write whatever one wished. They had put out some samples for sale, which bore the mantras “Put it in the cross” (Sett den i krysset); “Pole out” (Stang ut) and “The pitch is trimmed and we are ready for play” (the last was originally in English):  

![String briefs](photo: Mari Rysst)

It was the idea of these boys to sell these briefs for men and they were allowed to do so without the slightest objection being made. The boys asked: “Aren’t they cool?” A related material object with explicit sexual connotations are the tops promoted by Miss Sixty in extra small sizes with “Sex confusion is sexy” written on the front:  

![Top](photo: Mari Rysst)

Miss Sixty: “Sex confusion is sexy”, size 32-34 (extra extra small)

---

135 The symbolism behind “sex confusion is sexy” points to a trend in teenage magazines and films justifying most forms of sexual practices, also homosexual activity between heterosexual people. These may indirectly be inspired by “queer theory” and the fact that being queer (skeiv) has become explicit in some subcultures (Pedersen 2005). The Norwegian pop artist Morten Abel has a phrase in the song “Birmingham Ho” from 2005 illustrating this: “You don’t have to be gay to make a friend feel good, ok?” The trend may be interpreted seeking to undermine the heterosexual hegemony.
In other words, the briefs and the tops are material objects which I take as symbolising the connection between the cool, sexy and sporty. This is particularly so with the briefs for men, because they combine sexual and football metaphors.

The girls are most interested in clothes of the *Nike* or *Adidas* brands and the clothes and accessories at *Miss Sixty’s*. (They did not notice the top pictured above). Farou exclaims that she “just loves Adidas, while Anthony loves Nike!” indicating that children have different preferences concerning brands. Morten also expressed previously that he preferred *Nike* or *Adidas*. These brands are thus probably “in” at Østli. The girls also spend time at the cell phone stand. They both have their own phone, but today they have no batteries. This is often the case with Mitha; she has a phone, but it seldom works. But as a mere symbolic means to experiencing herself as *kul*, and being experienced by popular girls (and boys), as *kul*, I suggest even an unloaded mobile phone is better than no phone at all.

After remaining about three hours at the *NC*, I drive two exhausted girls home, and realise that we have been to a football tournament without actually watching one football match. This is also pretty much the case a year later when I go with Farou, Mitha, Marit and Nina to the *NC*. The girls are now twelve years old. The trip is the result of a text message (sms) to me from Farou about “doing something?” and I suggest Mitha could come too. But she is with Nina at the time I sent the request, so she replies that Nina would also love to come, and is that ok with me? It is. The next morning I receive a text message from Nina asking if Marit could come too….Again I agree. This creates an unintended negative and ambivalent situation for Farou, who obviously is not prepared for relating to the two most popular girls on such a trip. One reason for this may be that she knows she then has to try and position herself as particularly teenage-like, which she may experience as challenging. Another reason for her negativity may be a fear of intrigues and conflicts and of feeling socially excluded at the *NC*. She suggests that I turn down their requests to come, which I could not do, so the result is that we all go.

As was the case the previous year, the weather is warm and sunny. I pick them up by car, first Farou and then the other three, from outside Nina’s house. That it is Nina’s house that serves as the meeting point is no coincidence, and emphasises the peer
hierarchy and power inherent in her popular position. It goes without saying that she is the leader and has been so since the 2\textsuperscript{nd} grade. Again, I am not struck by the way they are dressed, which I am sure has been hotly debated beforehand. No one has any make-up on. As far as I can tell, they have not put on particularly fashionable or \textit{kul} clothes for the \textit{NC}. They are dressed in clothes they usually wear to school, which suggests that the way they dress in the school context is a good indication of how they want to construct their femininities regarding clothes in relation to peers in general, or for positioning oneself as “I want to be me”.

On this particular \textit{NC} day, Nina is wearing a pair of loose blue \textit{Adidas} shorts with a longsleeved \textit{Puma} sweater and a cap, her ponytail sticking out above the brim. Marit is wearing similar blue shorts with an \textit{Umbro} brand and a shortsleeved t-shirt in pink with an orange pattern. Farou and Mitha wear tight-fitting jeans, Mitha has a white t-shirt and Farou one in white and red. I am not able to observe any brand names on their clothes, which suggests that the popular girls’ way of dressing represent more coolness than theirs. This is probably related more to family histories and lack of money rather than lack of knowledge about the \textit{kul} image. A hindrance to coolness is also their hair. The girls of African origin have their hair in tiny plaits, while Marit wears her hair loose and Nina sports a ponytail sticking out of a blue baseball cap.\footnote{Their genetics, which make it impossible for them to grow naturally long, strait hair, may thus be a drawback in the quest for Norwegian coolness and good looks.}

The car trip to the \textit{NC} is again filled with impression management: conversations about events and occurrences during the summer holidays. They are all dressed according to what each one experiences as a teenage-inspired femininity, but again their subject positions fluctuate somewhat according to whom they interact with, whether with each other or with me. They switch between femininities as girl-children and as teenager-girls, just as when Mitha, who has just been to Greece, talks about all the good-looking boys there in a teenage dialect. She says “I wish I could stay in Greece because of all the handsome boys there!” She points out of the window for Marit at some boys, saying “they are something for you!” but Marit and Nina do not seem interested. Indifference is one way of exerting peer power. Mitha
stops talking, and Nina and Marit recount their experiences of being at their summer houses in Denmark and in Spain respectively.

When we reach the NC area, I again let the girls take the lead and just follow. Soon they have queued for the rock climbing wall, and this time Nina and Farou almost reach the top. Meanwhile Marit and Mitha have entered a karaoke tent where they apparently find much amusement. Then they want to do bungy jumping on a trampoline, but the queue is too long and we leave for the tent with commodities. Inside the tent the girls look and comment on things they like and don’t like, similar to the shopping trips described previously. The booths and brands are not the same as the year before. Miss Sixty is not there, but BikBok is as a newcomer. It is my impression that what is promoted at the NC represents both up-and-coming trends and fashion and the present trendy situation. The “in” and fashionable brands for the NC female age groups in 2004 are thus particularly BikBok, whereas Miss Sixty is out. This corresponds with the tastes of many of the girls at both field sites. Because of media debates similar to those referred to in Chapter 1, BikBok tries to promote clothes that do not violate the traditional cultural ideas of suitable clothes for young girls. Put another way, they try to make them more “chaste” than “erotic”. The new thing about the BikBok chain is the explicit focus they have on preteens as “tweenagers” by opening special fashion shops just for them in 2005. 137 The chain offers many kinds of teenage clothes in extra small sizes and jeans of the Fornarina brand, which is an Italian product renowned for skinny models and sexy marketing strategies.

In general, the advertisements at the NC in 2005 are less focused on exposed and perfect bodies than the year before; in fact there hardly seem to be any advertising posters at all. This is also the case in 2006 when I observe two posters with football players and no sexy ads. This may indicate that the NC arrangement committee is aware of the sexual connotations more or less explicit in all marketing and were trying to downplay that in 2005 and 2006. However, the choice of Aylar as an artist in the Opening show in 2006 weakens that argument.

137 As noted in Chapter 1, the concept of “tweenager” is constructed by marketing agencies.
Nina, Marit, Mitha and Farou want to engage in activities other than just walking or hanging about and doing nothing in particular. Nina and Marit are always consulted and have the final say. On the whole, the atmosphere among the girls is good; at least there are no overt conflicts. The girls are obviously more interested in activities than looking for boys. 

I discuss the different styles of the boys around them because there are many boys dressed in pink shirts, t-shirts, sweaters or hair bands. Pink is traditionally not a “masculine” colour, as discussed in Chapter 6. The girls interpret this as sosse style, which is sometimes combined with boys using brown foundation or other make-up, in other words a “feminine way” of doing masculinity which in this study is preferably read as a new way of doing masculinity, thus increasing the number of masculinity subject positions. In other words, it is a subversive masculinity performance, which, if repeated over time, will establish itself as a proper masculinity subject position, without having to refer to femininity at all. The girls today, however, say they do not like such boys (implicitly “feminine”). Their images of attractive boys do not include pink (girlish) colours and make-up but rather boys with athletic bodies, hair not too short and kul fashionable clothes. In other words, their images of handsome boys are based on masculine gender stereotypes as they are presented in 2003.

We go to eat pizza, and inside the tent we meet Trine from 5A who tells us that her older sister’s Østli team is going to play in a semi-final any moment. We go to watch. Trine’s sister is one of the clever players and a group of boys of mixed cultural backgrounds sit and comment on the looks of the girls through an overtly heterosexual male gaze, but also comment on their playing style. No wonder the girls (and boys!) want to look as good as possible, even in football gear, when they know they are going to be scrutinized by peer onlookers. Unfortunately it starts to rain so heavily that we decide to return home before the match is over.

**Sexy is the rule?**

Of the girls observed at the NC both in 2004, 2005 and 2006 there are many examples of the bert and the babe styles, but very few were ten/eleven year-olds. The NC context is a perfect setting for potential preteen babes to position themselves.

---

138 But my presence did not make that an easy option if they had wanted to.
as such, which led me to spend much time there as an observer. The impression I
had beforehand of the majority of ten/eleven year-olds not trying to position
themselves as *babes* and as conspicuously “older than their age” is supported by the
observations at the *NC* over four years (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). Preteens are often
dressed fashionably and are often teenage-like. However, such clothes, because of
their differing design, need not expose bodies and skin and be interpreted as “sexy”.
Baggy jeans and trainer trousers are examples of *kul* clothes that are not body-near.
But as indicated repeatedly in my study, there exists a commercial pressure for
young girls to dress sexy (Borg 2006, see “the girls” magazines’ in Chapter 12)
which results in such observations as that of a couple of young girls with push-up
bras.

The preceding descriptions of the institution of the *NC* illustrate the close connection
between the cool, sexy and sporty as sometimes explicit and often implicit in
different material objects and activities. Popular culture and its sexy models of
femininities and masculinities intermingle with the sporty gender models so that it is
often difficult to differentiate the one from the other. The Norwegian cyclist Anita
Valen and David Beckham are illustrations of sexiness even when doing sport
activities.  139

![Anita Valen](http://images.google.no/images?svnum=10&hl=no&lr=&q=anita+valen)

*Anita Valen always seems to wear lipstick, mascara and brown foundation when competing.*

---

139 [http://images.google.no/images?svnum=10&hl=no&lr=&q=anita+valen](http://images.google.no/images?svnum=10&hl=no&lr=&q=anita+valen)
David Beckham’s hairstyle is imitated by many small boys, particularly at Vestdal.
The strong connection between sport idols, popular culture and general commercialism is particularly worth noting concerning Beckham. He has become a symbol for a new masculine subject position labelled “metrosexual”:
The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He has taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference (original definition in Pedersen 2005: 229).

Beckham has recently promoted his own perfume in a sexy visualization far from the football field, illustrating what I argue is inspired by an eroticized gaze (both a female and a homosexual gaze). As such, the relationship between an eroticized gaze and “metrosexuality” is complex, a term referring to men who use make-up, hair styling and nail polish, in other words items redolent of the very antithesis of conventional masculinity. For is the advertisement below directed at men or women or both? If it is directed at men, is the idea that men wearing this perfume attract women, men, or heighten the man’s position in his peer group? Whatever the case, there is no doubt that the last decade has seen a new, more sexy and objectified presentation of men in magazines and ads, one which is closely related to popular culture, as the pictures below illustrate quite well (see also Chapters 12 & 13):
Beckham’s connection with popular culture is explicitly highlighted in his marriage with the (pop star) *Spice Girl* Victoria and his collaboration with Britain’s pop star Robbie Williams, often popularly hailed as one of Britain’s most sexy men, borne out by this posture:

![Robbie Williams and David Beckham](www.images.google.no/images)

The case of Beckham is particularly relevant for the theme of changing masculinities and femininities, because he was one of the first “non popstars” to include what today is known as typical feminine items in the construction of new masculinity subject positions. Before him, pop stars like David Bowie and Boy George have made similar masculinity changes. 140 Still, I suggest Beckham’s gender constructions influence everyday masculinities to a greater extent, because he is at the same time so strongly associated with the traditional masculine activity of football. His subversive gender performances have over time increased the number of possible masculine subject positions. In relation to the cultural circuits of femininity and masculinity, Drotner refers to young middle-class women who apply symbols from both circuits. “They mix what we traditionally call masculine ambition with obvious feminine expressions” (Drotner 1991:158). To illustrate this, she cites female Swedish swimmers who in their leisure time, also decorate their homes with “cushions, dried flowers and china dogs” (ibid.:158). In addition to this are boys, “who have long hair, ear-ring and make-up without signalize being gay” (ibid.:158, my translations). In short, what these examples express are new ways of doing gender by combining gender stereotypes from both circuits, which over time downplay and undermine the stereotypes. Perhaps they will make them disappear altogether, as stereotypes rather than subject positions.

---

140 I take for granted that they did not attempt doing femininity!
There are nonetheless many similar examples to Beckham of the collaboration between sports and popular culture. A recent one in the Norwegian setting is the cyclist Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjå promoting sports gear accompanied by this blurb in the newspaper *Dagbladet* (14/8-06): “Sexy campaign: Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjå is rawer than ever, both during cycling and on the pictures in the new ad campaign for Northwave” (my translation):

![Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjå in an advertisement for Northwave](Dagbladet 14/8-06)

Flesjå won the World Cross-Country Cycling Championship in 2006, and the *Northwave* campaign was released at the same time. The way she poses leaves no room for doubt about the mixture of sports and older sexuality applied in advertising and marketing strategies. Of the men, Beckham is one of the most famous and explicit. However, the last decade has seen many sport celebrities advertising different products, such as perfume and clothes. The Swedish tennis player Bjørn Borg was probably one of the first to have his own clothes collection, which is still going strong. The *Bjørn Borg* logo is frequently seen on boxer shorts’above the low-cut or baggy jeans of teenage boys (and girls).

In 2006, the Norwegian snowboarder Kari Traa released her own clothes collection “Sporty madness for girls who dare”, featuring special string briefs that have become popular among young girls.¹⁴¹ Female football players dress in traditional (“unsexy”) football gear while playing, but many dress in fashionable and often

---

tight-fitting jeans and tops when off the football pitch. This illustrates how individual girls act out different femininities according to context, a distinction made very clear through the total change of clothes and hair style. It also shows how the sexy and fashionable style is promoted and made relevant for serious sporting girls with a strong identification with the experiential space of sports. I argue that the NC is no hindrance to this promotion, being a magnificent institution and symbol of commercialised childhood.  

Of the girls included in this study who showed great interest and activity in sports, such as Nina, Ida and Mona at Østli, their choice of style in general is a mixture of the kul, the berte, soss and the sporty. As ten year-old girls, Nina and Ida exhibit more of the teenage popular fashion than the sporty style, while Mona is the reverse. The fashionable trousers of wide, loose-fitting cotton in a training style and a tight-fitting top can be read as symbols of how the sexy infuses the sporty. This is so because the fashionable, loose trousers, in imitation of training trousers, have a low hip cut, often making the midriff visible under a short, tight top. The intermingling of the cool, sexy and sporty as in the above descriptions is an indication of a sexualisation of childhood, in that the sport arenas are increasingly permeated by popular culture (which often is sexualised) and popular fashion, which is increasingly eroticised (Borg 2006, Steele 1985, Entwistle 2000).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that in spite of pressure from the marketing and fashion industry to make preteens dress older than their age, preteen girls primarily want to look fashionable, teenage-like and kul, not sexy. The values embedded in the new fashion for young girls are not an extension of the previous construction of the innocent girl-children. By designing teenage clothes for girls that include visions of eroticism rather than chastity the designers implicitly sexualise girls and blur the boundaries between (the pure) childhood and adulthood. By wearing teenage-inspired clothes, the girls may start to think of themselves as older than their age. Finally, the discussion of the relationship between the notions of cool, sexy and

---

142 But female footballers have more body-shaped suits than their male counterparts.  
143 I am totally aware of the fact that the arrangement of the NC could not take place without powerful commercial sponsors.
sporty shows that popular culture and sexuality permeate the social contexts of sports.

On this background the next chapter will describe and analyze peer relationships among the girls and boys of the same and the opposite sex in different social contexts. The present chapter has indicated the importance of popular culture in girls’ and boys’ everyday lives. The next chapter will explore this further and focus on details in the children’s peer interactions in the contexts of school, non-play and play.
Chapter 9: The everyday practices of the girls

Play takes many forms. One way of looking at its various aspects is to consider what material or resource is central: With what exactly is the child engaged? If it is true that a child can treat non-literally whatever he has become familiar with – though not necessarily mastered – then new resources for play should appear as his world expands and becomes differentiated. It should be the case that as new abilities enter the repertoire through maturation or learning, or both, they become playable (Garvey 1977/1990:8).

The extract above introduces the themes in this chapter. It concerns girls’ and boys’ everyday practices and is organised around the dualism of what the children understand as play and non-play both in and out of the school arena.144 This also includes sport activities, but the social contexts of organised, paid leisure activities are not in focus here because they have been discussed in Chapter 5. Play is an important part of spontaneous activity, and one of the leading questions to be answered here is the one posed above: With what exactly is the child (girl or boy) engaged? A related question is: In what ways the children are engaged with one another? How do their interactions reflect femininities and masculinities from popular culture, the social context of family and other contexts? These are crucial questions for answering the research questions on the sexualisation of childhood. This is because girls’ and boys’ activities bear witness to those values and interests that are important in their lives, in their childhood and in Norwegian society.

This chapter aims at depicting these values and interests through their different practices, and discusses both single sex and unisex interactions. With the heterosexual matrix as a backbone, I focus on details in order to outline the characteristics of gender relations and peer relationships which I find to be: gender segregation, socio-cultural segregation, friendship negotiations and circles, creative competence and ambivalence towards the opposite sex, both physical and otherwise. This chapter describes concrete expressions of these characteristics.

144 Although girls still are the prime focus, this chapter is not only about girls. It is about the relationships between girls and between girls and boys. When the argument is about girls and boys alike, I tend to use the term “children” and “child”.
As discussed previously, girls and boys as well as youth and adults, experience and learn while participating in different social contexts or experiential spaces. To an increasing extent, the public sphere of Western societies has been filled with different aspects of popular culture, as illustrated in the last chapter. This expansion of popular culture is closely connected to the development of capitalism, which in its efforts to survive and prosper has absorbed ever more areas. This process is called commercialisation (NOU 2001:6). The number of different paid leisure activities available and the institution the Norway Cup are examples of this.

Evidence of the hegemony of popular culture can be, for example that when out shopping, popular music is omnipresent and always on in the background. This is also the case at sport arenas, such as football fields, swimming pools and ski stations. Another illustration is the existence of popular music in Norwegian schools. Popular music has gone from being hardly present at all in my childhood in the late 1960’s, to being incorporated into music lessons, into free time in 2004 and particularly into school discos. For instance, in 4 (5) B at Østli they organise 4 (5) B’s Top Twenty on the last Friday every month. Each child brings to school a favourite CD single which is played and submitted to a vote. Often the hit brought by one of the popular children wins, thereby compounding the definition of what is cool, again illustrating how symbolic power works without anybody giving it much thought. The existence of popular music in the school setting does not seem to depend on class; music is commonplace at both Vestdal and Østli. The Vestdal children play pop music as background music while drawing, painting or doing handicrafts. They are also free to present a pop star and his/her music as part of their music lessons. All these examples show that popular culture is part of many social contexts, also the context of lessons. This means that children are exposed to influences from popular culture in most of the social contexts that make up their world, including TV shows, programs, films, advertisements and magazines. All these social contexts present cultural ideas of femininities and masculinities which I argue are dominated by heterosexual subject positions of appearing attractive, cool, being sexy and partly sporty for both girls and boys. Nonetheless, there are specific gendered expressions marked by differences in clothing, make-up, hairstyles and the physical body itself.
The following pages are filled with descriptions and analyses of children’s practices, which are taken from most of the social arenas in which I participated. The activities of the Østli children are primarily described, but Vestdal is drawn on for comparative purposes. The discussion and the chapter are organised according to social contexts (and sub-contexts) and the kind of interactions and practices they consist of (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of “social context”).

In the following I argue that much of what the girls (and boys) do which is not part of their school or paid leisure activities can be interpreted as some kind of play. According to George Herbert Mead, play is a fundamental process in developing social behaviour, self consciousness and thus a sense of identity, beginning with “pure play” in infancy (without rules and acting different roles) and evolving into “games” (with rules) such as hide-and-seek (Mead in Deegan 1999, Bock 1999). Mead saw play as essential in the development of self, as a process of constant creation in interaction with significant others (Deegan 1999). When alone, a young child will act out different roles, taking the perspective of a generalised other on their own actions. The roles children play are learned from interaction with or imitation from people in their surroundings or other impressions from films, TV and similar sources (ibid., Bukatko & Daehler 1998: 440-441).

Meads’s thinking has relevance for understanding the everyday activities of the girls and boys in this study. They act out impressions and activities experienced around them, often imitating experience from media, TV and films, and to a lesser extent the work of parents, teachers and other day care personnel. How do the girls position themselves in the different situations and contexts? How is this to be understood?

In this study, play is understood as an activity that bears the following characteristics:145

- It is spontaneous and voluntary, freely chosen by the player.
- It is pleasurable and enjoyable, that is positively valued by the player.
- It involves some active engagement from the player.

---

145 The concept of “play” as applied in the following is a good example of a close relationship between experience-near and experience-distant concepts.
- Some of it has no extrinsic goals, the goal is just the activity itself (e.g. “making a shop”).
- Otherwise it has goals, such as playing a game, where the goal is to win. (Therefore, different sorts of spontaneous games and sports activities are included in how play is understood in this study.)
- It has a certain systematic relationship to what is not play. More precisely, play activities are organized according to more or less formal “rules” including fantasy roleplay, while non-play is not (adapted from Garvey 1977/1990:4).

The primary interest in this and the next chapter is the details in and quality of same-sex and opposite-sex peer interaction. I have outlined the following three social contexts as relevant in relation to children’s everyday activities: the context of school lessons, the contexts of non-play and play. The context of school lessons is included here because it encompasses the most time-consuming everyday activities. School work is also a variant of non-play and both stand in opposition to the context of play. The practice similarities in the context of school lessons are interactions between peers/pupils and teachers concerning school work, and include only inside activities. The context of non-play includes activities of peer interactions without rules or fantasy role-taking. The context of play includes activities of peer interactions with some sort of rules concerning different forms of play: traditional and particular play, of which only the latter include some fantasy roleplay.

**The social context of school lessons**

*In the classroom*

Most of the girls’ time at school is spent inside classrooms where the teachers organize and steer the children’s activities. Spontaneous play is therefore mostly absent in this context. Nevertheless, the constrained peer interactions bring forth some typical characteristics. Usually it is the teachers who have organised the seating plan, in which girls and boys are mixed in order for everyone to have the
chance to work undisturbed. Peace and quiet is seldom achieved, and even in the most structured lessons, children find some opportunity to communicate with one another. This implies that most situations inside the classroom also produce relevant data, such as observing which children seem to be the most popular and which are close friends. Evidence of these phenomena is very apparent in how children look and talk to each other.

Already on the first days of fieldwork I sense who is occupying the role of leader at Østli by the amount of attention they get from the other children. Making participant observation inside the classroom thus presents an ideal opportunity to get an overview of the social landscape and get to know the girls and boys in an indirect manner. Furthermore, it may also present elucidating situations concerning relevant femininities and masculinities. It also brings forth qualities in the relationship between teachers and girls, and most importantly, in how girls switch subject positions in a context with both peers and adults. This is particularly evident in connection with the subject positions of being a conscientious pupil and kul girl (boy). Most children have internalised to some extent the image of a conscientious and good pupil, which involves being quiet, attentive and interested. This is difficult to combine with being kul. Therefore, a kul femininity is a difficult position to take in relation to both a teacher and a peer in a classroom. From sitting in a group talking about the latest pop hits, dressed in fashionable and kul clothes, Ida quickly positions herself as a conscientious pupil when the teacher asks her to name five capital cities in Europe. Switching positions like this occurs all the time in relation to teachers and school work. However, when a girl or boy acts tough and cool all the time, as Tommy does the day I step in as a teacher, and fails to switch positions in relation to teacher and peers, this creates noise and disturbance. Therefore, it could be argued that the school work setting presupposes the switching of subject positions in order to achieve a good learning atmosphere.

In the following I give a presentation of what I found to be a dominant characteristic of the spontaneous peer relationships in school settings indoors, namely gender and socio-cultural segregation. Although the Norwegian government and educational programs in general have for more than twenty years aimed at equality between the sexes and mixed gender activities in kindergartens and schools, it is remarkable how
the gender divide still occupies a strong position in the children’s spatial organisation of themselves. This is also documented in other child research done in Norway (Lidén 2000, Hagevold 2006, Rosten 2006) and beyond (Thorne & Luria 1986, Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005). In short, the explicit focus on equality between the sexes in the Norwegian context has not, according to the above studies, eliminated the phenomenon among the children in this study. As soon as the children are free to group with who they choose, they usually assemble in same-sex groups. How are we to understand this preference for same-sex interactions? How does it influence play and interaction with the opposite sex?

I suggest that gender segregation fundamentally has to do with classification into sex categories and the internalisation of cultural ideas concerning doing girl and femininities, or doing boy and masculinities, which has formed part of their experiential structures through socialisation. It also indicates the existence of a compulsory heterosexuality, or of a heterosexual hegemony. However, gender segregation is contextual because boys and girls do also mix and separate in different situations and contexts. What are the conditions for mixed-gender and gender-segregated activities? In the following I give some examples of these issues.

The first witnessed incident of a combination of marked gender and socio-cultural segregation is from the classroom of 4A at Østli after returning one day from a swimming lesson. The classroom has been reorganised into three long tables since my last visit, when each child had its own desk. I step in as a teacher because Kjersti (the teacher) has to attend a meeting, and I am surprised at how the children are seated. 147 One table is filled with only boys, the other two with girls. But the girls’ tables are also separated by skin colour: one table filled with brown faces, the other white. There is one exception: Inga sits beside her best friend, Clara, of Asian origin. I find this organisation a bit alarming, and later ask the teacher how this has come about. She says it is their doing; they had been allowed to find a seat wherever they

147 It is worth noting that the smell inside the classrooms at Østli is a mixture of exotic oils, soaps and spices of non-western origin not present at Vestdal. Paul Stoller argues for the use of other senses than mere observation in ethnographic knowledge construction (Stoller 1989), of which smell is an example. Unfortunately, I have not explored this potential.
wanted and she had not thought much about it. On closer scrutiny, the children that are close friends sit beside or near to each other and the boys are not separated by skin colour. This may be because they play organised team games at breaks more often than girls, making it easier for “teams” to gather in other contexts as well. But in general, when free to choose indoors, the children organise themselves first according to gender, then (the girls) according to cultural background. Ethnicity is thus relevant and present in the social context of school lessons. Friendship circles then cross these primary distinctions. The children’s daily interactions thus emerge in the intersection of friendship, gender, (class) and socio-cultural background. Thorne and Luria also report this pattern in the organisation of seats among their 6th grade children in American primary schools (Thorne & Luria 1986:178).

On the last day of school before Christmas in the 7th grade, I observe the same pattern of gender and cultural segregation. Moreover, who sits by who is often a matter for tough negotiation: Close friends beside one another, and much fuss is made concerning other seats. One thing is sure; it is most often a girl that is not happy with her seat and it is not usually one of the leading girls. The latter usually get their preferred seat beside their best friends. This state of affairs indicates the existence of power. The least popular girls adapt but are often unhappy with their seats. The boys do not seem that concerned with their seats, provided they do not have to sit beside a girl. Alternatively, they do care but do not show it, as they probably adhere to the cultural fear the sissy subject position; “big boys don’t cry”. Still, Morten almost cried at summer camp when he had to sit at the girls’ table, an occurrence which will be described below.

**Mealtime at Hudøy Island**

The summer camp at Hudøy is an event most children look forward to with great enthusiasm. It takes place during one of the last weeks of school before the summer holidays, and is thus part of the school year. Most of the teaching takes place outdoors, in connection with the study of flowers, plants, insects and sealife, but time is also spent inside. Nevertheless, it is first and foremost peer interaction that

---

148 I suggest this is so because she knows them so well as individuals and does not think about them as brown and white. As noted in chapter 6, the relevance of, or reference to skin colour is not overt in ordinary everyday practices, but comes to the surface in conflicts and on special occasions, such as birthdays.
dominates both inside and outside during the camp. In general, the interactions between teachers and pupils are more informal than at school in Oslo.

Hudøy is a small island located in one of the most attractive coastal areas in Norway, near Tønsberg and Tjøme in the county of Vestfold. The island is owned by the County of Oslo, and is designed for use as a summer camp island; there are no other residents there. Every second year the entire Østli School, that is from the 3rd to the 7th grade, stay at Hudøy for five days. Hudøy is described as “our Paradise” on the school’s website and some parents use a week of their holiday helping out.

Each grade has its own house. These were originally built after the Second World War as summer houses for working-class children in Oslo whose families couldn’t afford to go away on holiday. The house of the 4th grade has one big room for eating and playing, and two very big dormitories upstairs for the children. One room for boys and one room for girls, and as such illustrate institutionalised gender segregation and compulsory heterosexuality. There is much preoccupation with the crossing of the boundaries between the rooms; it is not allowed for boys to enter the girls’ room and vice versa. Not surprisingly, this does happen, and is one of the most exciting events for all the children.

The eating routines at Hudøy consist of three meals each day and are organised around six long tables with benches for the children to sit on. The children are free to choose their seats at every meal. Already at the first meal, it becomes evident that gender and friendship determine the seating, as observed from the classroom. Tables for girls and tables for boys, two of each, one mixed for those who come too late for the same-gender tables. Here the seats are not separated according to skin colour, perhaps because the context is new and more informal than at school? An alternative interpretation is that the Muslim girls who wear hijabs, shalwar khamis and long dresses or skirts, were not permitted by their parents to go to summer camp. Those girls of non-western origin who do come on the camp all wear “western” clothes and distinguish themselves only by being brune. This suggests that dress, as situated bodily practice, is a stronger delineation of ethnicity than skin colour. I will return to this later.
At one meal, Morten is sulking because there is no seat for him at the boys’ tables or by the mixed table; he has to sit with girls only. Much activity ensues, and Farou at the mixed table is asked to swap seats with Morten. She refuses, but Anthony says enthusiastically that “I’ll change seat with Morten!” Everybody laughs and says “Typical Anthony, he always wants to be with the girls!” Morten and Anthony change places and the situation calms down. Anthony is the only boy in the 4th grade who explicitly expresses an interest in and fascination for girls. This he also did before I got to know the children. He does not care about the risk of being teased for being “mad about girls” (*jentegæren*). This is probably because he has shown some junior heterosexual competence by coming out as a “boyfriend”, and has “gone out with” at least one girl already (see Renold 2005). At this point he was one of the very few children who did not mind violating what I argue is a peer norm of gender segregation. I’ll come back to the case of Anthony in Chapter 12.

**In the assembly hall**

Other implications of the heterosexual matrix, incidences of gender segregation and friendship circles come to the fore when the children gather in the assembly hall at school. This happens when many classes are to witness the same performance or do something together, such as practising carol singing before Christmas. The hall is shaped like an amphitheatre, with a stage in front and the seats in rows rising gradually. The children are again free to choose seats as long as they place themselves in the rows assigned to their class. During the fieldwork period it became clear that friendships here are also shown by who sits by whom.

Every time I join them in the assembly hall there exists one row for girls and another for boys. Before Christmas, however, I observe Morten in 4A seated among Marit, Ida and Nina, and Ida trying to catch the attention of the other two girls. On this day, she is wearing a scarf round her hair wide baggy trousers, while Nina wore her usual tight jeans. Ida joked with Morten and said Nina liked him, but to that he looked indifferent. At the end of the lesson, however, Nina said something in great confidence to him, at which he smiled. Then Oda called to Christel and said “Anthony wants to talk to you just to annoy you!” The background for these small occurrences is that Morten and Nina are soon officially “going out” together, and the
exchanges in the hall were negotiations and preparations for this. Anthony and Christel had “gone out” together previously (which meant they were “sweethearts” (kjærester), see Chapter 12). Anthony had broken off the relationship, at which Christel had gone “mad” and Oda’s remark must be understood in the light of this. It is worth noting that despite the clear gender segregation in the organisation of space, relationships across the gender divide exist and are negotiated continuously. Crossing borders into the realm of the opposite sex appears particularly common in connection with romantic interests and illustrates how contexts overlap. The context of romance and thus of (junior) heterosexuality is omnipresent and also concerns the context of non-play, which will be described below.

The social context of non-play

This context includes interaction among peers that does not qualify as play as defined earlier. I try to identify here the most apparent characteristics in peer relationships in different loosely organised settings, such as pairing up in the schoolyard, on walking trips in the woods or while walking to the swimming pool.

First day of school

When I enter the schoolyard at Østli on the first day of school in August 2002, the children are lined up in an exceptionally orderly fashion. In Norway it is expected that the children dress smarter than usual on the first day of school, and many children wear new clothes for this occasion. As such, new clothes in August may symbolise a new school year, and aggressive marketing for different school items starts at the end of July. In 4B, Marit, Oda, Ellen and Nina wear skirts or dresses and Oda has curlier hair than normal. Nina wears a short denim skirt and a white cotton tee-shirt, which in contrast to Ida, does not show her navel. Ida wears a knickerbockers with a top that has a knitted waistline and is a bit short. She has long wavy hair, while Marit has one plait and Nina a ponytail. I read them to have dressed up for the first day of school. The other girls wear thin cotton dresses with shoulder straps and a singlet or tee-shirt underneath. It is not easy to tell whether the boys have made an effort to dress smartly; they wear the usual jeans or long shorts, but some seem new. The girls of Norwegian origin in 4A, particularly Trine

149 She too has naturally curly hair.
and Anne, have “nice” dresses on as part of their femininity subject position of girl-child, while Mona and Toril represent sporty femininity by wearing knickerbockers, tee-shirts and sneakers. The girls of non-western backgrounds have also dressed up, in that more girls than usual wear variants of *shalwar khamis* or just long dresses and skirts.

The organisation in lines of two is an old Norwegian school tradition, and schools throughout Norway practice this today. In contrast, at Vestdal the children just walk to the door of their classroom and wait for the teacher in one big crowd, although the tendency is that girls stand with girls, boys with boys. However, the segregation is not as obvious as it is at Østli, which is thus one incidence of contextual variation. Therefore, to some extent, the architecture of buildings influences the spatial organisation of gender (see description of schools in Chapter 4). However, the organisation can also be read through the heterosexual matrix in that ridicule and teasing ensure that girls stick with girls, boys with boys.

The children are free to choose who they pair up with, which leads to the pairing being same-sex all the way. In exactly the same way, friends stand together, and this is more prevalent of the “best friends” among the girls than with the close friends among the boys. As covered in Chapter 4, the “best friend” issue is most prevalent among the girls; the boys don’t form dyads as clearly. This may be so because they engage in more team sports than girls, who are culturally expected to be more intimate than boys and to share secrets, thus making them vulnerable (see also Thorne 1993, Hagevold 2006, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005). This is the pattern both at Østli and Vestdal, but does not mean that boys do not have priorities and wishes as to whom they want to be friends and pair up with.

Today, Ida feels uneasy and is disappointed because she couldn’t stand in line with either Nina or Marit, who have paired up together. They have and exhibit an indifferent attitude towards Ida, their backs turned to demonstrate that she is not included today. This is a perfect illustration of how symbolic peer power works.

---

150 I believe it is a common practice the world over.
151 Because this research is primarily about girls, I don’t know the boys’ culture good enough to know if they really aspire and wish for best friends, just as girls do. But from how they organize themselves in space, groups of more than two are the pattern.
among the children. Similar exclusion mechanisms are reported by Simmons as one incidence of how girls show repressed aggression (Simmons 2002, see also Hey 1997).

Lining up in pairs is a way of organising the children in all kinds of school settings, for instance on walking expeditions in the neighbourhood. Negotiations related to the building of friendship are built into this organization in that the children often negotiate, discuss, quarrel and possibly decide beforehand who is to pair up with whom. When going on trips the children have to stand in line, and walk in line to the destination. More often than not, the girl dyads walk together, and if that is not to one girl’s liking, there fussing and sulking will always ensue. Normally, however, this happens among the associates or “satellites” (children who float from one circle to another); those who often aspire to a place next to one of the popular girls, just as Ida, Mitha, Farou, Oda, Ellen and Christel circle around Nina and Marit. As such, much of the activity in these settings may be interpreted as motivated by negotiations of friendship and popularity. This comes to the fore on one of my first all-day trips with the children in the 4th grade, which I describe in detail below.

**Excursion in the woods**

This trip takes place at the end of August on a grey and chilly day. The intention is to teach the children about the historical traditions of the area. Østli is known for its stone quarry, which employed many breadwinners at the beginning of the last century. A local historian is hired in as a guide. He has difficulty holding the children’s attention; they are more concerned with one another. Not all of the children are dressed for walking in the woods; it is wet and thick shoes or rubber boots are required. This situation is related to socio-cultural background and becomes an aspect in the relationship of the pupils of non-western origin with both their teachers and their peers of Norwegian origin. This is so because the lack of appropriate clothing for all-day hiking through the forest only seems to be a problem for the children having non-western backgrounds, and is the result of their lack of cultural competence (cultural capital), money or both. Hagevold’s study of seven year-olds in another Norwegian town illustrates the same phenomenon, namely the lack of suitable clothing among children of non-western origin (Hagevold 2006).
This implies that the parents are not versed on the correct gear for outdoor school activities in a Norwegian setting, nor do their children. For some children, this becomes a handicap in that they get so cold that they have to return to school before time (ibid.).

Today, Aila’s inappropriate clothing is the most apparent. She has put on her big brother’s rubber boots without socks, and soon gets such big blisters that she must return to school with one of the assistant teachers. Anthony is wearing shoes which are too small, but he manages. The other children are appropriately dressed. Nina wears tight jeans and an “all-weather” wind jacket which is fashionable and sporty, Oda, dark pink trousers and a matching pink sweater, Ida the same top as on the first day of school, but wide, long trousers. Their clothing today matches their overall femininity “style” as described in the last chapter, and applies to the other girls too. This indicates that their different styles (clothes) are fairly consistent across contexts although the actual items vary with the situation. Nina thus wears a trendy all-weather jacket in the woods but a miniskirt on the first day of school, which are both fashionable and read as *kul* by her peers.

The girls with best friends stick together, like Mona and Toril, Marit and Nina, Miriam, Prithua and Sasha. They make up one group; Aila and Sumitra another and Oda, Christel, Ellen and Petter still another. So Anne and Lisa make up one and lastly Clara and Inga. Trine, Mitha and Ida try to associate with one of the dyads. The social dynamics are often characterised by “satellite” girls trying to achieve admission into a dyad. The teachers have to tell them to stand still and be quiet, but negotiations continue. Ida and Mitha want very much to be with Marit and Nina, and Ida continuously reiterates her request: “Can I play with you?” The other two make some excuses for not letting her in, or simply ignore her. But Ida keeps on trying and argues with Nina about why she cannot come home with her after school when Marit can. Nina never gives a reasonable answer; Ida really feels excluded and is unhappy. This again shows subtle exclusion mechanisms and the workings of symbolic power (Simmons 2002). Many of the girls keep asking one another “Who is your best friend?” and implicitly want to hear their own name in reply. This is a common activity between the girls, where the most popular children are asked this question from aspiring friends. Nina and Marit never say who their best friends are, they have
an arrogant and indifferent attitude, which results in much guessing from the surrounding girls. Hagevold reports the same quest for friendships among seven-year-olds in another Norwegian town and Thorne presents this as a position taken in the “different-culture” literature on girls and boys (Hagevold 2006, Thorne 1993: 94, Adler & Adler 1998). The motivation behind this activity can be interpreted as an emotional desire to belong to a special child or group and to build friendship.

At the same time, junior heterosexual activity also exists. Oda, Christel and Ellen are very secretive, and it is obvious that Oda is interested in having contact with Petter. She approaches him by standing near him, and asks him in a sweet voice if they “can play together?” He says no, because he has just accepted Christel as a playmate. Oda sends him looks of devotion. After some time, she again asks a bit annoyed “Now it is my turn to play with you! You have played with everyone but me!” This time Petter accepts, and Oda smiles happily. They walk together with the others until the class reaches an open space in the forest suitable for rest and lunch. Again, the children make groups, and Oda, Petter, Christel and Ellen sit together. Petter is the only boy who sits by the girls; all the others sit in same-sex groups. Later I found out that Oda and Petter are going out together, which explains all their secrecy and negotiations on this trip. It also explains why Petter is not teased for being a sissy; he has come out as a boyfriend and has some competence in the heterosexual culture of girlfriends/boyfriends. As noted, the issue of “going out” is the children’s variant on being sweethearts, an issue that apparently motivates crossing the sex boundaries in an otherwise gender-segregated context, as noted above.

All the other children sit in same-sex groups, and the girls of non-western background make up two groups. One group consists of Miriam, Sasha and Prithua, who have brought along their baby dolls to play with during the “break”. This is the first and last time I observe girls playing with baby dolls, which are the ultimate symbol of childishness, and indirectly mocked by the girls who aspire to a more teenage image. They send them indulgent looks; a physical way of demonstrating authority, of gaining control and thus emphasising the popular ways of doing girl (more on friendship in Chapters 10 & 11). Events such as these clearly show the mechanisms and variations manifest in how ten-year-old girls do gender, underscoring femininities in the intersection of class, socio-cultural background and
age. The above situation also points to the issue of intragender difference: Girls perform variable femininities, the former group as childlike girl-children playing with dolls, the second as more teenage inspired.

The trip continues back to school with same-sex children walking in pairs, which again emphasises the strong gender segregation at this age. It never happened that a girl and a boy made a pair in the line, not this day nor on other days, for instance when walking from school to swimming lessons.

**Walking to the swimming pool**

This arrangement gave me an opportunity to walk in line myself and talk to the children, as some of them wanted to pair in line with me. This was mostly the girls of non-western background, and those that did not have an obvious best friend, such as Farou, Sasha, Samira, Miriam, Prithua, Aila and Elizabeth. They seldom mix with the boys, but lots of (heterosexual) activity aims in general at having contact with the opposite sex. This is particularly true of the boys, with regard to the girls. They infiltrate the line, grab some item from the girls – such as a hat or scarf – and run off. The girls respond by screaming and shouting: “Don’t do it! Teacher! Tommy took my hat!” Some run after the boys and grab their hats back as well. Alternatively the boys break into the line while pushing into the girls, but the opposite also happens. It is mostly Petter, Tommy, Aslan and Anthony who are engaged in these (heterosexual) activities while walking in line.

The phenomenon of grabbing things, running after each other and pushing into children of the opposite sex is thus another typical characteristic of the heterosexual interaction between ten year-olds, which is “institutionalised” in the variants of Boys- chase- the girls, or Girls- chase- the boys particularly prevalent among younger children. Tag is a more sophisticated form, as will be shown shortly.

The chasing activities are also reported by Renold, Thorne, Adler and Adler and Hagevold, and as such seem to be a widespread and cross-cultural form of heterosexual interaction between pre-adolescent children (Renold 2005, Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Hagevold 2006). The games and activities may be
interpreted as expressions of typical characteristics in this age group’s ambivalent manner of approaching the opposite sex, both indicating a gender segregation and (hetero-) sexual attraction. In other words, the activities can be read as common expressions of junior sexuality. Adler and Adler underline the point of (heterosexual) ambivalence:

Many instances of chasing and teasing arose between boys and girls who disliked each other. At other times, this manifest dislike was tempered with a sexual tension or interest that lingered just below the surface. Finding no acceptable outlet in the peer culture, boys and girls channelled their feelings into the culturally approved chasing and teasing behaviour (Adler & Adler 1998: 166).

The girls and boys in the present study want and do not want physical contact, and the overarching peer norm seems to be gender segregation in the social context of non-play. This may be so because they are often in a crowded setting, which Thorne argues inspires gender segregation for fear of being teased for liking someone in front of many people (Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998). Their behaviour may be interpreted as being motivated by cultural ideas, such as “don’t let it show that you like someone of the opposite sex” and “don’t touch someone of the opposite sex” which lead to femininity and masculinity subject positions in line with these ideals. These reactions point to possible emotional dilemmas in individuals that may be rooted in junior heterosexuality: girls and boys are attracted to someone and want some intimacy, which is however “forbidden” by peer norms. The challenge is to balance their behaviour accordingly. Thorne and Luria also found more gender segregation when their American children could choose which activities to engage in (Thorne & Luria 1986).

The social contexts of play

In the following I outline the most common play activities of the girls and boys included in this study. This is done to show the omnipresent and widespread interest of variants of play in their everyday lives. In addition, I highlight in what ways the boys and girls are engaged with one another in each play activity. I have divided the context of play into two sub-contexts, that of traditional play and particular play, because the latter includes local and self-made games only found among the children included in this study.
The sub-context of Traditional play

Games with traditional names

I understand “traditional play” practices to be games with rules that have been handed down through the generations and which are found in many parts of Norway. The rules have some local variations but have a common recognisable core. Play interaction according to these traditional and quite strict rules make up the practice similarities of this context. This implies that the activities in this context may have local names but are still identifiable, for instance Tag. The most used names for Tag in Norway are Har’n, Sisten or Tikken and traditional games are part of children’s cultures both today and in previous generations (Enerstvedt 2004, Åm 1987, Hagevold 2006).

Considering the anxiety expressed in the media and literature concerning children watching too much TV and forgetting how to play, corroborated by Neil Postman’s The Disappearance of childhood (1982), I was surprised to find much traditional play and other forms of play at both Østli and Vestdal. All the outdoor breaks are filled with some play activity or other, depending on the season. Many activities from my own childhood are still practiced and preoccupy the children a great deal. Åse Enerstvedt reports the same: If parents and grandparents bothered to find out what games modern children are familiar with, they would be surprised to find many games from their own childhoods (Enerstvedt 2004). Among these are variants of Tag, which consists of one being “It” and running after the others and trying to touch them so that “it” is transmitted. Then the one that is “It” runs after the others. This game often involves both sexes, is played at both Østli and Vestdal, and involves a lot of screaming, shouting and some physical contact. It is also quite inclusive; usually the child just joins without asking permission. As noted, it is a more advanced game of Girls- chase- the boys and the like, as it often happens that girls chase boys and vice versa during tag. Sometimes it ends with someone falling and crying, or someone grabbing a hat or some other possession, interpreted above as typically characteristic of junior heterosexual interaction.

A common activity among the girls is a game called Knot Mother (Knutemor), consisting of up to four girls with their bodies entangled. They hold hands above and
across each other’s bodies and try to break loose without falling. The activity involves much physical contact between the participants, and is thus an activity suited for close (same-sex) friends. Solveig and Synne are the dyad which most often engages in this activity, rather than joining games in bigger groups. In addition, their relationship includes much physical contact, illustrating the intimacy of what Fanny Ambjørnsson terms “homosociality”: close same-sex relationships (Ambjørnsson 2004:106). Their modest and shy personalities make them avoid big crowds. *Knot Mother* has a feminine name, is engaged in mostly by girls (at least I did not observe boys playing it) and bears some resemblance to the game *Stuck in the mud* (the Norwegian name *Stiv heks*, means *Stiff witch* in English).

However, contrary to *Knot Mother*, *Stuck in the mud* is played by both sexes with an unlimited number of participants and inclusion in the game is therefore also easy. The “witch” runs after the others and the one she touches has to stop running, stand still “stiff as a witch” with both legs apart. The others who are still running try to crawl through the parted legs, which frees the person bound by the mud or witch’s spell. The game is over when all participants have been caught and stand stuck, which may take a long time!

A related game is *Red light (Rødt lys)*. This also consists of an undefined number of participants standing in front of one person who closes their eyes while the others move. When the person suddenly shouts “Stop!” (as if at a red traffic light), the others have to stand absolutely still. Those who move just a little bit when “stop” is yelled, are out. This game can frequently be observed and is also played by both sexes. However, it is dominated by girls, at least among the children in this study.

Another common and well-known game is *Hide- and- seek (Gjemsel)* in the variant of *Kick- the- can (Boksen går)*. All children but one have to run and hide. The one left counts to a hundred (or some other number they have agreed on) and then starts seeking out the others. If they see one of the others, they say their name aloud while placing their foot on the can. If however one of the hiders is quick, they can run and kick the can while saying “kick the can” and are then safe from being the next one to
seek out those hiding. This activity was observed more often than *Tag* and involved both sexes and all socio-cultural groups. However, there is always one person who acts as the leader or the boss. This is often the same person who started the game, and they must be asked for permission by those wanting to join in. Different forms of power, such as symbolic power, are here often wielded in order to include and exclude children. At Østli those individuals were often Nina, Marit, Ida or Mona; at Vestdal the leader positions were more varied. In general the leaders are often the most popular children, such as those just mentioned.

Another popular activity at Østli takes place during the winter season, where the amount of snow determines which activities dominate. When snow has fallen the schoolyard is cleared by a snow machine, which gathers the snow in one place, creating a huge “hill”. This is then filled with children of all ages and socio-cultural backgrounds, both girls and boys, and a game called *The King on the hill* is played out. This game starts with everyone trying to get to the top of the hill, which in winter is slippery and steep. (The game is also played on grassy hills where these exist). It is everybody’s fight against everybody; they all try to get to the top by pushing the others aside and down the hill. The person standing alone at the top in the end is the king (on the hill). Then the game proceeds by trying to take the king’s position. When boys participate it is usually one of them who becomes the king, indicating a male dominance in this game. He has to be rather strong and fearless, and the older boys rule over the girls and younger boys. It often happens that when the 4th graders see the older children on the hill, they withdraw into an observer’s role. Not surprisingly, this game is tough and is accompanied by a lot of screaming, shouting and arguing, where swearing among the older girls and boys is common. This swearing often contains sex words which for some children is part of the subject position of a *kul* femininity and masculinity (see Chapter 14).

Lastly, the game of *Blind man’s buff* engages both sexes, and involves an unusual amount of physical, (often heterosexual) contact. This is because the blindfolded person is led to a person whose identity the former is to guess by touching his (her) body. As such, this game has the potential for more (hetero-) sexual touching than

---

152 Any material item resembling a can may be used, including stones.
the others presented above, and resembles more the activity of massage as described in Chapter 12.

It is worth noting that all the cited games primarily involve the children using only their bodies. No other material object apart from the “can” is used. This means that physical contact of some sort is often involved, to the greatest extent in Knot Mother, and to a far lesser degree in Red light and Kick the can. The next most common games to be described, however, involve relations with material objects and less physical contact.

**Skipping**

Leadership, power and heterosexual relationships among the children become particularly apparent in the popular game of skipping. This activity starts in early March at Østli, despite there still being some snow in the schoolyard, and the activity dominates all breaks for a couple of months. The rope is about five metres long, and is either brought to school by one of the pupils, or is in the possession of the class, which means the teacher. This was the case for both the 5th grade classes, and the idea was that all the children should skip together. It is possible for an unlimited number of children to participate, but of course the queue gets longer the more children who are involved. At the beginning of the skipping season, many children of non-western backgrounds just stand by and watch, particularly those newly arrived in Norway. Not surprisingly, it is Mona, Toril and their associates who often initiate the skipping in 5A, and Nina, Marit and Ida in 5B. Traditionally the game of skipping was mostly played by girls; boys seldom skipped in my childhood. Thorne reports that boys seldom take part in skipping on a par with the girls. Rather, they intrude and spoil the game (Thorne 1993:121). But at Østli, boys such as Petter, Morten, Anthony, Yaran, Tommy and Aslan seriously want to skip. These are the boys who most often associate with the girls in other social contexts as well. The skipping seldom occurs without argument and conflict, some related to mixed-gender interaction. I had first-hand insight into these because I soon was given the role of permanent rope swinger, the least attractive position in the game (but ideal for the fieldworker!).
The conflicts related to skipping often have to do with disagreements as to who is to participate, swing the rope and be first in the skipping. In addition they argue about the rules, both during skipping and while queuing up. It is primarily the three popular girls who discuss and decide over the others, and some of the girls, such as Solveig and Synne, withdraw from the game altogether. As for the rest of the girls, Oda, Ellen and Farou are not always given permission to join in, nor were some boys who might spoil the game. The power exerted in this situation is more overt than symbolic, in that children clearly oppose being bossed around by the leaders all the time. It is this resistance that creates the open conflicts.

In the game of skipping, there are different rules to follow depending on the pattern of skipping followed. The leader of the game and the one who is to jump first, chooses which pattern. The others line up behind, and the one who breaks a rule has to line up last or swing the rope. Waiting in turns is not easy for some children, and here interaction and quarrelling between the children also occurs. It takes the form of accusing one another of not keeping their place in the queue, which results in them bumping into one another, pinching each other’s arms or pulling each other’s hair. I never observed any physical assaults of a sexual nature, such as pinching bottoms or breasts, although swearing with obscene words frequently occurs among the boys. After some time it turns out that the quarrelling and conflicts are so rough and are creating so many unhappy girls in 5B, that the teacher confiscates the rope. She says they are not to have it back before they manage to solve the conflicts on their own. This took many weeks.

Central to both the conflicts and the negotiations for a solution are the three popular figures of Nina, Marit and Ida. Mona in 5A expresses that “they always create trouble, and they quarrel among themselves too”! As noted, they are often the leaders, and control the others with different strategies, for instance with verbal assaults in front of everybody or just by means of a mere glance. The following event illustrates this: I am swinging a rope together with Sumitra, and the popular girls are not there, but Oda, Ellen, Aila are. Later, Nina arrives, but has to line up last (as do all late comers). The girls discuss which pattern they shall skip, the “pole” or the “clock”. Nina wants the former, the others the latter, and no final decision is made. But it is only a matter of time before Nina asserts herself as leader and
decides on the “pole”. The other girls line up behind her, and the usual hierarchy is established. Observed from the outside, the working of peer power is a fascinating phenomenon.

Nina and the other popular girls’ domination is felt so strongly by the two shy girls Synne and Solveig, that they never participate in the skipping when the three girls do. I’ll return to this and the theme of peer power in Chapter 11. It is worth noting here though, that boys increasingly want to join in the skipping, and that the girls let them on the whole. Therefore the popularity of skipping may just as well be motivated by a (heterosexual) desire for mixed gender contact as for the game itself. This is an illustration of how the same activity may be motivated by different unconscious or conscious goals for both girls and boys: junior heterosexuality and the game itself. This interpretation can also be applied to different ball games.

**Ball games**

In addition to skipping, different ball games dominate when there is no snow in the schoolyard. Girls and boys alike initiate games of football, but of the girls, Mona and Toril are most often engaged if they are not busy skipping. They are the two girls most enthusiastic about football, but also the three popular girls in 5B often play. It is seldom, however, that regular football is played due to lack of space, but a variant called *The One Bounce (Enspretten)* is. A minimum of two or many children participate, and the point is to let the football bounce only once on the ground before it is kicked again. The ball goes from one foot to the next with only one bounce on the ground between each foot. The game is very popular among the girls and boys interested in football, that is to say most girls and boys of the 5th grade at Østli. It is an easy game for both sexes to participate in because no one gets stigmatised or teased for playing with girls (or with boys) when the meeting point is football. This is probably so because football is an “institutionalised” activity also for girls. But one has to get permission to play, which makes it an arena for conflicts and exclusion mechanisms. Nevertheless, football is an activity that over time has increased mixed gender contact also because so many children play football in the local teams outside of school. As discussed in Chapter 5, the participation of both sexes in the game of football may be read as an example of successful gender equality policy in Norway, because, according to Renold, Carlsen and Thorne, the
situation is not like this in the UK and the US (Renold 2005, Carlsen 2007, Thorne 1993, see also Adler & Adler 1998). According to Renold, girls and boys usually do not play football together, unless the girl has, or has had, a “girlfriend” relationship to one of the boys (Renold 2005: 58). In other words, football is more strongly connected to boys and masculinities in these countries than in Norway.

Another ball game is called *Bounceball (Sprettball)* and consists of taking turns throwing a tennis ball at a wall. The children, mostly the girls, queue up and take turns throwing and catching it. The girls who did not want to skip often did this or played *Knot mother* instead. *Bounceball* was also played at Vestdal, also here mostly by girls.

In addition to the cited ball games, I also observed girls and boys engaged in basketball, handball and volleyball, but not as often as the above mentioned.

**Commercial games**

Another observable activity in the schoolyard is Pokémon card games, one of the hits of the toy industry and an example of the commercialisation of childhood. I include the games of Pokémon (and B-blades) in the context of traditional play because they were very commonplace in Norway for many years. In addition the game has relatively common rules for play. The Pokémon logo and concept are found in TV cartoons and on accessories such as bags, but most of all in cards. These are bought in packets and consist of cards with pictures of different Pokémon figures, such as the one below:

![Two sides of a Pokémon card](image)
The children collect the cards, and the most “valuable” are those that are rare, or are defined attractive for some reason. The game is played in twos with many watching and if you have a card, you can join in. Each player throws a card on the ground and the side it falls on decides who won the other’s card. The children that have numerous and rare cards gain some position and admiration. Therefore there is a tendency at both schools to start playing or looking at cards in class, which disturbs the teaching. This led to a ban on bringing the cards to school. If the teachers spot some cards, they are confiscated and not returned. Even though these cards are not very expensive, thirty-nine kroner for one packet, it is an expenditure much negotiated in many homes because the children always want more cards. Nina’s mother says she is put under great pressure by her seven year-old son regarding the purchase of these cards, but she would not give in to him and told him “you have enough cards. If you want more you can try and win some.” The passion for Pokémon activates both sexes, all socio-cultural groups and leads to much cross-gender contact.

Some of the children of non-western backgrounds also participate, but not often with many cards. Finances and family history influence the quality of each child’s participation in this game. It is a purely commercially constructed game, which may reinforce middle-class values and their cultural capital concerning quality as the Pokémon figures clearly represent popular culture. Thale and Per at Vestdal say they do not like the game and have not bothered buying cards. However, some time later Thale tells me enthusiastically that she has won three cards in one day! The following week she has won even more cards. The joy for her is to collect more and more cards without having to spend money on such a “silly thing”, a condescending quip she may have borrowed from her mother or father.

Akin to the Pokémon “epidemic” is the game of so called B-blades, which is an activity mostly engaged in by boys. The B-blades are very “in” among the boys at Vestdal. I only observed a couple of them at Østli. The B-blade is a sort of spinning top bought in the same kind of shops as Pokémon: book stores, toy stores and kiosks. The B-blades range in qualities and price. The expensive ones ruled at Vestdal, while I only observed the cheap ones at Østli. The game consists of getting the top to spin for the longest period of time on all kinds of surfaces.
In sum, all the cited traditional and commercial games, with the exception of *The King on the hill* were found at both field sites. The architecture of the school arenas made *The King on the hill* practicable only at Østli. This may be why football and skipping were more prominent there as well. At Vestdal, different variants of *Tag* and thus chasing and catching each other dominated among the traditional activities. However, the overall impression is that traditional play activities are attractive among the children and occupy most of their school breaks. In addition, gender segregation was not as strong in most traditional play activities as in the contexts of school lessons and non-play. This again indicates that the motivation to join a game may be twofold: interest in the game itself and interest in legitimate heterosexual contact. As such, the subject positions in the different contexts vary because the practices and the intentions connected to them are different. General sociality, friendship building and romantic endeavour were most prominent in the context of non-play. Therefore, different femininities and masculinities become more apparent in that context. For instance, the *kul* teenager-like subject position for both girls and boys becomes more important here because they relate to each other “spontaneously”, and are not directed by the formalised rules of a game. Participation in games is focused on proficiency, bodily competence and often winning. In other words, participation in games and sport is more about acting out a specific role than adhering to a femininity or masculinity subject position.\(^{153}\)

According to how I read Mead, the self (and gender identity) is better developed in the context of play than non-play because the player has to learn and act all the relevant roles in the game. These processes are fundamental for “the emergence of all aspects of the self: consciousness, mind, intelligence, significant symbols and human interaction” (Deegan 2004: 1v). The emotional importance of play for children is here stressed and is the basis of kindergarten ideology (Dewey 1903, Addams 1905, Kvalheim 1980).

The above interpretation, that children show great interest in play and that the sub-context of (traditional) play as a whole incurs less gender segregation than the

---

\(^{153}\) The distinction made here between “role” and “subject position” concerns all sorts of games that include playing roles as if on a stage. The concept of “subject position” is therefore best suited for everyday interactions and presentations of self, while children act out “roles” in play. This distinction becomes particularly relevant concerning particular play as will be shown in the next section.
context of non-play, also holds for the activities of particular play to be discussed below.

**The sub-context of Particular play**

Particular play is a variety of activities in the social context of play and includes activities of two separate but nonetheless related kinds: one inspired by materiality and the other by popular culture. By “play inspired by material particularities” I mean material items which are part of the children’s geographical landscapes and which have inspired the creation of play activities. By “play inspired by popular culture” I mean activities that mimic TV programs, films etc., and show examples of fantasy roleplay. The practices illustrate children’s creative competence and result in “homemade” games and locally-embedded rules, a phenomenon also described in other research (see Thorne & Luria 1986, Enerstvedt 2004, Åm 1987). The practice similarities in this variant of play are of two kinds. The first is almost identical to the ones in the variant of traditional play: Peer interactions concerning play with formal, but “homemade” sources as opposed to traditional rules. The others include peer interactions organized around loosely defined “rules”, more precisely, different fantasy roleplaying activities. The play activities are all the result of children’s own creativity, without which the activities would not have existed either as names or practices. Particular play is inspired by the competence they already have of traditional play, or in the words of Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn:

> Both in people’s everyday creative practices and in the more unusual world-historical instances of creation of salient cultural symbols, new practices draw upon associations learned from the past (Strauss & Quinn 1997:54).

Put another way, particular play would not exist in its present form without prior knowledge of other forms of games and play. According to Mead, the urge to play is biological but the forms it takes, cultural (Deegan 2004). At Østli, this relates to how poles for supporting a roof are suddenly reassigned as essential items in a new game called “the pole game” (see below) with formal “homemade” rules similar to the ones in activities of traditional play, for instance in *Kick-the-can* and *Tag*. In the light of the themes in my study, it is relevant to depict what kinds of spontaneous activities the children’s associations, competence and creativity result in.

**In the schoolyard**
The pole game
One of the activities that catch my attention early in the fieldwork when the children are in the 4th grade, is lots of running between three tall metal poles near the school’s main entrance. These poles were set up as parts of the roof construction above the entrance; the poles supported the roof. The children, of all socio-cultural backgrounds, mostly girls but also a few boys, are standing in a kind of circle along and around the poles, and in a circle nearest to the poles two children were chasing each other. The point is for one of them to try and catch the other, but if they get exhausted or don’t want to continue, they can touch one of the observers in the circle. They have their hands stretched out and want to get touched in order to run. This game is also easy to join in and as such is very sociable: just stand in the circle and you are in. But there is a limit to how many can join in, which opens the game to negotiations. It seems, however, that the children wanting to join stand waiting until there is room in the ring. The game is called The pole game (Stangleken) and was created by children at Østli. Marit says it was she who invented it. Whether that is true or not, the game is particular and demonstrates both the engagement and creativity of the inventors and players. In other words, it illustrates children’s agency, competence and interest in the practice of play-like activities and in this activity ethnicity is not relevant, all participate on equal terms.

Antiover
This partly also concerns another game called Antiover (the Norwegian term). I never observed girls in garments of non-western origin participating in this activity which may be because their friendship circles did not or that their long dresses were experienced as a physical hindrance. Antiover is also played in the schoolyard, primarily by girls, and was invented by them. The game is organised around a huge green container filled with waste paper (about five metres long, two metres broad) at one end of the yard. The game consists of two teams which have to be chosen by the leader of each team. In this selection, friendship relations are demonstrated and new ones initiated. It is often Nina and Mona who initiate and lead the game. They choose partners for their teams in turn. The faster a person is chosen, the closer the friendship. Therefore Mona always picks Toril first and Nina picks Marit. To be the last one selected is therefore a sign of lesser popularity. This is because the selection is usually not based on proficiency in the game but by popularity position (which
may be related to ability). This dynamic corresponds to Thorne’s postulation that boys have a tendency to choose team members according to proficiency, whilst girls do choose according to friendship preferences, which again suggests a quality difference in ten year-old girls’ and boys’ friendships (Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005, see also Chapter 10).

One day when I arrive, many 5th graders are assembled around the container, and Mona is standing to one side looking unhappy and sad. Some of the other girls are trying to console her, and eventually she and Nina walk off, arguing. The conflict concerns differing interpretations of the rules. Mona has accused Nina of doing something “unfair”, or more precisely, of having broken the “rules”. After some negotiations, consisting of suggestions and compromises concerning Nina’s versus Mona’s “rules”, the game starts again. The episode points to their vulnerability and power simultaneously. Even the popular and powerful feel unjustly treated and get hurt when their position is challenged. Simmons argues that being popular is not only a place in the sun because the “in” girls have to defend their positions continuously (Simmons 2002). Of the popular girls in my research, this is to some extent the situation for Ida who can never be sure of being included in Nina and Marit’s clique, and of Nina versus Mona who starts to challenge Nina’s position during the 5th grade and particularly in the 6th (more on friendship in Chapter 10).

The game Antiover consists of throwing a tennis ball across the container for a person of the other team to catch with both hands. Every correct catch gives a score of one point. When one team has five points, they are to change sides by saying “anti-freeze” –the ones who move are “out”. In this way one after the other is out of the game, and the final round is between two players. Antiover becomes increasingly popular during the fieldwork period, and particularly so in the 6th grade. Often boys stand by watching and are occasionally permitted to play on one of the teams. As such, Antiover is more sex-segregated than most of the traditional games cited earlier. This may be so because it was the girls who first invented it and started to play, defining it as a “girl’s game”. Another reason may be the practice of choosing teams. It is not easy for a girl leader to choose a boy for her team instead of a girl, as lots of teasing would probably be the result for both of them. This is also documented by Thorne who points to the risks of choosing a team member of the
opposite sex in public, for all to see, a phenomenon that works to increase rather than reduce gender segregation (Thorne 1993). However, the activities are illustrative of girls’ creativity and agency in that the experience of materiality in the surroundings is transformed into the actions of play. In general the boys at Østli play institutionalised sport games like football and basketball more than the girls, while the boys at Vestdal to a greater extent participate in commercial games such as Pokémon and B-blades, girls only taking part in the former.

**Sliding**

As presented in Chapter 4, the 4th to the 7th graders spend one year of school in the same location as the junior high, which is when the children are in the 5th grade. This means that they are surrounded by teenagers during some breaks and as such experience teenage culture in their proximity. It also means that the younger children have to share arenas with their elders, for instance on slides and the “hill” during the winter season. Consequently some boys, such as Petter, often get involved in conflicts with their elders. Petter’s elders find him “irritating” because he does not easily collaborate with their desire for superiority concerning arenas for sliding and ball games. Sliding on ice and snow on the slope leading down to the school yard is a very popular activity, and the rules are strict about taking turns. If someone tries to pass another, they risk getting pushed down the hill and getting hurt.

Most of the 5th graders of both sexes having Norwegian background slide, while the modest girls Synne, Solveig and the girls with *hijabs* (head scarves), *shalwar khamis* and long dresses usually do not. This is probably because they do not want to risk having physical contact with a boy. Moreover, their clothing makes it difficult to move fast enough. During the sliding, boys and girls mix to a considerable extent. Besides sliding fast, the other attraction with the activity is to slide into one another, particularly someone of the opposite sex. The girls’ reactions when boys bump into them are screams and accusations such as “Oh, Petter (Aslan, Anthony)! Don’t do that! It hurts! Stop it! You’re mean!” even when everybody knows bumping into each other is part of the game. As such, a mixture of coquettish and tough femininities is played out, while the boys mainly act tough and a bit aggressive. The reactions are similar to those triggered when the boys try to break up the lines when walking back from the swimming lessons or during outdoor school activities, which
I interpret to be a typical characteristic in junior (hetero-) sexuality. In general, the boys scream and shout more “angrily” than the girls, but that they are really more flattered than angry is revealed by their shy smiles. This pattern of (heterosexual) interaction was also found in the context of non-play, and taken to be expressions of a possible emotional dilemma of “don’t let it show that you like someone of the opposite sex”. Conversely, they behave as if they want to avoid contact altogether, as will be shown in some of the activities below.

**School outdoors**

As noted previously, the ten year-olds I got to know at Østli have outdoor school once a week. The Norwegian ethos is profoundly influenced by proximity to nature, mountains, fresh air, outdoor activities and “being sporty” (*Friluftsliv*) (Gullestad 1997, Klepp 2006), which at Østli this ethos is exemplified by outdoor lessons in forest terrain. The pupils in the two 4th (later 5th) grade classes walk in pairs from the school to the woods, which take about fifteen minutes. The destination is a special place in the forest where the teachers, parents and children, together some afternoons, have set up a *lavvo*, or a tent in the traditional Sami style. The site is close to a small lake used for swimming on hot summer days by families in the area. An additional dimension to peer relationships during these school outings is the fact that the youngest children in school, the six year-olds, come to visit. And the teachers expect the ten year-olds to take care of them for part of the day as preparation for the next school year. Then the 5th graders are appointed as helpmates for one child each. The policy of older children being sponsors for younger ones was effectuated some time in the 1980’s in most Norwegian state schools.

Much of the time on these outings is devoted to free and spontaneous play, and is thus well-suited to revealing their interests. Most of the girls and boys are dressed in leisure outfits for outdoor activities according to the weather, but particularly during cold winter days the children of non-western backgrounds start feeling cold, as mentioned previously. This is not necessarily due to lack of means with which to buy the appropriate clothing; inappropriate knowledge on how to stay warm in a cold foreign climate also plays its part. One Pakistani mother told me she only recently “discovered” the benefits of wool underwear; after freezing many winters
she was now happy! Thin socks and insufficient footwear are often the biggest problems.

**Hut building**

The activities the children engage in on these days are numerous. They run about in the area and many start to build huts from branches, leaves and stones. The walls and roofs are often stuffed with heath. Hut building may be a typical activity for Norwegian children in relation to the ethos cited above. Many are used to spending time outdoors on forest trips with their families at weekends (gå på tur). Of the children at Østli this is particularly true of Nina, Marit, Morten, Toril and Mona, but not of the children from non-western backgrounds. At Vestdal, the Norwegian outdoor and sporty ethos seem to concern the majority of families, as indicated in Chapter 5. During the outdoor school at Østli, most girls and boys of Norwegian origin have some previous experience with hut building.

Today the dyad of Marit and Nina find their own place and Ida tries (again) to be included. A lot of negotiations always ensue her attempts, but she is ultimately rejected and ends up with Toril and Mona. Then Oda, Ellen and Christel make one hut. The activities inside the huts are often different role games: “I am the mother, you the father, you the brother/sister or the dog”. The boys build huts too, they also exclude but in a more direct manner: “No! You are not allowed in! Go somewhere else!” The girls often just walk off in silence, leaving behind the girls who want to play. Or they just ignore them. In spite of much talk concerning the importance of having an inclusive attitude by teachers in class, subtle ostracism happens on a constant basis (see also Simmons 2002, Hey 1997, Hagevold 2006). Some of the girls of non-western backgrounds try to be included in the huts of the established builders, but are seldom admitted in. So Miriam, Sasha and Prithua make a shop area where they make food from grass, leaves and cones, which they then hawk. Synne and Solveig play with some soft mice toys called Diddles, a quite expensive item whose logo is found on other things as well, such as notebooks, pencils and cups. The girls give each mouse an identity and play a role game with imagined family members. This is a play activity denoted by Mead as “pure play” particularly in connection to primary school children, which emphasises Synne and Solveig’s primarily girl-childish femininities as sweet and “innocent”, attitudes also revealed
by them in other contexts and situations (Mead in Deegan 2004, see also Paley 2004).

As indicated, the gender segregation is prevalent on these outdoor days but not absolutely. I never observed girls and boys building huts together, but much activity and attention is given to the huts and bases of the opposite sex. After having spent quite some time building, Marit and Nina find some blue rope in the woods and start to make hair bands from it. Soon they are into the game of playing Indians, which rapidly spreads to other huts. Playing Indians is suddenly the thing to do. Symbolic power has been at work. The girls and boys run about chasing each other, which demonstrates how an activity initiated by the popular girls spreads easily. This is also so among the boys, who often are into the game of playing war.

**Playing war**

Playing war is traditionally a masculine activity and at Østli too it is usually initiated by the boys. It is a common activity played by the boys on these outings, and often leads to real fights as well. The “war” is between different groups of boys located in different huts (“base camps”) spread in the area. However, it is not uncommon that girls and boys play war against each other, and as such, may be read as girls experimenting with masculinity. This game makes them position themselves in a masculine manner, or rather, they act out the masculine role of being a soldier (see note 153, page 217). The rules in “war” are flexible but clear on one point: physical violence or hitting with sticks or other objects is not allowed. They have to catch one another by their fists, which results in much running, shouting and arguing. The real conflicts that occur during the game of war involve someone getting too aggressive, a reaction other participants try to calm down.

One day I arrive to find many girls inside the boys’ war camp, an unusual sight. When I approach and ask them what is happening, the girls say they are participating in the war game on the same team as the boys. I understand that this variant of playing war is the result of tough negotiations. Petter was against them joining “because the boys are so seldom permitted to play football with them!” 154 The boys

---

154 This utterance may be read to underline how commonplace it is that girls play football at Østli (and Norway?). Petter’s reaction suggests that it is his experience that girls initiate the game as often
in the game of war today are Petter, Tommy, Aslan and Ola, and the girls Marit, Nina, Ida, Oda, Ellen, Mitha, Lisa, Synne and Solveig. It surprises me that the two latter girls participate, in view of their modesty, but it turns out that they mostly observe from some distance.

Ida and Marit are very clear about playing war today. Marit marches to and fro saying “today I am a soldier, a military!” Mitha and Nina also march stiffly in front of the hut. A group of girls have caught a boy. They tie up his feet and arms and try to bring him to their “base”. The binding is one of the important events in the game, and involves the children in a lot of physical contact. These scenes may all be interpreted as expressions of junior (hetero-) sexuality. A lot of screaming accompanies both the binding and later deportation. After some time, the game is interrupted by the teachers calling; the six year-olds have arrived and need attention. The soldiers do not want to stop the game: “I want to play war!” Marit shouts indignantly. But soon they are all gathered around the lavvo with the small children. They switch from playing the role of tough soldiers to positions of attentive, nurturing femininities. Playing soldier may be read as a masculine real “performance”, but looking after younger children demands an empathetic and warm way of doing girl (or boy).

Marit and the rest of the war players are at first very reluctant to look after the small ones, but soon they comply and even compete about looking after the most popular children, such as a girl named Cathrine. She is deemed very pretty by the others, has long hair and big eyes. In addition she usually wears fashionable and teenage-like clothes. I suggest her attractive appearance and style qualifies her for popularity. After tending to the small ones for a while, the girls rush out, switch into “soldier” roles and are off and away as soon as they are able and depart into the game of war again.

Now the soldiers want to shift site, and run to another part of the area. They want to establish new base camps and they end up with a sort of cave lying between two high cliffs. These cliffs have soon transformed the war into a jumping competition as boys do. His reaction supports the claim that “footballer” today is a subject position in the cultural circuit of femininity as well as masculinity.
and roles change into “real-life” masculinities and femininities again, this time including the tough and sporty: Who dares to jump across the cleft? Morten is the first boy who manages to, Nina the first girl. He helps her over by stretching out his hand. They shout and say: “I am the first! I am the first!” This event may point to an element in “the mystery of popularity” (see Chapter 10): In addition to being good-looking and deemed kul, these two children are admired for their courage, competence and proficiency in athletic activities which are parts of their cultural and social capital.

The game of war was thus suddenly substituted by a sporting activity. The war is forgotten, and about ten girls and boys participate in jumping across the cleft. None of the girls of non-western background does. The scene is imbued with a supportive atmosphere; they help each other to get across. This event clearly shows how material particularities provide associations and inspiration to create other activities. In this case they are likely to be inspired by events in the book and subsequently the very popular film about Ronja Røverdatter (Ronja, the bandit’s daughter) by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. In this book, two hostile families live on either side of a huge mountain cleft which the girl Ronja and the boy Birk jump across while trying to make friends. They eventually succeed, and how Lindgren describes their way of approaching each other resembles the way I have described characteristics in junior (hetero-) sexuality above. There is ambivalence to physical contact and of liking someone with opposite sex.

Inside activities

“Sex in the City”

The girls and boys included in this research watch TV and films to varying degrees, and act out their influence in different play activities. One example of this takes place at Hudøy Island, in the girl’s dormitory. There is always a lot of noise and activity when they are getting up in the morning or going to bed in the evening. One morning, I go up to see what is happening, and find Ida, Marita and Nina discussing the correct outfit for sleeping in. To the amusement of Marita and Ida, Nina has slept naked and usually does, while the others use pyjamas or just underwear. Nina gets much attention because of her laidback attitude to nakedness, which might be the reason why every now and then they joke about pulling her trousers down. In
connection with the discussion on proper night clothes, they are acting out roles from the soap *Sex in the City* (*Sex og singelliv*). This TV series is about four single female friends; their conversations, relationships and frustrations primarily concern men and sex. The series is popular among many age groups, including grown and married women. As such, the girls I got to know who did watch the programs, often did this together with their mothers and older siblings, and definitely acquired information on sexual issues.

On this particular morning, Ida is a reporter covering what the other two are doing. Some girls are still asleep, but wake up from all the screams and laughter, particularly when they find out that Nina is still naked. The inspiration from *Sex in the City* has mostly to do with what the girls in the series talk about concerning interpersonal relationships, particularly (hetero-) sexual ones. Playing out *Sex in the City* points to the girls’ interest in these matters, including nakedness and bodies, which is a well-documented part of children’s sexuality in both anthropology (Mead 1935/2001, 1928/2001, 1930/2001, Shostak 1982, Talle 2004/2007) sociology (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005) and psychology (Bukatko & Daehler 1998, Røtnes 2000). However, as presented previously, I argue in this study that junior and older (adult) sexuality is not the same, which probably has implications for how girls (and boys) understand what is going on in programs such as *Sex in the City*. I will return to this theme in Chapters 12 and 13.

*Idol*

The next activity worth mentioning in the sub-context of particular play is the nationwide popular song contest *Idol*, cited in connection with *the Norway Cup* and which will be further described in Chapter 11. *Idol* is an American concept, the aim of which is to find and create future pop stars. The contest engages people of both sexes, all backgrounds and nationalities and children and teenagers in particular. *Idol* is highly commercialised; its main sponsors are *Burger King* and *Euronics*. They are responsible for many such accessories as caps, balloons etc. In Norway alone, about five thousand teenagers queue up in the biggest cities for auditions before a jury of three qualified people. It takes many months before the last hundred “finalists” are broadcasted on the TV program. The rules are tough and the jury is very outspoken regarding the presentations. One after the other the jury members express their
honest opinions concerning the singing and end up saying something like “you are out” or “you pass!” Both the girls and boys at Østli and Vestdal talk about the contest, play the different actors, both singers and jury, discuss their favourites and so on. The heat is often high concerning favourites and groups of children make their own “fan clubs”.

The children at Vestdal spend many of their breaks imitating the contest, in which two boys and a girl are judges, and others of both sexes take turns singing before the “jury”. They sing familiar pop songs, just like the artists in the real contest, and get the judges’ feedback in front of all the others. As noted, in the contest on TV, the judges are rough and do not show much sympathy for non-talented singers. The judges at Vestdal, however, let everyone “pass” and give more positive than negative comments. The Idol contest is so much debated and focused on in all kinds of media that people of all ages know what it is. As such, it is a great advertisement for popular culture and music, but also of femininities and masculinities, as the jury comment on appearance and style as well. Variations on statements such as “You sing awfully but look gorgeous” are frequent jury comments.

The children’s interest in pop music is the same at both field sites, with the minority having no interest in Idol, such as Synne and Solveig at Østli. The fact that they do not watch a TV program most others watch and talk about illustrates the importance of showing some competence and interest in what the leading children define as important in order to experience integration into the popular group. Knowledge about Idol has for instance become incorporated into the codes on coolness which the leading children have had the power of defining for their peer group. Synne and Solveig’s lack of interest in events like Idol is thus one indication of why they are a long way from being categorised as kul by the other children. In other words, they lack the essential personal capital for the femininity subject position of being kul (more on qualifications for popularity in Chapter 10).

The practices in the sub-context of particular play show peer interactions and how the children’s creative ability is activated by particular materiality and inspiration from different forms of popular culture. It is evident that information about older sexuality is derived from these impressions and partly acted out, as in playing
massage and *Sex in the City* etc. As such, the sub-context of particular play becomes an overlapping context for that of romance to be described in the next chapter. But to end this chapter I will discuss and outline the typical characteristics elucidated in the children’s peer relationships so far.

**Characteristics in ten year-old’s peer relationships**

As I have shown, **gender segregation** is a prominent characteristic in the children’s organisation of space. Girls primarily seek the company of girls, and boys seek that of boys, but not in all situations and activities. The spontaneous segregation of gender by the children indicates that having an identity as boy or girl is valued and important in the Norwegian society (and I believe in most/all societies). However, the degree of separation is contextual – being illustrative of the heterosexual hegemony. The clearest segregation is when lining up or hanging around in the context of non-play and finding seats in the school lesson context. Football, partly the game of skipping and some traditional and particular games exemplify much mixed-gender contact, as do some of the particular play activities in the woods. In other words, how relevant gender is depends on the activity. In mixed-gender games such as football, gender is played down, less than in skipping because of its primary association to girls’ games. The female interest in football has increased in the last decade in Norway and the other Nordic countries inspired by the political emphasis on equality between the sexes and the government encouraging girls to enter traditional masculine activities and careers and vice versa.

Gender segregation has also been documented by other studies, and different interpretations have been made (Adler & Adler 1998, Davies 2003, Nielsen & Rudberg 1989, Hagevold 2006, Hey 1997). According to Hey, “psychological studies confirm the intense interest children have in socializing with each other as well as the tendency for groups to be segregated by gender” (Hey 1997:9). From existing research done on ten year-olds, it seems that gender segregation is generally widespread among middle-school children (Bukatko & Daehler 1998). According to Thorne, three major explanations have been set forth: Shared interests or “behavioural compatibility”; psychoanalytic processes; the cognitive dynamics of gender-labelling and identity (Thorne 1993: 57).
Very briefly, the first argues that girls seek other girls to play with because they are more temperamentally alike and have common interests. This theory fails to explain why many girls and boys seek cross-gender playmates rather than those of the same sex. The psychoanalytic approach argues that girls seek girls and boys seek boys because of the difficult process of achieving independence from the mother. This is particularly so concerning boys, who must seek identification away from the feminine world while girls just continue with their life where they are (see also Chodorow 1978, Gregor 1987). The third theory is the one this study has taken as its point of departure: namely, the internalisation of femininities and masculinities through socialisation as girls or boys (see Chapter 5). As result of their own gender awareness and of compulsory heterosexuality, children prefer and seek “their own kind” (Thorne 1993: 60), but this is contextual. The preceding pages have shown that gender segregation is most likely to occur in the context of non-play and when children are free to choose seats indoors, but also when playing games traditionally considered to be girls’ games (Knot Mother, Antiover) and more seldom, boys’ games (B-blades).

Gender segregation is reduced when access to the game is as easy as it is in Kick-the-can and the Pole Game. It is worth noting, even in the most strict gender segregation, that gender-crossing motivated by romantic goals did happen. On the whole, however, girls and boys mixed to some extent in most activities even when a game was primarily associated with but one gender, such as skipping. This may indicate that the Norwegian policy of “equality between the sexes” has had some effect, particularly when compared with material from the UK and US (see Thorne 1993, Renold 2005, Adler & Adler 1998, Reay 2001).

In spite of this, the powerful peer norms concerning proper behaviour influence the quality of mixed gender interaction. The peer norms result in children stigmatising and mocking peers who aspire to more gender-mixed friendship and more androgynous subject positions, such as the tomboy or sissy. The children’s category-maintenance work is effective, separating the genders and enforcing culturally proper femininities and masculinities. The fear of being teased for liking someone of the opposite sex thus separates the sexes. This is more relevant in big crowds and in
public than when the choice of playmates is more limited, such as in
neighborhoods. The existence of teachers and adults also reduces gender
segregation, and both Thorne and the children I got to know report that girls and
boys mix more at home than in school settings (Thorne 1993, Chin 2001). This was
the case with Mitha, Christel and Petter. Mitha and Petter not only accompanied
Christel to the riding lessons, but also spent time with her in their neighbourhood.

One possible consequence of the common gender segregation shown in the literature
and in this study is that peer relationships share other similar characteristics, for
instance the importance of having a “best” friend. As we may recall, this is a
recurring topic for the girls and best friends group together. Having a best friend
enhances a girl’s status, and if the relationship works well, it creates confidence and
trust in the girls concerned. Asking to be friends is done directly: “Can I be your best
friend?” or “Can I play with you?” which may be answered just as directly: “Yes” or
“No”, but also by silence and ostracism. Of the girls in this research, the most stable,
harmonious and intimate dyads are the ones between Solveig and Synne, but also
Mona and Toril. They are always together, from the 4th grade through the 6th grade.
From my insufficient knowledge of the boys’ culture, it seems that boys prefer
groups of three to five, more than dyads. But Morten and Yaran spent so much time
together, both in and outside of school, that they might be classified as best friends
of mixed socio-cultural background.

A third characteristic in the ten year-olds peer relationships is socio-cultural
segregation, particularly among the girls. It was shown that ethnicity becomes
particularly relevant in certain contexts for the girls, and it was suggested that
clothing is more important than skin colour in this regard. Among the Østli girls,
there existed only one continuous best friend dyad of mixed socio-cultural origin,
the one between Inga (of Norwegian origin) and Clara (Asian). This phenomenon
will be discussed in relation to the proverb “Birds of a feather flock together” in
Chapter 11.

A fourth notable characteristic is the ambivalent behaviour children display in
approaching the opposite sex, which is related to the peer norm of gender
segregation, but most importantly to junior heterosexuality. Girls and boys approach
each other in similar ways and the behaviour varies according to the emotional risks
involved. In general, grabbing an item, pushing into and chasing each other proves true for both genders. This behaviour is institutionalised in the game of Boys-chase-girls, girls-chase-boys, with more advanced rules in games such as Tag and Kick-the-can. Closely associated to the general ambivalence is the signalling of antipathy towards the opposite sex when admiration is actually the case. The peer norms regarding proper attitude and behaviour towards the opposite sex are filled with ambivalence, contradiction and little or no intimacy. Children who violate these norms run the risk of serious and humiliating teasing, the fear of which keeps them “in line”. The accepted attitude among the girls (and boys) towards the opposite sex is thus to signal dislike and distance, but still seek boys or girls to “go out with”.

**Conclusion**

By organising children’s everyday practices into three main social contexts distinguished from each other by different practice similarities consisting of dissimilar types of interactions, it has been possible to outline typical and visible characteristics in their peer relationships. The practice similarities in the school lesson context were interactions between teachers and peers concerning school work; in the context of non-play they were interactions between peers without formal rules; in the context of play they were interactions concerning play with traditional rules or “homemade” rules. This chapter has also shown many examples of the dynamics and flexibility of the concept of subject positions in that much rapid switching has been reported. Particularly from the activities in the woods, a distinction was made between acting a (dramaturgical) role in play and a subject position. This concept and the social context approach have made it possible to systematise and delineate the most important behaviour characteristics, to be continued in the next chapter. I will now conclude this chapter by answering the question in the introductory quotation: With what exactly is the child engaged?

The preceding pages have shown that much of the children’s practices and everyday life are filled with different sorts of play in addition to organised paid activities. If Mead is right concerning the fundamental importance of play and games for the development of self and social behaviour (Deegan 2004), the children in this study seem to be on the “right track”. It was shown that one prominent characteristic in

---

155 I know many girls and boys who use a lot of time at home watching TV, playing electronic games and searching the internet. Therefore my conclusions do not include indoor, home activities.
this regard was **creative competence**. Inspiration from material particularities in their surroundings and from general life experiences were acted out in play. This indicates that the girls and boys are still childlike in many respects, that is, they seem to act according to the expectations concerning their culturally constructed age and are (still) predominantly engaged in variants of play activities. This is illustrated by the fact that when they are free to choose activities spontaneously, they engage in activities of play and sports of different kinds. In contrast, the teenage girls in the same social settings just walk or stand around talking instead of running or participating in games, which the younger girls know and comment upon. Still, even the popular teenage inspired group consisting of Nina, Marit and Ida initiate and engage in lots of play, games or sports activities. As such, their subject positions in their free time fluctuate between “girl-child-like” and “teenager-like” femininities, setting aside sports activities which do not differ much according to age. The ten year-old girls (and boys) in this study thus present an impression and picture of this age group as being more creative, competent and child-like than that foreshadowed by the media debates and literature references in Chapter 1 (such as Postman 1982).

The way the children relate to the opposite sex in the activities described in this chapter, show characteristics in their way of doing (hetero-) sexuality which still may be interpreted to be “junior”, rather than “senior” or “adult”-like. The details in their opposite sex interactions are characterised by ambivalence and fear of physical contact and intimacy. This does not indicate that they act “older than their age”. How this manifests itself in their girlfriend and boyfriend relationships will be explored in Chapter 12. Before that, I discuss in more detail the issues of friendship and popularity, and how these intersect with class and socio-cultural background.
Chapter 10: Friendship and popularity

The popular group is what society might term “cool”. You know, they are skaters, they skateboard, they wear more cool clothes – you know, the “in” things you’d see in ads right now and magazines. If you look at our media and advertising right now on TV, like the Levi commercials, they’re kinda loose, they skate and they’re doing those things. The identity they created for themselves, I think, has a lot to do with the messages the kids are getting from the media and advertising as to what’s cool and what’s not cool (Adler & Adler 1998: 40).

This quote points to the main themes to be explored in this chapter, namely friendship and popularity. I will analyse these issues in more detail than previously, relating them to different aspects of femininities (and masculinities). It has already been shown how the girls (and boys) form friendship circles on the backdrop of their interests concerning leisure activities, consumption and deference (or not, as the case may be) to teenager-like images of doing girl (and boy). However, all of the girls have to position themselves in one way or other to the kul and populær, either as wannabes and close associates or as complete outsiders to their spheres. I suggest it is desire to be liked, to have friends and perhaps to be popular, even if that popularity has a very short range (just involves the best friend). The following pages explore the mechanisms behind popularity and friendship among the girls in this study. More precisely, it discusses the meaning of friendship, “the mystery” of popularity and its relationship to peer power as I observe it being experienced by the girls.

At Østli, half of the children included in my study have non-western backgrounds and many live in non-privileged families. Their family history and personal experiential structures differ in many forms of capital compared to members of a privileged family of Norwegian origin. This inspires femininities (and masculinities) which may harmonise or oppose those performed in families with other socio-cultural backgrounds. The present research has shown that the stable friendship circles of the ten year-old girls tend to consist of girls of either Norwegian or non-western backgrounds, very few are of mixed-culture character. How is this to be understood? In what ways are friendship circles of same cultural background related to belonging and integration? How do socio-cultural and class background influence friendship processes, and in what ways do they relate to experiences of belonging in
the peer group? I argue that family history, personal capital, socio-cultural background, financial resources and locality influence peer relationships and friendship in that they alone and in combination define the possibilities and constraints of peer participation and sociality. I show that having attractive things and being good-looking seems to enhance one’s chances of being popular, and as such have implications both for the girls aspiring to such a position as well as their families.

This does not mean that having the right possessions guarantees a girl (or boy) a place “in the sun”, but that it helps to pave the way. As has been indicated in the preceding chapters, this was understood by Mitha and Farou, who wanted to belong to the popular group of Norwegian origin. Materiality is thus a dimension in the issue of friendship and belonging among the girls this research is based on. It is also important for integration – to be explored in the next chapter.

In the following, I start by exploring the meaning of friendship among the girls by outlining friendship characteristics and different ways of doing girl. There then follows a discussion on the “mystery” of popularity and the implications of peer power for the experience of belonging in the peer group.

The meaning of friendship

According to Ann Oakley, “Friendship is the least studied of all relationships, despite the fact that all sorts of studies show that friendship is a very important determinant of health and well-being” (Oakley in Hey 1997: vii). Friends and friendship thus seems to be one of the most basic and important relationships in the lives of human beings, but how it is understood and practiced varies across time and cultures (Broch 1992). Some languages do not have a word for friendship but conceptualise it in kinship terms (Schwimmer 1974:49). Allison James says:

Unlike cultures where bonds of affection are linked with or expressed in terms of kinship systems, western friendship has no explicit external framing, no pattern of ritual obligations to shape and sustain its course. Enjoined in the spirit of mutuality, trust and intimacy, it is potentially an exceedingly strong and exceedingly brittle interpersonal relationship (James 1993:207, emphasis added).
According to James, the core of friendship in western societies rests on mutuality, trust and emotions related to the feelings of being wanted and belonging, rooted in fundamental psychological needs of attachment. As such, friendship building can be understood to develop from the first human experience of sociality between primary caregivers and children. Theorists in developmental psychology, for instance John Bowlby, stress the importance of satisfactory primary attachment for later sociality. This is because the early experience of being loved influences the child’s self esteem and competence in building relationships later in life, be they friendships or otherwise (Bowlby 1969).

How friendship is understood also varies according to age, gender and class. According to developmental psychologists, children’s friendships increase in psychological complexity with age (Bukatko & Daehler 1998, James 1993). Bukatko and Daehler hold that the three year-old’s concept of “friend” is synonymous with “playmate” and does not encompass the same complexity as it does for older children. The minimum characteristic for talking about someone as a “friend” or not, may just be interaction of some kind (ibid.). This implies that children’s understanding of friendship is not the same as that of adults and varies according to age. 156

In the preceding pages I have given some examples of how friendship is practiced among the ten year-old girls. It is my interpretation that the emphasis on mutual trust, loyalty, some kind of intimacy and most importantly availability and inclusion, is important in these girls’ friendships. This resonates with the research done by Hey, who argues that the central characteristics of girls’ friendship are “reliability, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing” (Hey 1997:65). Ginsberg, Gottman and Parker (1986) suggest that friendship for children includes stimulation, physical support, ego support, social companionship, intimacy and affection. Others have emphasised the importance of communal sharing, trading and bargaining (Goodwin 1985, Mishler 1979). Bukatko and Daehler hold that children in the middle school years are very concerned about being accepted by their peers and fear rejection,

156 A current psychological research project at The University of Oslo studies friendship relations in Norwegian kindergartens. Results so far show that nine out of ten children below the age of six say they have at least one “friend” in the kindergarten (Borge & Eivers forthcoming).
which in turn results in friendship formation (Bukatko & Daehler 1998). Of the girls and boys I got to know the importance of having friends and friendships became evident from day one, as already described in the preceding chapters. “Can I play with you? Who is your best friend? Why can’t I come home with you after school when X can?” were common questions. In short, the literature and the children in this study indicate that friends and friendship are important in their lives.

Previously, I have shown how friendship circles change, although dyads seem stable, in that different associates are included in best friend dyads or form their own circles with varying durability. In general, studies show that the younger the children, the more easily they switch friends from one situation or day to the next, their friendships being often contextual (ibid.). But as friendship seems important in most children’s lives, a child without friends often signals unhappiness, which worries the caregivers both in and outside the home. According to James:

..children’s experience of both **having** and **being** friends plays a critical part in their acquisition of social identity and Selfhood. A second conclusion is that the experience of friendship is pivotal in engendering a sense of belonging. Those children who find difficulty in making friends risk becoming socially marginalised in the everyday companionship of the class-room and playground (James 1993:201, emphasis added).

This resonates with how G.H. Mead understood the work of play for children’s development and growth presented in the last chapter (in Deegan 1999). When children play with each other they contribute to the development of both self and friendship. The distinction between “having” and “being” friends was not expressed by the girls or boys included in this study, but I see it as implying variation in how the reciprocity and obligation of a friendship is experienced. “Having friends” is a more superficial and simple relationship often found among primary school children, while “being friends” involves stronger obligations, emotion, complexity and durability (James 1993).

“Being friends” presupposes that you “have” friends but you can say you have friends without necessarily “being” a friend. It is surely a matter of context and definition of how a friendship relationship is to be classified. Adler and Adler distinguish between “close”, “casual” and “compartmentalised” friendships depending on how frequently the children spend time together and in which contexts. The last type of friendship is typical of children attending the same leisure
activity but not interacting in other contexts. “Casual” friendships involve children spending time together irregularly, for instance when their families are socialising. “Close” friendships are best friends and children who spend a lot of time together both at school and otherwise and who feel obligations and attachment to each other (Adler & Adler 1998).

In the extract above, James points to familiar and relevant issues also in the Norwegian context concerning girls’ and boys’ friendship. Much effort is made in school settings to enable children to make friends, which is a highly valued goal for teachers and parents alike. Children without friends are almost regarded as abnormal and helped in many ways by the school staff. They try to create a friendly and inclusive atmosphere because it is assumed that such attitudes reduce the number of isolated children (see also Chapter 9). It is important to reiterate that, in the Norwegian schools where the fieldwork was done (and also in the schools of my own children and friends’ children), one strategy for inclusion is that it is not permitted to say “no” when a child asks to participate. It is also recommended to ask a lonely child to come and join the group (which I never observed). The strategies may reduce the feelings of isolation for a short period of time, depending on the attitude of the “including” children. If they openly express, either verbally or through body language, that the child is unwanted, the feeling of isolation may actually increase. It is useful to recall the turning of backs on Oda when the girls were going by tube to play at a school football tournament (in Chapter 5), see Simmons 2002). However, the school’s emphasis on inclusive attitudes did not reduce the number of best friend dyads, and might have encouraged the creation of subtle excluding strategies instead. It is also remarkable to observe how some girls may repeatedly ask to be included but are subtly turned down. As the last chapter indicated, this happened with Ida during the 4th and the 5th grades, and she finally achieved a more permanent inclusion in the popular group at the end of the 5th grade. Some girls thus show an astounding stamina in their efforts to make friends, which emphasises their emotional engagement and the importance of friendship.
Of the girls in this study, the “being friend” characteristics apply first and foremost to the close friends or dyads of best friends. Farou classifies most female classmates as friends, for instance Mitha as a “good” friend, but not her “best” friend. This suggests that friendship for the girls involves some closeness in the emotional bonds involved, which means that best friends are the closest and casual playmates the most distant. The informal obligations are strong among close female friends: they are not free to play with others whenever they want; they are expected to be compassionate and be together most of the time; to wait for each other at breaks; to keep all the secrets to themselves and to exchange small gifts. In addition to obligations to be considerate and empathetic, close friendships thus involve exchanges of various kinds. The most obvious are small gifts and the sharing of food in school settings. And when a close friend is on holiday or away on some other excursion, it is expected that they bring a gift when they return. This works to preserve the friendship, much like Marcel Mauss described concerning the logic of the gift (Mauss 1966). The ten-year-old girls’ understanding of friendship can be summarised and visualised as below:

![Diagram of friendship characteristics]

The following case story of the girls’ meeting the Idol finalists, and the rest of this chapter illustrate some of the connections between these elements.

---

157 As mentioned previously, I did not observe clear best friend dyads among the boys. But from overhearing some of their conversations, it seems that “best friends” is a topic among them too. For instance, Tommy accused Ole of being Petter’s “slave” and that Petter “wanted to be Morten’s best friend, but that Martin already was!” (meant to injure).
The strong interest in the *Idol* contest results in Farou and Mitha asking me if I can go with them to town. They want to meet the *Idol* finalists who are to be at *Burger King* for a public audience and to sign autographs. They are not going to sing, only sign autographs and talk to people. 158 I demure, but Farou takes that as a “yes”. Similar preparations as for going to the *Norway Cup* ensue. She speaks to some of the popular girls about it, perhaps motivated by the desire for positive attention, and phones me the same evening asking whether Marit and Christel can come too? I consent, but ask her to be very secretive about it, as I know most girls (and boys?) in the class would like to come, which would be impossible. 159

When I enter the classroom the next day, four pairs of eyes look at me in great anticipation: “Are we going?? When are we going??” The negotiations concerning who is to come along have been a hot issue at school. For some unknown reason Nina is not permitted to come by her parents and Ida is busy at dancing classes. I do not want to have responsibility for a lot of children, and explain that the number will be limited by the fact that Farou has asked me to go with them, not the other way around. So off we go by tube after school: Farou, Mitha, Marit, Christel and myself. As on the trip to the *Norway Cup*, they are ordinarily dressed, not extra fashionably, teenage-like or otherwise conspicuous in any way. We arrive at *Burger King* on Karl Johan Street with time on our side, and start waiting for the *Idol* finalists.

The girls are in high spirits and can hardly sit still. It is obvious that this was an event filled with high expectations and also gratitude for my taking them there. Mitha says “This is the best day of my life!” and when the idols eventually show up, Farou bursts out: “Oh God, I think I’ll faint!” The girls line up beside the table where the idols seat themselves, and get their autographs on a couple of cards each. The extra cards are to be given as gifts to the friends who have not been able to come. Interesting discussions follow as to whom they will give their extra cards to. Mitha says she will not give one to Nina, “because she has never been nice to me, Samira shall have mine”. This is worth noting considering that she always tries to be friends with Nina. Why bother when she “has never been nice” to her? The statement points to the “mystery” of popularity: The popular children are not always

158 And help *Burger King* sell burgers and other stuff by attracting people.
159 I could not manage to take about 50-60 children alone to town…
regarded as nice and sympathetic by the others, indicating that mechanisms other than that of having an extraordinarily likeable personality are important. However, Mitha’s assertion also reveals how peer pressure works in the establishment of children’s groupings, to be echoed by Marit below.

Marit does not have two extra cards for her best friends Nina and Ida, and feels bad about it. Mitha says “now we are in trouble, now Nina will be mad!” In addition, Marit says quietly “I only thought about myself”. These dialogues and concerns reveal the power relations and unspoken expectations in these friendship circles: Friends and significant others not physically present are still “present” and influence behaviour, as on the shopping trip. These girls feel obliged to bring something back to their absent friends, and because they have not got enough cards with autographs, they gather balloons instead. This points to the recognised phenomenon that the exchange of material items work to both establish and preserve friendship, described so aptly by Mauss on the functions of gifts (Mauss 1966). In giving something, the recipient feels obliged to accept and later return the exchange. This creates ties of belonging in that mutual feelings of reciprocity and obligation bind the giver and recipient together, which is central to adult friendship relations. The girls also buy caps and get them autographed, and seem to feel very kul walking up Oslo’s main street, arm in arm with their heads thrown back. The donning of an Idol cap makes them think of themselves as kul and important. In addition, the items gathered contribute to the experience of group solidarity of these girls, at least for a couple of days. The Idol items build and maintain friendship relations among both the girls who went on the trip and those who receive gifts on their return.

On our way back to Østli I understand that they very much want to wear these caps to school the next day. I forbid it, despite knowing that Mitha and Farou will receive positive attention and admiration if they do. As mentioned many times, they aspire very much to a position among the popular girls of Nina, Marit and Ida. Particularly as Nina and Ida had not gone to the Idol gathering, this is a chance for Mitha and Farou to elevate their position. Nevertheless, because I felt I had already been discriminatory by taking only four of the children, I had to make a deal about toning the event down. My dilemma points to the ethical considerations in long-term
fieldwork with children, namely the difficulty of not favouring those people most available for knowledge construction.

Another characteristic in friendship relations is the issue of “parroting” or copying one another, which is considered unacceptable for all but the closest of friends, as mentioned earlier. The girls prioritise “having their own style” or “wanting to be me”, which implies not buying identical clothes. Conversely, best friends may wear the same sweaters and colours as a symbol of close friendship. They may look like “twins” so to speak. Synne and Solveig thus wear identical homemade red knitted caps as a symbol of their best friend relationship. This phenomenon is not widespread among the girls I got to know, but is expressed every now and again in connection with other items shared among friends, for instance pencil cases, hair bands, dolls, caps and the like. In other words, material items work to establish and manifest friendship relations in that the possession of similar material items signals close friendship in much the same manner described by James: “Being friends must not only be experienced but be seen to be experienced” (James 1993:215, emphasis added).

As a consequence it is highly irritating and almost offensive if unwanted girls copy items in an effort to make friends (see also Farou’s birthday party in the next chapter). In most cases it is discussed among the girls as something very stupid which definitely does not result in one being given an elevated position. I repeat what the girls in the 7th grade expressed in Chapter 7:

Bennie: If I see that somebody else has a sweater that is very nice, I cannot buy the same, because it is no fun if you don’t have your own style.
Vilde: It really isn’t just about clothes, it’s a bit like this, that you may become a bit more popular if you try out different clothes which none of the others have and things like that. But it really depends more on your personality. If you just say “I don’t know” and “I don’t know” and just follow us when we do something, that’s not ok.
Bennie: But if you are out shopping on Saturday, and then buy a sweater, and become ill and stay away from school the whole week, and I buy the same sweater while you are away, then I am not imitating you…
Vilde: No, but that doesn’t matter, because I know you have your own personality, ok?

Vilde points to the importance of individual agency in the quest for friendships and popularity: “If you just say “I don’t know” and “I don’t know” and just follow us when we do something, that’s not ok.” It is attractive to express independent opinions and take some initiative, not to just conform to and follow the others. This
leads to the last characteristic in children’s friendship relations to be discussed here, namely the reciprocity aspect referred to above.

Friendship reciprocity implies that the relationship must continuously be confirmed and reaffirmed through interaction (James 1993, Broch 1992, Hey 1997) and the exchange of small gifts. According to James, this explains why friends emphasise their "similarity" by liking the same clothes, food, music and the like, which again work to undermine potential differences between them. These differences are also minimalised if their family background and childhood experiences have resulted in personal experiential structures that resonate with each other. This results in the girls (and boys) sharing some common ideas for peer relationships and doing girl (and boy) which may result in similar behaviours in the same social contexts. Sharing not only the same interests, such as football and dance, but also clothes from the same stores are examples of this. Solveig and Synne share an interest in pets and animals of all kinds, Mona and Toril share an interest in football and sports, Nina, Marit and Ida share an interest in sports and everything understood as kul or not childish/childlike. As such, girls in the same friendship circles can often be said to be sharing similar notions for gender construction. This issue and that of “sameness” are elaborated in the following discussion of the different femininities found to exist in the girls’ interactions and construction of gender.

“Birds of a feather flock together”

**Different femininities**

In Chapter 4 I described seven stable girl dyads or best friend groups at Østli (A,B,C,D,E,F,G) with variable associates. Group E, Inga and Clara, is the only dyad with a mixed socio-cultural background, and groups F (Miriam and Sasha) and G (Aila and Sumitra) are the only ones of non-western origin. Based on this, the proverb *Birds of a feather flock together* (Like barn leker best) seems to be relevant in friendship relations in this study, regarding both cultural background and general interests. This also influences the construction of femininities in that a similar class and socio-cultural background may be seen to inspire similar gender constructions, as discussed in Chapter 8. This seems to be the case among the girls in this study. Gullestad writes about the importance of “fitting together” (*passe sammen*) for
Norwegians making friends (Gullestad 1989:110). In the following section I will outline in what ways girls in the same friendship circle may be understood to share cultural notions of doing girl, in the hierarchical order, by referring to the femininity “continuum” of “girl-child” and “teenager-girl” presented in Chapter 6.

Contrary to what is proposed by some studies (for instance in Bukatko & Daehler 1998, James 1993), the friendship circles of the girls in my study have been remarkably stable from the 4th through the 6th grade. This does not mean they are free from conflict. On the contrary, the stakes are high in conflicts among the most powerful, such as Nina, Marit and Ida, and are felt among the other children of both sexes. Mona says “they quarrel with everybody, even each other”. They argue, among other things, about which activities to engage in during breaks and who is to be included in their group in different situations and the like. As shown, Ida improves her position during the 5th grade, from being loosely associated in the 4th to being more firmly involved in the 5th grade. However, as her attachment to them is tenuous, continuous negotiations are held regarding what to do during the breaks at school, what to do after school and who should be allowed to play with them. These discussions are often centred around Oda, Ellen, Christel, Mitha and Farou, later Mona, Toril and Trine from the other class. Hey interprets these interactions as “social dramas”:

What appears to be at stake in these detailed (and apparently trivial) social dramas of intimacy are deeper meanings about belonging and striving for power and social prestige involving inevitable tensions over those girls deemed most popular (Hey 1997:62).

All the above mentioned girls aspire to playing with the popular girls, and Oda, Mitha and Farou are the girls who most often exhibit disappointment and anger at not being included. The others just withdraw in silence.

In the discussions in the preceding chapters of Nina’s and the other two popular girls’ bodily representations and behaviour, I have interpreted their femininities to be more teenager-girl like than girl-child like. They can act sweet, nice and childish when relating to parents and teachers, but their dominant femininity subject position is that of being kul, including elements of the berte, the soss, and the sporty. They all

160 Gullestad also argues that “equality” in the Norwegian context is usually understood as “sameness” which is why I use this term and not “conformity” (Gullestad 1989).
have parents who encourage and practice sports, who all had sporting careers in their youth (handball, swimming, football). In addition, the girls’ families are financially privileged and of Norwegian origin, which in sum means the three popular girls share some important background and family experiences.

This last interpretation is relevant for the dyad of Oda and Ellen as well, who are associates to Nina’s inner circle. Oda particularly wants to be a part of group A, but in spite of many fashionable clothes and having come out as a girlfriend, which is an asset in achieving popularity (to be described in Chapter 12), she is only occasionally included.

The best friend dyads of Mona and Toril – and particularly of Solveig and Synne, are of a different quality than that of group A, in that the levels of conflict are extremely low and gender identification is different. Their friendships are very stable, emotional and exclusive in that the two are emotionally dependent on each other and feel rather “lost” without their best friend. In other words, assurance and dependency are important characteristics in girls’ best friend relations or understanding of friendship. In Norwegian society, preoccupied as it is with raising independent children (Hennum 2002, Sørhaug 1995), young girls are discouraged from making very best friends in kindergartens and schools. This is because this relationship fosters dependence and exclusiveness rather than independence and feelings of solidarity. These four girls, however, needed the assurance of a best friend, and the girls shared other characteristics or interests as well. Solveig and Synne are quiet and modest and do not seem interested in being with the kul group. They have created their own sphere of belonging. Their primary interests are animals and soft toys, but not fashionable clothes or other things defined as kul by group A, except perhaps Bratz dolls. They enjoy playing with these, which illustrates the impossibility of precise demarcations between subject positions and the material items used in their construction. Synne and Solveig are not classified as kul and do not position themselves as such in spite of being interested in the Bratz doll world. For instance, Solveig’s primary interests may be read in the following drawing, with its child-like motive, which she produced when asked to depict something she had enjoyed doing the previous weekend:
It shows a cat family with “parents” and kittens. Solveig loves cats very much and talks a lot about the cats she knows in the neighbourhood. She is not permitted to own a cat of her own, but has a guinea pig. Synne made a similar drawing to Solveig’s and also talks a lot about cats and dogs. Their similar drawings again point to the phenomenon that best friends can copy each other, just as Marit and Nina did in their skiing drawings in Chapter 5. The manner in which Solveig and Synne position themselves towards each other, peers and adults are ultimate examples of girl-child femininities. They live in their own little world, a far cry from the kul, Idol and football which they do not find interesting and do not participate in (see also Chapter 5 & 6 & 9). This also concerns the dyad of Inga, of Norwegian background, and Clara, who is of Asian origin. They do not mix much with the others and are not teenage-oriented, but are keen on reading books about animals and biological adventures.

The dyad of Mona and Toril is not as exclusive as the one of Synne and Solveig just described, as they are very active and sporty and engage in all kinds of sports activities with both the girls and boys outlined in the preceding chapters. The femininities they negotiate are nice and sporty, with teenage-like inspiration being increasingly represented through their classmate and associate Trine, who aspires to be kul, dresses in a mix of nice and teenage-inspired clothes but has not (yet) become included in the popular group. In other words, these girls are more girl-
child-like than the girls in group A. As such, Mona and Toril may be read as “birds of a feather who flock together”, just as the other circles described.

I interpret the associates to the mentioned dyads or circles to share their ways of doing girl to some extent. This is particularly true of Trine, Christel, Samira, Mitha and Farou regarding group A. This has implications as to how Mitha and Farou, of non-western backgrounds, experience belonging in the peer group, to which I will return soon.

As discussed in Chapter 8, the femininities of group F consisting of Sumitra, Aila (and later Elizabeth) serve as a contrast to those of Norwegian origin. They mostly dress in shalwar khamis and long dresses or skirts, including hijabs, but Sumitra in particular combines the traditional Iraqi with western jeans. It appeared that the difference between Sumitra and Aila in this regard concerns the attitude at home to western clothes, where Aila is not permitted to wear jeans. Although she herself says it is her own decision:

Mari (to Aila): And you always wear Iraqi clothes. Do you have to do that, or is it something you want to do yourself?
Aila: I want to.

I suggest Aila has internalised the Iraqi perception of suitable clothes for her age and gender and is inspired by that in her way of doing girl. However, she also knows perfectly well the ways of doing girl most common in the Norwegian society, since she has lived in Norway all her life. This is indicated in the conversation below when I ask the girls how they would spend five hundred kroner, given the chance to spend it as they wish:

Elizabeth: I would buy a pair of trousers and a sweater, something important anyway. I wouldn’t waste it on sweets and suchlike, that don’t last for long.
Mari: No. What about you then, Sumitra?
Sumitra: I would give them to Mummy. And then I would get them back later.
Mari: And you, Aila?
Aila: I would have bought a pair of trousers (says this a bit ashamed).
Mari: An ordinary pair of trousers or trousers like the ones you are wearing now (a thin, wide, cotton Iraqi one).
Aila: Ordinary.
Mari: Just an ordinary pair of jeans?
(She nods).
Mari: Is it that you want to wear jeans but are not allowed?
Aila: Yes, but….
Mari: You don’t have one?
(She nods).
Aila wants to wear jeans but does not own any, which indicates a possible identification with Norwegian and western femininities. If she had the money, she would buy a pair of jeans. But it is also possible that she would feel uncomfortable in a pair of jeans, in view of the disapproval of her family. Along with a tight budget, a pair of jeans may is not a priority in their family, so Aila wears Iraqi clothes. However, the conversation shows her identification with both Iraqi and Norwegian understandings of femininities which to some extent stand in opposition to one another. As such, she is in tandem with Sumitra; they are “birds of a feather who flock together”. However, as shown in Chapter 8, Sumitra combines the femininities of being a good Muslim girl and a girl-child of Norwegian origin by wearing a long blouse over her jeans (which are not classified as kul but “nice”). Aila and Sumitra’s experiential spaces of family are not identical; this has consequences as to which femininities they are inspired to perform. This again may have implications for their belonging and integration into Norwegian society, to be discussed in the next chapter. Elizabeth’s situation is different in that her family wants integration in the Norwegian society but lacks the financial capacity at the time of the fieldwork. Before returning to the theme of integration, I will first continue with a discussion of the relationship between friendship and geographical and social proximity.

Proximity

James asserts that friendships among young children are often pragmatically inspired either by the proximity of their homes and/or by their families (particularly their mothers) being friends. The postulation is supported by girls in my research. Nina, Marit and Mitha live in the same neighbourhood, but Mitha closer to Nina than Marit. Ida and Farou live further off, which makes it easier for Mitha, Nina and Marit to frequent each other after school without needing to making arrangements beforehand. Usually Mitha walks with Nina and Marit to school and thus experiences feelings of belonging with these girls, which probably results in her aspiring to permanent inclusion. Instead she experiences inclusion and exclusion from one day to the next, making her insecure and often frustrated about friendship (more on this in Chapter 11).
In general, girls and boys living close to one another tend to socialise more than others out of school. This is particularly so among children of the opposite sex and of different ages, whose friendships are difficult to show in school settings for fear of being teased (see also Thorne 1993, Hey 1997, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005). The peer norms of gender segregation and junior heterosexuality become hindrances for showing their friendship in school but not so much in the neighbourhood. The fact that proximity in general inspires friendship is not news to teachers, who place children they want to associate together on the same desk or beside each other in class. Conversely, they split children who are considered to be too dependent on each other or who need to sit apart for other reasons, such as disturbing the teaching.

This means that the organisation of children in space and proximity influences friendship relations. That helped Aila and Sumitra to become friends; they live in the same street. In addition to their both being of Asian and Muslim background, they are neighbours and do not attend any organised paid activities. In sum, these combinations mean they associate at school. They cannot participate in the football discussions of the girls who play organised football. Later, Elizabeth moves into the area and becomes close friends primarily with Sumitra both at school and at home. As such, street life seems to inspire friendship in other settings too, which may secure these children a sense of belonging to a peer group.

It is possible that since the families of Oda and Ellen socialise, this has inspired and strengthened their best friend relationship. However, this is not so in the case of Solveig and Nina, who do not mingle much despite their families being friends and going on family trips together. Their personalities and interests probably differ too much. The “children are friends because their mothers are friends” issue is better illustrated by a case at Vestdal, as an explanation as to why Aleksandra and Geir spend so much time together also at school. It also explains why Aleksandra sometimes stays with Helena when her parents are away. Aleksandra’s mother is a friend of both Geir and Helena’s mother, which in Aleksandra’s case means she spends more time with these children than with others, for practical reasons. It is of course impossible to know whether she would have done the same without her mother’s relationships, but it definitely influences Aleksandra’s choice of friends. As
such, parents may inspire and influence their children in making friends with children (or parents) of their own taste, but more often than not the children’s opinion has the last say, as in the case of Nina and Solveig.

The issue of parental sociality influencing children’s friendships should not be underestimated in the opposite direction either, namely that parents start to socialise as a result of their children being friends. The role and attitude of families for girls’ and boys’ experiences of belonging to a person or group is thus important, and also shows itself in the relationships between children of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Of the families I got to know at Østli, many families of Norwegian origin in the area socialise with each other, but not with families of non-western backgrounds. Instead, some of the latter socialise with other families from their homeland or live quite an isolated life. The family’s social network thus becomes an asset or hindrance for their children’s chances of belonging and integrating into society at large.

As shown, the different friendship circles vary in popularity and thus power. The girls in group A (at Østli) are the most popular and attractive for many children, girls and boys alike. As frequently mentioned, they all belong to financially privileged families. Of the children with non-western backgrounds living in non-privileged families, Mitha and Farou are the girls who continuously try to make friends with the popular group. It is thus worth exploring the mechanisms behind popularity because of the power implied, which has consequences as to which values and interests the dominant peer culture consists of. Therefore, the rest of this chapter focuses primarily on Mitha and Farou’s efforts to belong to the popular group, to be continued in the light of integration in the next chapter.

**The “mystery” of popularity**

Early on in the fieldwork, the theme of popularity popped up in conversation with the girls, such as when Farou told me about her bicycle needing repair (see below). Popularity is an issue that permeates the lives of the girls in different ways and is not an easy phenomenon to understand. Reay reflects on this phenomenon among the children in the classes she studied: ”The complex issues as to why these two boys
were popular when their masculinities did not fit the dominant one within the male peer group are beyond the brief of this article” , she comments (Reay 2001: 157). In general, parents and educators have looked for ways to support children struggling for friendship and popularity. There exists no recipe for “how to become popular”, which is why I have chosen “the mystery of popularity” as the title here. However, as indicated previously, popularity is related to power and personal capital. Simmons argues that being popular is “no walk in the park” in that maintaining popular status is hard work, consisting of competition and insecurity, even a feeling of “losing oneself” (Simmons 2002:173).

The following dialogue between Farou and I provides some clues as to how the girls (and boys?) experience popularity. The conversation takes place in January 2005 while seated in a café at one of the big shopping malls near Østli. Farou is soon to be twelve years old.

Farou: At my old school I was teased because I had such an old bicycle, which I didn’t want to get rid of. It was yellow and it had a basket in front, and the most popular kids, they always had such big, tall bicycles…with 21 gears and such, and I only had the silly old childish bicycle with three gears!

Mari: But do you mean that in order to be popular you must possess many kinds of things?

Farou: Yes, when you are popular there are in fact people who (admire you and) look up to you, or think they are cool and don’t want to do anything other than what they do, and then, if you think about clothes, then they would probably not go and buy them at a jumble sale.

Mari: So you don’t think so? Where do you think they would buy their clothes then?

Farou: Definitely in such expensive stores like BikBok, everybody has started to wear such pullovers (she points at her own red hooded, fleece sweater with FEVER decorated on the chest).

Mari: Yes, you have bought this at BikBok…

Farou: Yes, and then I thought they were so expensive, because they cost a little more than 300 kroner, and then I just wanted to look around a bit, because sometimes they have some things at reduced prices, and then I found this, and then I bought it, and it is quite comfortable to wear (her tone of voice indicates that fashion clothes are not always comfortable….)

Mari: But it is your opinion that you cannot become popular if you don’t have some things, like clothes and…

Farou: You only become popular because people think you have cool clothes and such. Mona, she is popular because she is good at football.

Mari: But she has cool clothes and such?

Farou: For the most part, yes. She always wears, almost every day she wears something from BikBok or such shops.

Mari: But what is needed in order to become popular, do you think? Do you think you can explain that to me?

Farou: In our school?

Mari: Yes.
Farou: It depends. Solveig and Synne, they don’t care much about being popular, maybe Solveig a little, but Synne doesn’t bother at all. And then it happens that we are sometimes divided into gangs, the sports gang, horse gang, such things…
Mari: Yes. The sports gang…who is this gang?
Farou: The ones who play football.
Mari: Ok. That’s mostly the popular pupils, isn’t it?
Farou: I cannot say that I am popular, for I don’t know.

Thus according to Farou, it is necessary to have something (economic capital: material objects) or to master an activity (cultural capital: personal characteristics) the others admire or want if you are to become popular. She points to the popular children having expensive bicycles with many gears, clothes from expensive shops, or being good at activities such as football. Moreover, it can be deduced from previous conversations and particularly from the conversation cited above (“there are in fact people who admire you and look up to you”), Farou and the other girls consider it an asset to be good-looking and to have long hair and a slim body because that is where the focus is in soap operas, the girls’ magazines, and advertisements, to mention but a few (see also Hey 1997, Adler & Adler 1998, Thorne 1993). Nina is considered pretty and good-looking, making “all the boys flirt with her”, as Mitha puts it. Marit is also pretty and possesses the right things, such as clothes from JC. Ida is also pretty, although small and naturally thin, but with fashionable clothes. Her biggest asset is probably her talent as a dancer, which is an activity of great prestige. She travels abroad and participates in international dancing contests and does very well. Mona is a talented football player, is pretty and has increased her position and popularity during the period I have known them. The above-mentioned girls are also academically gifted. Thorne confirms the importance of appearance for popularity:

After a few days of observing, I had figured out that Kathryn was the most popular girl in the classroom. Her cute face, stylish curly brown hair, nice clothes, and general poise and friendliness were easy to notice, and she received a lot of deference from both girls and boys. Miss Bailey often chose Kathryn to run errands to the main office or to do other tasks that marked out favored students. After a few weeks at Oceanside, I realized that my fieldnotes were obsessed with documenting Kathryn’s popularity. “The rich get richer” I thought to myself as I sorted out yet another occasion when Kathryn got extra attention and resources (Thorne 1993:24).

In addition to looking nice, Thorne points to two other important features concerning popular children. She argues that popularity also affects the way adults relate to them and that friendliness may be an aspect of popularity. In other words, personality matters. At Østli it is often one of the popular girls who is asked to run
errands, or who is picked by her classmates to go with them, but this may also be because they are so quick to express a willingness to do so. That does not mean that they are friendlier than other children, but that they have some strength or resources the other children do not possess. For one of the enigmas of popularity is precisely the impression that popular girls and boys need not be particularly agreeable, they can even be hostile and manipulative (Allan 2005, Simmons 2002). Remember Mitha’s statement concerning Nina at the Idol event: “She has never been nice to me, Samira shall have mine! (cards)” This point to the issue of power, that popularity is associated with having power in the peer group.

Farou’s assertions on important popularity characteristics resonate well with those emphasised by Adler and Adler (1998). In addition, they also distinguish between different popularity factors among the sexes. This is not prevalent among the children in my study. Although the popularity factors overlap to some extent in Adlers and Adlers’ research, they work differently on the girls’ and boys’ social position hierarchy. For boys, the Adlers found that athletic ability was the most decisive factor for popularity, which corresponds to the situation of the boys in my study. Morten, the long lasting boyfriend of Nina, is good at skiing and football, and has a keen interest in all sports. (Remember his role in the cliff jumping in the sub-context of particular play in Chapter 9). One of his best friends is Yaran, of Asian background, who has a privileged family. He is also a good football player and is popular among the children. In addition to athletic ability, Morten is also knowledgeable about kul things and events, such as “in” brands or pop stars, which further boosts his popularity. In addition, his relationship with Nina improved his position, as having a girlfriend does in itself, but particularly when this girlfriend is the most popular girl (see Chapter 12, also Adler & Adler 1998). He also wears clothes that qualify him as kul (enough), although expensive brands did not seem to be as evident among the boys at Østli as among the girls.

The reverse is the case at Vestdal, where the boys I got to know wear more expensive brands than the girls, and demonstrate more competence in “brand” matters than the girls. Still, the boys wearing the most expensive clothes are not the most popular in the class, which would indicate that having the right clothes and
possessions don’t guarantee “a place in the sun” among the popular and that other assets are also important. The social position of three girls of Norwegian origin at Østli (Trine, Oda and partly Anne) also confirms this; they have “nice” and sometimes *kul* clothes of expensive brands, but do not form the core of the popular group. One of the most popular boys at Vestdal, Geir, has an including, engaging and lively personality, and always has a witty comment to hand, but may wear outdated clothes handed down from older siblings. The other popular boy at Vestdal had a combination of “correct” clothes and an attractive personality. The phenomenon of personality is what is alluded to in the phrase “the mystery of popularity”, because what is understood to be an “attractive” personality is so difficult to grasp or construct.

In contrast to the analysis made in my study, Adler and Adler do not find that cool ways of doing girl have motivational force among the girls in their material, but that coolness was true of the boys. However, Adler and Adler’s interpretation of cool, apart from the gender bias, corresponds well with the understanding in my research. Being cool involves skill in the presentation of self, involving material items such as clothes, as a 6th grade teacher in the study of Adler and Adler argues in the extract at the introduction of this chapter (Adler & Adler 1998). The teacher emphasises points also made in my analysis in Chapter 8 and subsequent chapters.

It is worth remembering that being cool is a social construction whose definition is ambivalent, fluid and malleable and thus understood somewhat differently by the different genders. In Norway the use of the term cool has exploded during the last decade. Today, it is a term associated with youth culture, but is increasingly used by older generations as well. I return to further interpretations of the cool in Chapter 13.

Now it is possible to visualize the girls understanding of popularity as consisting of the following elements or associations:

161 This may have many explanations, but one supports the assumption made in Chapter 8, that “cool” in the beginning was a gendered concept associated with boys. Another may be that the use of the term “cool” has increased since the Adler and Adler did their research. In Norway its use has exploded during the last decade. However, the research done by Renold and Allan in the UK also seem to show that “cool” is primarily used to refer to boys (Renold 2005, Allan 2007).
As is shown, this understanding overlaps with their understanding of coolness envisaged in Chapter 8, and I will return to some of the elements in later chapters, for instance the issues of being “good-looking”, having a “slim body” and “going out with” someone in Chapter 12.

In the conversation above, Farou points to another important phenomenon regarding friendship and popularity, namely that the interest and preoccupation with the issue is not shared by all the girls. In saying this, Farou’s experience-near understanding echoes my analytical conceptualization of gender difference, namely that girls’ way of doing girl varies. Solveig and Synne’s girl-child variants and Sumitra and Aila’s Iraqi femininities differ the most from the up-and-coming hegemonic teenager-girl femininities. The former do not “care much about being popular” Farou says. This also applies to other non-western friendship circles and the culturally mixed friendship circle of Inga and Clara. They do not play football and are interested in natural phenomena and animals. In other words, the culture of the teenager-girl and the cool is not aspired by all the ten year-old girls. The “let’s not bother to be kul girls” (my formulation, not theirs) have found and accepted their place in the peer hierarchy, to which I will return to below.


**Popularity and peer power**

To echo Chapter 8, peer power is understood as a force residing in the relationships between children forming these relationships after the taste or view defined by a child or group of children. Peer power implies the possibility to define the world view of the peer group and is often symbolic (Bourdieu 1996). This has implications for the peer norms discussed previously, because the leaders of the popular group have influence on the definition of these norms. Farou elucidates this when she jokingly says to Nina and I: “Nina always wears such nice clothes! Doing so makes me experience “buying pressure!” Nina must give me some medicine against this pressure!” (see Storm-Mathisen 1998). Even though Farou says this in a joking way, her experience and utterance point to the core of peer power. The leading girls thus have the potential to change the quality of the interactions in some of the social contexts to be discussed concerning romance and “going out” (dating) practices in Chapter 12. The following quote from Adler and Adler is also illustrative of these issues and may be read to be supported by Farou and most of the girls:

The norms of popular appearance included designer clothing, such as Calvin Klein, Gap, Banana Republic and J.Crew. In the upper grades, makeup was used as a status symbol, but as Eder and Sanford (1986) note, wearing too much makeup could inhibit a girl’s social mobility since other members of the group were highly critical of this practice. Finally, girls who were deemed pretty by society’s socially constructed standards were attractive to boys and had a much greater probability of being popular (Adler & Adler 1998:50, emphasis added). (Mari: The brand names are different in the Norwegian setting 2004).

As previously shown, the popular group of Nina, Marit and Ida has defined where fashionable/kul clothes for their age group are to be bought, and are greatly influenced by the girls a year and more older (see Chapter 8). It is interesting to note that the study made by Eder and Sanford (1986) also finds influential peer norms as to the “proper look” for securing social inclusion. For instance, make-up is not the norm among the girls on either field sites in the 4th to 6th grade. The 7th grade girls at Vestdal emphasise the importance of sticking to the norms as regards when to start wearing make-up at their school:

Mari: I observe that there at not many wearing make-up here…
Jeanette: And if they are, they probably don’t have much on…
Janne: It is a bit too early, we are a bit – it’s not very “in” at our school, you get a bit “set aside” (satt ut) if you start wearing make-up. It becomes a bit like “she uses make-up” sort of.
Mari: So you kind of get teased the other way around?
Janne: Not really teased, it’s more like we talk about that person using make-up.
Jeanette: It kind of gets – “Wow – she uses make-up as well!” And it’s there for everyone to see.

Again, the power to define the acceptable behaviour limits as twelve to thirteen year-old girls lies with the leaders of the popular group and is the core of peer power, changes in norms and peer culture. If the most popular girls started wearing make-up, string briefs or sexy teenage clothes, this could spread to the peer culture in general. In a similar vein, if marketing agencies have influential children on their side, their sales would probably rise. Besides fashion clothes in general, Nina, Marit and Ida do not fancy these things even in the 6th and the 7th grade, but the girls a year older in the same school do in the 7th grade. I return to the issue of peer norms in Chapter 12.

Together with Mona and Toril they have also decided that the most attractive activity after school is dancing, skiing and particularly football. As a result, most of the girls from Norwegian backgrounds do play football, and the ones who do not experience a degree of marginalisation and pressure to join, as in the cases of Synne, Solveig, Christel, Inga, Mitha and Farou (in the 4th grade). As described in Chapter 5, the most popular activity at Vestdal is dancing, which most girls do. The pressure to attend was expressed by Karin’s observation concerning Mina – the only one not dancing: “She will definitely soon start as well!” The influence of peer pressure includes ordinary activities as well, and I am struck by how it works without words; that is, as tacit knowledge.

As shown in Chapter 9, on one of the outdoor school days in the woods by the lavvo, many children were playing hide and seek or were building huts when suddenly Nina’s group found some blue rope and decided to play Indians. They borrowed knives from the teachers and started to whittle arrows and make bows. It didn’t take long before playing Indians was the dominant activity, and it didn’t take long before the game was over, once Nina’s group stopped playing. The incident points to the influence this group has, but also suggests how creativity might be an element in the “mystery” of popularity: The popular children initiate activities experienced as fun by the other children and are therefore attractive to be with. This was also the case with the shopping trip in Chapter 7. These were the first girls in the 5th grade that seriously planned to go shopping alone without adults. This was something they
identified with growing-up and distancing themselves from the world of children. Going shopping alone was something they had negotiated for at home, and which became a reality in late January 2003. The trip was talked about not just before but particularly after it had taken place, and they wore the clothes they had bought to school the following day. Soon other girls started to talk and plan to go shopping as well, and the next ones out were Christel and Mitha. As already described, I then accompanied Mitha, Farou and Samira. Although the days after the first trip were full of shopping plans among most of the girls, the practice did not spread much further. It was still the case that most girls were not permitted to go shopping alone; this did not change until the 7th grade, when shopping with friends, as opposed to parents, became the norm for most girls.

The working of peer power and pressure is thus often of a non-verbal or symbolic kind that directly relates to the peer hierarchy. It seems tacitly accepted by the girls and boys that particularly Nina, Marit, Ida and later Mona are the most popular girls. Their influence is exerted in various ways. One is by just a comment. On one school day in the woods, Trine brings along her CD walkman and listens to music by headphones. She is listening to Christina Aguilera, who is one of her favourites. Nina comes over and asks what music she is listening to. Trine answers “Christina Aguilera”. Nina responds by exclaiming: “Do you think she is good?? I don’t!” Trine is offended and answers sulkily and quiet: “But I do” and walks away.

As mentioned earlier, in the game of skipping it is the rule rather than the exception that Nina is the boss over the rope she is skipping at; Mona is boss of the rope in her class. Although most girls participate in the skipping, Synne never does during the 5th grade. The domination of these popular girls is felt so strongly by the two shy girls, Synne and Solveig, that they never participate in the skipping when the other three do. Synne jumps with her best friend Solveig if they have a rope, but never with the big crowd. I try to make Synne participate when I swing the rope, and occasionally she acquiesces, but leaves shortly after. Therefore I am very surprised when I observe them at the end of the 5th grade skipping rope with a little crowd of those children who often watch on the line. The leading girls are not there. Synne has found a rope, and is now the boss. It is evident that she enjoys the situation, but then the following scenario arises:
I am swinging the rope together with Sukunda, one of the new girls, from an African background. She often assumes this role because she does not know how to skip yet. Soon many other children arrive and want to skip, among them Nina, Ida and Marit. As just described, Synne is the leader and she lets them all in. But her body language and the expression on her face betray something else. It takes one round of skipping before the leading role is transferred to Nina. Something has happened in the queue or in the skipping so that many are out and Nina stands in front. Shortly after this, Synne and Solveig have left the game and are standing by as observers (again). The episode illustrates how the peer hierarchy and power works in the relationships between the girls, here as tacit knowledge or without words.

Similar power processes work inside the classrooms, for instance during the planning and acting out of special activities connected to a school project on “Egypt”. The two 5th grade classes work together on this. The children are divided into groups with five themes: “Gods”; “Pyramids”; “Everyday life”; “Clothing traditions”; and “Celebrities”. The teachers pick a leader for each group: Nina is to lead the first, Marit the second, Ida the third, Trine the fourth and Anthony is the fifth leader. It is worth noting that the teachers pick the most popular girls as leaders, giving sustenance to the argument made by Thorne that popular children also tend to get sympathy from adults (Thorne 1993). In the above case, these girls also express a strong desire to be leaders, which, of course, may influence the teachers’ choice if other children do not want the “job”. In the following I will describe the proceedings in Nina’s group. This is so because they chose to make a performance connected to the theme of “Clothing traditions” and Marit and Ida’s group eventually joined them in this. They all plan to make wallpaper on “the rich people’s clothes” in addition to a “fashion show”. Not one boy was interested in doing anything with the theme of clothes, and many boys join the “pyramid” group.

In the ensuing weeks a lot of preparation ensues concerning the fashion show and other performances. The planning and the content are entirely created and directed by the children, including which dresses to wear on the “catwalk”. While practising, it is evident that they are inspired by images of popular disco dance, and here Marit and particularly Ida have much competence and instruct the others.
Girls from non-western backgrounds, who do not usually participate much with girls of Norwegian origin, seem to really enjoy the preparations for the show. They plan to use non-western dresses for the show, which seems quite appropriate, given that the theme is Egypt. The girls of Norwegian origin argue about an attractive pink dress that belongs to Oda, and which many of the girls want to wear. The dress ends up with Marit, not with Ellen, despite her being Oda’s best friend. Such incidents are typical elucidations of how peer power works, and the Foucauldian understanding of power as embedded in relations resonates with the above situation (Foucault 1976). The relationship between Marit and Oda shows that the former has a stronger peer position illustrated by her using the dress and not Oda or any of the other girls. Resistance was exerted in the form of protest and negotiations as to who was to wear the pink dress.

When the day of the fashion show arrives, the children are in a state of great anticipation. Nina leads the show, she is the master of ceremonies. She has been selected as such by the other girls and boys. Many girls are to show their dress on the “catwalk”. Mitha starts with an Egyptian belly dance, wearing a short sarong-like skirt and top made of a white sheet. Her tummy does not show despite the dance, but she has a bare shoulder and back. She dances to great approval from the others, and Tommy says loudly with a big smile: “Mitha is the best!!” Then Oda walks hastily across the floor, draped in a white sheet, with red eye shadow and lipgloss. Then it is Miriam’s turn. She is dressed in a white Iraqi dress, she tosses her hair elegantly while moving to and fro across the floor. The next girl is Sukunda, wearing a white dress, also made from a sheet, and her usual hijab, walking very elegantly across the floor. Prithua wears a black, all-in-one dress, and looks like a very experienced model in the way she moves. She too tosses her hair. Even Aila is participating, after much discussion with Marit, who didn’t really want her to. Aila runs rapidly across the catwalk, but has dressed up in a nice Iraqi dress.

The last two performances are of Marit and Ida. They sort of finish it all with extra “style”. Marit wears Oda’s dress after winning the negotiations about it. The dress is pink with a lot of glimmer on the front, and Marit has a green hair band and red lipgloss. She moves very catwalk-like across the floor, turning to every side, with her head thrown back. She has clearly observed models on a catwalk before. The last
The fashion show event, however, has multi-faceted interpretations relating to the issues of peer power, popularity and dominant femininities. First, it was the popular girls who directed and created a fashion show. Although the “fashion” to be shown was not popular fashion, the idea of a fashion show indicates an overall interest in fashion among the creators, namely Nina, Marit and Ida. The Egyptian “fashion” is presented through imitations of popular fashion and fashion shows, in addition to disco and pop culture dance. As such, the whole fashion show may be read as an illustration of the influence popular culture, fashion and teenage identification have on the popular girls’ construction of gender as kul teenager-girls.

The preceding sections have pointed to the strong relationship that exists between friendship, popularity and peer power, which has implications for how girls experience belonging in their peer group. In the next chapter I will continue on these issues and discuss how this concerns the belonging and integration of girls from non-western backgrounds.
Chapter 11: Consumption, belonging and integration

Imagine me opposing to buy what my son wants. If I do, he will become stigmatized, the others will not play with him, I have seen that myself. Once they tried to convince him that “it is only your family that exaggerates about not being able to afford buying things”. 162

The utterance from this mother of Asian origin illustrates how consumption capacity is related to belonging and integration. This is to be discussed in this chapter. Since the 1970’s, Norwegian society has taken in an increasing flow of people from non-western countries, both as refugees and as “ordinary” immigrants. From 1975 onwards, the Norwegian State, followed other European welfare states in restricting immigration (Brochmann, Borchgrevink & Rogstad 2002). In spite of this, the amount of people from non-western backgrounds has increased remarkably all over Norway, but particularly in the biggest cities, such as Oslo. An increasing number of these people live at Østli. In general, they tend to occupy poorly paid jobs and are often found working in restaurants, as cleaners or as taxi drivers, just like many of the parents included in my study. Their capacity for consumption is therefore limited, also because many are engaged in transnational transmittances which may drain the household economy (Lindley 2007, Carling, Erdal, Horst & Wallacher 2007). 163 This chapter discusses and explores the relationship between a household’s financial resources, cultural priorities and girls’ experience of belonging and integration in the Norwegian society.

Closely connected to Farou’s assertion in the last chapter, that having expensive and kul possessions are assets for popularity, is the theme of socioeconomic background. Obviously, it is easier for privileged families to meet children’s demands for consumer goods than for marginalised, insecure and disadvantaged families.

162 The extract is from an interview with an ethnic minority mother living in Sweden, as part of the Nordic project “Consumption and Vulnerability in the Nordic welfare states” (Bonke et al. 2005).
163 Transmittances are of many kinds: money and material items such as cars and white goods. I do not discuss the implications of transmittances because I have no data on the extent of it among the families included in my study. It is a sensitive theme among non-privileged families of non-western origin because it seriously challenges already strained finances. For families applying for official funding, the Norwegian society does not support transmittances (Bonke et al. 2005, Carling et al. 2007).
Research on childhood in low-income families in the UK highlights the difficult relationship between inclusion and financial resources (Ridge 2002, Middleton, S., Ashworth, K., R. Walker 1994). Tess Ridge writes that “Childhood is a social experience in itself, with its own norms and customs, where the costs of inclusion may be great, likewise the cost of exclusion” (Ridge 2002: 59). In this chapter, I discuss in what ways socio-cultural background and the household economy influence friendship processes and girls experience of belonging and being integrated in the Norwegian society. I understand integration to be “participation in the society’s institutions in combination with maintenance of group identity and cultural particularity” (Eriksen & Sørheim 2006:79, my translation). More specifically, integration concerns (possibilities of) participation in the same social arenas as children and adults of Norwegian origin.

Early on in the fieldwork, it is evident that the girls and boys are preoccupied with material living standard and housing practices, a theme that pops up on different occasions. For instance, when I ask Aila and Sumitra where they live, they emphasize that they live in a house (hus), not a flat. Inga spontaneously says she wants to move to a house, the flat they moved to after her parents divorced is too small. Farou says the same, she wants to live in a house, pay no rent and have free electricity! Obviously, financial issues are parts of her experiential space of family and thus discussed in her home. I also overhear Martin asking a boy of non-western origin if he lives in “the high-rise blocks” 164, to which he answers affirmatively. Then Martin tells him that he “lives in a house with a huge terrace, and the price of the house was three million kroner!”

The popular girls at Østli all live in privileged families, and the housing standard, particularly in the case of Nina, is referred to a couple of times in conversations with Farou and Mitha: “Nina’s house has such a huge living room!” Of the children I got to know at Østli, I overheard questions concerning the number of rooms in their flats and houses and comments on housing in general, for instance on walks down to school from the lavvo in the woods. Ivar’s house is cited because it has an indoor swimming pool, something very rare among ordinary Norwegian people. Mitha,

164 “The high-rise blocks” are the highest blocks in the area, filled with small flats only, and known to house low-income families, often with social problems.
who lives in a small flat with her family, sharing a room with siblings, says she wants to move to Sinsen, because “there are so many nice houses there”.

At Vestdal the theme of housing standard is mentioned only once when Marte says that “Ina lives in a terraced house”, implying that most of the others live in villas. Some of the children at Østli even write “my own room” on their wish list for Christmas, because they share a room with a sibling. Sharing rooms with siblings is not an admirable situation and does not inspire children to invite friends home. The “coolest” thing for a house to have is a living room in the basement, where the children and later teenagers can stay without interference from adults. Nina’s mother expressed a desire for this, as this was the only drawback with their present house, even though it had enough rooms and a big living room. In other words, having the financial wherewithal to meet consumer demands from the children and to be able to demonstrate an adequate income is an asset for girls (and boys?) aspiring to a place among the popular. Adler and Adler hold that socioeconomic background was one of the most powerful factors in this regard, particularly among the girls. All the popular girls in their research had upper or upper middle-class backgrounds (Adler & Adler 1998), which, as just mentioned, is the case at Østli as well. But then again it is worth remembering that not all children living in privileged families belong to the popular group, but that the ones who do are from such a background.

**Social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms**

As described in Chapters 4 and 10, the friendship circles among the girls at Østli are distributed among 14 stable best friend dyads, and two of them, that is four of the girls, have non-western background. All in all, the two classes consist of 14 girls of non-western origin, which is exactly 50% of all the girls (a total of 28). This means that 10 girls from non-western and 6 girls from Norwegian backgrounds don’t belong to a stable friendship circle, but associate with the dyads or one another from one situation or day to the next. Of these girls, as I have reiterated previously, it is Mitha and Farou who are constantly trying to associate to the popular group of Nina, Marit and Ida, and who are excluded and included depending on the situation and the mood of these three girls.
One such incident is experienced by Mitha during Art classes. The pupils can choose between two different pictures to copy and then paint. Mitha chooses the same picture as Nina, and the teacher asks her to swap places with Tommy, who is sitting at Nina’s table. When the latter realizes that Mitha is coming over to her place, she sighs “Mitha is coming…” and rolls her eyes at Oda across the table.

A similar event occurs during English lessons when they are told to work together in pairs. Farou utters a wish to be with Nina, as does Mitha. The teacher says Farou can join Nina, who, beaming with joy, moves to Nina’s desk. Nina again rolls her eyes to Marit. However, Farou is ultimately received politely and without fuss. She places herself on top of Nina’s desk and starts a conversation in English (which was the lesson). Mitha is placed with Marit, and seems satisfied.

The third case to be mentioned here has been touched on previously, and happened when the three favourite girls planned to go shopping without adult chaperoning. Mitha wants very much to join them, and overhears the plans while accompanying Nina and Marit to and from school. Still she is not allowed to come “because they can only be three, not four”. Out of school, the exclusion has been most seriously felt by Mitha because she lives closer to them than Farou, and because, according to Mitha, “she and Nina were best friends in the 1st grade”. They have known one another for a longer period of time, as Farou only moved into the area in the 4th grade. She has been testing the relationship with Nina every now and again. The most stable contact they have had involves their mutual interest in the Witch magazines, something that united them in a Witch club, which lasted a couple of weeks (see Chapter 12).

The most conspicuous of the frequent exclusions experienced by Mitha and Farou (at least the ones I know of) is their not being invited to Nina’s birthday party in the 5th grade. According to Mitha, this is because Nina says there is not enough space in their home, which is not very credible: She lives in a big house. Farou, however, says they were not invited because they are brune, in fact no brune were invited. That she actually suggests this being the reason indicates that racial or ethnic discrimination is experienced to some extent by children of non-western backgrounds. The same pattern occurs when Ida arranges a pyjama party a couple of
months later, and also when Ellen invites no brune to her birthday party. When I ask her about her party, her eyes start to wander and she starts to talk about something else before she walks off. The teachers have repeatedly talked to the children about not discriminating or excluding others on the basis of race or skin colour. All the children know that it is strictly forbidden and any racist assaults never go unnoticed either by children or teachers. Therefore the children know that inviting only white-skinned girls and boys to parties is not really acceptable and those that do, such as Nina, Ida and Ellen above, would never say that cultural background is the reason for not inviting certain children. They make other excuses, such as not having enough space or only being allowed to invite a certain number of children and the like.

The school policy and official social inclusion and anti-racist attitudes in Norwegian society in general, probably result in few overt conflicts of a racial nature. Only twice do I experience a serious conflict. The first happens at Hudoy Island when the group of newly-arrived children of non-western origin, Mitha and Trine, are discussing the pupils’ photographing of one another at the beach and in the dormitory. The girls think the boys are “yucky”, and they all agree that Mitha has done a stupid thing by taking photographs of the boys in bed with boxers on. One of the girls says that “Uganda is no good” 165, to which the others agree. The conflict escalates because Mitha accuses Trine of blabbering, of telling them about her taking the photographs. At this accusation, Trine gets angry and marches off, and sulks for many hours. In this conflict, racial and socio-cultural issues are brought to the surface by the insult to Mitha’s country of origin.

The second racial conflict involved one of the leading girls who, after arguing with Aslan and Tommy in the classroom, exclaims that she wishes “some new boys would join their class. But were this to happen, they’d better not be brune! I am so fed up with all the boys of foreign background!” The teacher immediately withdraws the girl from class and later discusses the event with everybody. It ends with the girl saying “sorry”, and the situation returns to normal. As indicated previously, racial or

165 Uganda is Mitha’s country of origin.
ethnic issues were not much present in ordinary everyday activities, but sometimes, though not always, it popped to the surface when controversies arose.

During the fieldwork period, I sense that the relevance of skin colour for friendship and belonging probably has nothing to do with the skin colour as such, as suggested before, but as to how alike or “similar” the child is experienced as being in relevant social contexts, including how they dress. Yaran lives in a privileged family of Asian background and he participates in relevant social contexts for integration, such as birthday parties and football. In addition, he has cool enough clothes, good looks, and attractive possessions, such as a cellular phone and skiing gear. As a result, he is probably experienced as more “similar” to children of Norwegian origin than the other boys of non-western origin; he thus seems more integrated. This is emphasised by him being one of the popular boy Morten’s best friends.

Much effort has been made by Mitha and Farou in their struggle to be included among the popular girls. It is not easy to understand why they do this, why can’t they just be a dyad and create their own little circle inviting others to join? As “birds of a feather” they could “flock together”, but apparently this strategy does not appeal to them. They could also create a stable attachment to one of the other circles, which does not attract them either. In order words, I suggest that the desire for popularity and the images of the kul serve as powerful inspirations, making them choose an offensive strategy rather than withdrawal or isolation. This is the strategy that most of the other girls, irrespective of cultural background, have chosen in relationship to the popular group. They adapt to or withdraw from their dominance, which also includes most of the girls in the other class. The exceptions are Mona, Toril and Trine who occasionally oppose their dominance and argue with them. Nevertheless, the agency of Nina, Marit and Ida is demonstrative of how peer power works: the structuring of a peer hierarchy and culture, with few words and weak overt opposition and resistance. In the next section I discuss the relationship between different forms of capital and position in the peer hierarchy.
“It costs money to be *kul*”

Ragnhild Brusdal points to social processes among children and youth living in less privileged families. She emphasises that social participation often costs money and requires material items of different kinds, for example certain clothes. Children unable to match these demands have a tendency to withdraw or choose an offensive strategy in trying to buy or get hold of the material items needed. This they do with the help of small jobs and sometimes even by using white lies (Brusdal 2004). Often in this study these strategies were present, and the pervading impression is that it costs money to be *kul* and thus popular. When the social setting consists of families of great variations in income, as in the situation at Østli, the financial cost of social inclusion is felt more deeply among less privileged families. Moreover, when the situation is such that the popular and dominant group of girls, who have the power to define what is “in” and attractive, all live in privileged families, the postulation that coolness and inclusion cost money increases in relevance. At Vestdal most families have an income level well above the average, reducing the likelihood that social exclusion is based on finances there.

I will explore the postulation of coolness and price below. The following two tables illustrate the distribution of popular material objects among the children, and serve as a point of reference. 166

---

166 These material items were chosen because I experienced them to be important in their lives.
The most marked difference concerns their having their own room or not. The table shows that 21 out of 23 children of Norwegian and only 13 out of 23 of non-western backgrounds have their own room. The second marked difference concerns having a family PC with internet, and the third concerns winter sports gear. It comes as no surprise that children of Norwegian origin are better equipped for the latter. In addition, gear is offered at variable prices, where expensive brands are the most attractive. It is worth noting that the distribution of cellular phones is modest and shows no marked socio-cultural difference.
When the two tables are compared, similar patterns as described previously are confirmed. The Vestdal children show more affluence: They possess more sports gear, particularly winter sports gear, and 40 out of 43 children have their own room as compared to 34 out of 46 at Østli. It is worth noting, however, that the reverse is true regarding TV sets. More children at Østli than at Vestdal have a TV set in their room (21 out of 46; 11 out of 43). The reason for this discrepancy is not lack of money at Vestdal, but rather suggests different parental attitudes concerning what is “good for children” and is related to the Norwegian ethos of *den gode barndom* (the good childhood). It reflects different family histories and social distinctions. The finding suggests that parents at Vestdal may be more conscious about protecting childhood innocence by restricting information about sex, violence and drugs than parents at Østli, including parents of non-western background. Therefore the Vestdal parents want to have the possibility to control what their children watch on TV. Alternatively, families at Østli may in general watch more TV, creating the need for more than one TV set. In addition, as fewer children have their own room, siblings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have their own room</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own cellular phone</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a TV set in their room</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a family PC with Internet</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own bicycle</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own cross country skis</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own slalom skis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own snowboard</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own slide board</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have their own slide</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 boys</td>
<td>23 girls</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sharing rooms may have a TV set placed there. As such this finding supports the claim made by Thorne (1993), Walkerdine (1997), Renold (2005) and Cherland (2005) and also the vague tendency found in this thesis, namely that middle-class parents are more eager than working-class parents to protect childhood innocence.

As I have already shown, the girls become consumers in their own right in increasing degrees. They express the desire to have their own money, which results in them doing small jobs and asking for pocket money. By explicitly asserting needs and wants that cost money, including what activities to attend after school, they become potentially expensive for the family economy. This is more deeply felt in the non-privileged families of girls aspiring to teenager-girl femininities, than in families with a different family dynamic. The preceding chapters have emphasised that being kul implies an imitation of teenage culture. This means more expenses for the family in that teenagers cost more money than children; teenage style is often more expensive than that of children (Brusdal 2004). The aspiration to begin following teenage style was manifested for the popular girls in their desire to have and buy clothes in more expensive shops than the cheapest chains. Most importantly, the study shows a connection between dominant and hegemonic femininities and the possibility to participate in the consumer culture, which again relates to popularity.

As Mitha and Farou live in marginalised and insecure families they can only afford the kul style to a certain degree, and their parents cannot afford to provide them with expensive sports gear in order to attain prestige in the peer group. Such gear includes expensive bicycles, snowboards and different skis. The importance of having (or doing) the right things even makes some girls lie. Mitha says she owns a snowboard when she in fact brings none when the class goes on a winter tour. Once she also said the family was going on a summer holiday to Cyprus, which never happened. The lies were revealed and thus never became assets in the quest for popularity.

Another example concerns Farou. Last Christmas her greatest wish was for a pair of slalom skis, which she does not get. But she was given the money to buy them. That year was particularly bad for snow, so I suggested not spending the money on skis. It is evident that what matters most is the admiration she hopes to inspire when the others find out she has her own slalom skis. This echoes the conversation concerning the cool or childish bicycles in Farou’s understanding of popularity. The observation
of Mitha and Farou wanting to buy and use impressive material items in order to increase their chances of becoming best friends with the popular group, supports the postulation that “it costs money to be cool”, and that household financial resources have direct implications for children’s position in the peer hierarchy. This again has implications, in particular for children from families with little money (Rysst 2005b, Ridge 2002, Middleton, Ashworth & Walker 1994). This is related to the issues of necessity and post-necessity spending discussed in Chapter 5, and will be continued below.

Needs, wants and bicycles
The circles of children of non-western backgrounds do on the whole live in marginalised, insecure or disadvantaged families. In general they lack fashionable bicycles, winter sports gear and other sports gear necessary for participation in relevant Norwegian social contexts. This lack of material items is more widespread among the girls than the boys. The issue of “need” versus “want” is underlined when children ask for clothes of a particular brandname or sports gear more expensive than the family can afford. It is in these situations that the relationship between cultural priorities and financial resources becomes particularly apparent. The majority of girls are, perhaps out of necessity, identifying with other ways of doing girl than their peers of Norwegian origin. As shown, Sumitra and Aila construct femininities of good Muslim girls; the clothes they wear indicate and remind them of this (see Chapter 8). Their emerging awareness of a general male gaze both inside and outside of the family context, which in their case surely results in increased “covering up” of the body and maybe also restricted activities outside of home, may be understood to work against belonging and integration in the Norwegian society. However, girls of non-western origin who have been to kindergartens and primary schools in Norway have probably internalised similar cultural ideas for play and perhaps gender as girls of Norwegian background. But many of the former share a religious and cultural background imposing constraints on how to socialise in Norwegian society, as the experiences of Sumitra and Aila show. They do not participate in the contexts of paid, organised activities. Sumitra wants to play football and says she is permitted to do so but never turns up. Then she wants to start dancing with Elizabeth at the local youth club, where the lessons are
free. At the end of the fieldwork period, this has still not occurred. Aila says she doesn’t want to attend any activity outside of school, which I have no data to show is not true.

The lack of participation, particularly of girls of Muslim backgrounds in Norwegian social contexts also concerns private arrangements. Few children of non-western origin attend birthday parties or arrange parties on their own birthdays (see also Haguevold 2006). In this Mitha and Farou were exceptions, along with a few others (for instance Samira, Prithua and Elizabeth). In addition, most girls of non-western backgrounds do not attend any activities after school, as observed in Chapter 5. Again, Mitha, Farou, Samira and Elizabeth are exceptions. It is not known among the children in my study if the reasons for not attending birthdays or after-school activities for girls are financial or cultural. But according to Anne-Line Øybø, who has studied Somalian families living in Oslo, the Muslim women in her study say that Islam does not permit any celebrations apart from Id (Øybø 2007). If they are right, allegiance to Islam may be one reason why some Muslim girls at Østli do not attend birthday parties. The variable participation also shows how Islam is practiced differently in different families, permitting Mitha to attend, but not Samira. Of the girls in my study, the families of Asian Muslims practice Islam in a more fundamental way than their African counterparts.

The consequences for the girls who don’t participate in Norwegian activities, such as birthday parties and out of school leisure activities, irrespective of the reasons, are a lack of belonging and integration in Norwegian society. Instead “birds of a feather flock together”; the brun-skinned have their friends among the brun-skinned and thus experience some degree of emotional belonging. But it is a belonging that isolates them from what is going on among their peers in Norwegian socio-cultural contexts. When integration is understood to be participation in the same social arenas or contexts as people of Norwegian origin, this is achieved if children of non-western backgrounds attend activities after school, such as football, dance, handball and birthday parties. It is beyond any doubt that after-school activities create social milieus and belonging for the girls and boys participating and often do so for their families as well (for instance if they come to football matches and other common arrangements). But as shown, which activities it is most important to attend in order
to experience sufficient belonging and integration is a matter which to a large extent is defined by the peer group and influenced by peer pressure. This also concerns what kind of birthday parties are most desirable and sought after. The following description and analysis of such a party highlights the arguments of the last two chapters.

The birthday party

Every child’s birthday on both field sites is celebrated in class by singing a birthday song and placing a candle on the desk of the birthday child. Sometimes cake or icecream is brought from home and distributed. Among the girls I got to know there is always much attention and interest surrounding up-and-coming birthdays if the girl plans to arrange a party. This is always so in the case of the girls of Norwegian origin, but not so for the others. Farou, Prithua, Mitha, Samira and Elizabeth were exceptions. Usually the parties are arranged at home, but discussions concerning doing something “special” were had and increased in importance during the fieldwork period. ”Doing something special” consists of taking a few friends bowling, swimming, to the movies, to McDonalds or the like. When asked to describe the birthday party of their dreams, many girls thus cite these alternatives.

The pressure to do these extraordinary things increases with age, and is a phenomenon reported from other Norwegian settings. Advertising has also increased the relevance of special parties.\textsuperscript{167} Both bowling halls and McDonalds offer “special prices” for birthday arrangements, which in general turns out to be a more expensive alternative than a home birthday. An advertisement from a go-cart centre in Oslo reads: “A birthday full of speed? We arrange birthdays for children!” They offer a full party menu, which includes driving go-carts at two hundred and ten kroner per child, for a maximum of 12 and a minimum of 6 children. The result of this trend is that the really attractive and kul parties are held outside the home, cost more money and are exclusive because neither the whole class nor everyone in the same-sex group are invited because it becomes too expensive. It can therefore be argued that the commercialisation of birthdays negatively affects families with little money. Of the children at Østli, I only heard about Yaran’s birthday being of this kind. He

\textsuperscript{167} http://www.aktivioslo.no/bursdag.php (20.11.07)
invited four girls and four boys from his class to go “Metrobowling” and spend the whole party time there. Such arrangements include food and drink in addition to the activities. As indicated, Yaran is the only child of non-western background (India) who participates fully in all relevant Norwegian arenas. These include fashion, other material items and organized leisure activities. He is the only child of non-western origin who, in everything but skin colour (he is very brun), resembles his (wanting to be kul) peers of Norwegian origin the most regarding general lifestyle and interests.

The phenomena of “out-of-home” birthdays, however, has not taken hold among the girls at Østli during the fieldwork period. But at Vestdal, Karine’s birthday is celebrated at a sweet factory, a new option in the commercialisation of birthdays. In the 6th grade, the girls at Østli start to arrange birthday parties in pairs, if their birthdays fall close. Nina and Ellen did this in the 6th grade, when they hired the local “House of sports” (Idrettshuset) and invited the whole class, but home birthdays were still the most common arrangement in the 5th grade. Erika Ravne Scott, who has studied Norwegian birthday parties for children as a form of ritual because of the continuity in the basic components of how they are arranged, reports that commercialisation of birthdays is increasing (Scott 2008). However, home birthdays are still the norm, and the ideal and most common ingredients are homemade chocolate cake, buns, muffins, fizzy drinks and material decorations like balloons and paper hats (ibid.). As will be shown below, Farou’s birthday party is close to this norm.

Farou is going to be eleven years old in February 2004. Just after Christmas, she announces she is going to celebrate her birthday. Soon the girls wanting to be part of the plans pay her more attention than usual. On her actual birthday, she brings a cake for distribution in class, and Nina helps her serve it. I am not surprised that just Nina has this role. As the most popular girl, Farou has both intended and asked that she do so. It is a common pattern among girls in general to pay more attention to the birthday child when somebody announces birthday party plans. I suggest this is related to both ensuring that one is invited and to exerting some influence on how it is to be arranged. Sometimes the birthday child also asks the popular girls to help with the plans, as with Nina above, and if they agree, the former experiences a
(short?) period of belonging to the popular group. This is true not only of Nina, but also Marit, Ida and Mitha in connection with Farou’s birthday. They are active participants in the birthday plans and accompany her home after school on the day in question in order to help arrange and organise the party “room”.

Farou has invited all the girls in her class, with the exception of three of African background, “because they always make trouble”, she says. I doubt this was the real reason, because the girls are quiet and new arrivals in Norway. It was rather that they are not accepted by the other girls for some unspoken reason, of a likely socio-cultural nature. Symbolic peer power may have been at work, making Farou exclude the girls, just as she herself has been previously.

Who to invite to parties is always a hot issue, so hot that it is debated among the parents at both field sites at their regular meetings at school. The theme explicitly involves social inclusion and exclusion if the policy around parties is that the child invites her “closest friends only”. This practice often results in the same children being invited and excluded to all parties, creating many sad faces every time invitations are handed out. The class atmosphere does not thrive on this practice. Therefore, the policy in many Norwegian school classes is either to invite the whole class, or only the class mates of the same sex as the child. This ensures that no one is excluded (or included) more than the others. “All or same-sex” was the agreed norm at both Østli and Vestdal, but is sometimes violated, as in the case of Farou this time, and in the case of Nina and Ida mentioned earlier. It was also brought to my notice that other girls had ignored this practice by not inviting, in particular, brune girls.

Farou’s party takes place on a cold winter day. It is held in a communal room in the basement of the apartment block at the disposition of all the residents, and not in the flat of Farou’s family. The basement room is used by families needing more space than their own flats allow. The basement holds twenty to thirty people and consists of a long dining table with about twelve seats, a sofa and a coffee table. The room is furnished with decent, but secondhand furniture and the walls are covered with wood panelling. The style of the room is of the Norwegian “cozy” cottage kind
which inspires a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Connected to the room are the tiny kitchen and the entrance hall.

The guests are expected at five o’clock p.m. and soon after five the room is filled with smiling girls. Farou’s mother, her older sister Janine and little brother Sunny are also present. In addition to the girls in her class, Farou has invited two girls from her old school. They are all dressed in clothes picked out beforehand, at least by Nina, Marit, Mitha and Oda, in addition to Farou herself. I had overheard discussions at school concerning what to wear. Farou wears new clothes given as presents from her parents: tight jeans and a pink long-sleeved sweater. Her hair is decorated in an African style, with extensions and a pink hairband. Nina wears black slacks and a short-sleeved, long, red sweater with writing across the chest, her hair tied in a ponytail. Marit wears a skirt above the knees and a yellow short-sleeved t-shirt, and her hair in two ponytails. Mitha, Solveig and Ellen all wear black slacks of the same style as Nina, but with different tops. Mitha resembles Nina, which may be no coincidence, in that she wears a red t-shirt, but on top of a long-sleeved white sweater. Solveig and Ellen wear Adidas sweaters of a sporty style. Oda is wearing a short skirt, this time in denim, high boots, a white blouse, white long tights and a white hairband to match it all. The boots makes her very teenage-like and her appearance at this party points to her strong desire for inclusion in the popular group. None of the girls wear short sweaters exposing midriffs or wear make-up of any kind. Because many of them wear black slacks like Nina’s, I ask if this is the latest fashion. Nina seems a bit annoyed at the question, and answers “I don’t know”. Ellen does the same. Apparently, this was something they did not want to talk about or rather, they did not know what to say. However, the girls’ subject positions in this birthday context are as kul teenager-girls, with elements of the berte and soss and sporty in those femininities.

Soon after the guests have arrived, presents are given and admired: hair accessories, fancy pencils, erasers and money, which has increased its popularity from the 4th to the 5th grade. An unwritten rule is that a maximum of one hundred kroner is used for birthday presents for classmates. Sometimes two girls buy a present together in order to allow for a better quality gift. The girls admire and comment on the gifts which
are put on a little table for all to see, and some honour is acquired by the one giving
the most popular present.

The basement room is decorated with balloons and the dining table with party
paraphernalia, snacks, sweets and soft drinks. This they start to consume shortly
after arriving, when Janine also puts on their private CD player. She is given the job
of being responsible for making sure the music is continuously on. The music
consists of pop hits “which was the only thing they liked”, she says. In short, pop
music plays a central role in creating the desired atmosphere, also while seated at the
dining table. In the days before the party, negotiations regarding seats around the
table have been going on. As discussed in Chapter 9, it is always interesting to see
how children seat themselves when free to choose, in that who sits by whom usually
signals friendship of some degree. It seems attractive and a sign of honour to sit
beside the birthday child, who has her closest friends as close as possible, “closest”
for that day anyway. The least popular girls sit at the opposite end. The girls wish to
sit beside a close friend, and questions such as “Can I sit beside you at your party?”
or “Can I sit beside X at your party?” are to be heard frequently in the days before.

Today Farou, sits at the end of the table, as do most children throwing birthday
parties. There then follows Marit, Nina, Mitha, Oda, Ellen and Solveig with the two
girls from the old school completing the circle. The negotiations have concentrated
on Marit and Mitha both wanting to sit beside Nina, which resulted in Marit sitting
next to Farou. The “in” foods to be served at Norwegian children’s birthdays are hot
dogs, pizzas or hamburgers (Bugge 2005). Farou’s mother has conscientiously made
a “homemade” pizza for the first time in her life. Home-made pizzas are more highly
valued than pizzas bought at the supermarket. Farou repeatedly emphasises that the
pizza is homemade; making sure no one overlooks the fact.

During the meal, the conversation becomes heated regarding conflicts at school with
other girls (and boys), particularly involving those who had not been invited from
their class. They also comment on those girls invited who had not come. Ida has an
acceptable excuse because she has to go to dancing classes, also Synne who is ill and
Christel is visiting her father outside Oslo. However, Samira does not have an
excuse, and the conversation revolves around the girls who are always invited but
never come, even though they say they will come. All of these are of non-western backgrounds. It is worth noting that the recriminations for not coming were directed at the girls themselves, not their families. This suggests that the girls are ignorant of different cultural family histories than their own, they take it for granted that the girls are free to come if they want. This is probably not so; in these matters their agency is influenced by cultural and financial constraints, as discussed above. The girls do not propose that other girls do not come for fear of having to eat food they do not like or are not permitted to eat for cultural/religious reasons. However, the fact that their absence is a theme at all indicates the importance of their coming, should they want to experience belonging and integration with the girls of Norwegian origin and the more integrated girls of non-western backgrounds, such as Mitha and Farou, that is with girls who aspire a Norwegian way of living. Arranging and attending birthday parties can thus be read in the intersection of gender, class and socio-cultural background.

After the pizza and snacks are eaten, the girls decide that they want to have a “dancing competition” which resembles Red light described in Chapter 9. The music is played a bit louder, the girls dance in whatever style they want, and suddenly stop when Janine turns off the music. They move their bodies as in pop videos, wriggling their bottoms and hips. The ones who fail to stand still when the music stops are then out, a new round starts and eventually the winner is the last girl left. They find great amusement in this, and continue for about half an hour until Farou’s mother brings in the cakes.

One cake is a homemade chocolate one and another a small cream cake bought at the bakery, the latter to Solveig’s delight. Again they organise themselves around the table, and talk about the girls who are not there, “who always make trouble”. Romantic affairs and boys do not seem to be a theme, but the interest in friendship circles among the girls is great and evidently always under negotiation and discussion. This points to Simmons’ argument, namely that it is not always easy to be popular, in that the position must be defended continuously (Simmons 2002, see also Hey 1997). However, it is my impression that the social position of Nina and Marit is stable and not much negotiated in the 4th grade and the first half of the 5th,
but becomes so during the 6th when Mona and Trine challenge their positions. I return to this “challenge” in Chapter 12.

The girls are soon well satisfied with cakes, snacks and sweets, and do not quite know what to do next. Knowing their interest in the Idol contest, and having observed the Vestdal children acting it out, I suggest they play Idol. This is met with enthusiasm, and Nina immediately says she wants to be Jan Fredrik, the chief judge. No one protests; they are used to her wanting and taking the leader’s role. Two other “judges” are appointed, and the girls step in one after the other, gyrating their hips and singing a verse of some pop hit. They do this without embarrassment and to the amusement of the observers. When this “game” is over, Farous’ mother seems exhausted, and even though there is half an hour left of the party, it ends there. I drive Nina, Marit and Mitha home. In the car they discuss the party. All in all they have enjoyed themselves, which spells an advantage for Farou in her friendship building.

This leads me to a concluding discussion on how this birthday party highlights the present and previous chapter’s observations on the friendship, popularity, peer power, belonging and integration themes. In addition, it shows how the party is used as an instrument with which to build friendships and hopefully inclusion in the popular group for Farou. The party reflects the desire to satisfy the necessity of a kul party for the purposes of earning admiration, as understood by the popular group and their associates. In other words, I interpret the organisation of the birthday party as an expression of cultural ideas of what counts as kul for these girls. In addition, how the party was arranged shows how Farou is motivated to do this in accordance with the taste of the popular girls. In other words, the party also elucidates how power works in the peer relationships.

**Conclusion: The birthday party as an asset for popularity**

The first characteristic to note is that the party did not take place in their flat. By arranging it in the communal room in the basement, Farou avoids potential comments on the standard of their flat and its furniture, which is not luxurious (enough) to be admired. Her guests would not be impressed by their standard of
living and she chooses to arrange it on neutral territory, so to speak. Farou and her family could not be criticised for how this room was furnished; it is beyond their control. In addition, she does not have a room of her own, which is definitely not admirable. Secondly, the existence of pop music is something Farou knows is important if the party is to be experienced as *kul*, because it creates a teenage-like atmosphere of “non-childishness”. This is further emphasised by the fact that the girls brought with them their favourite pop CD’s, which illustrates how the party has been planned by many beforehand. Thirdly, the menu is illustrative of the desire to do the correct thing with regard to food fashion. Pizza, coca cola, cakes, sweets and snacks are served. The most attractive foods are homemade pizzas and cakes, which Farou’s mother conscientiously has prepared. She has made two pizzas and a chocolate cake but bought a cream cake with marzipan at the bakery. The fact that this was the first time Farou’s mother had made pizza, indicates the importance Farou had attached to it being homemade, which she regularly emphasised during the meal. The buying of the cream cake shows her feelings as to the necessity of this food. It might be said to be a typical Norwegian dish in that the birthdays of most people of Norwegian background include a cream cake (*bløtkake*). It is obvious that Farou very much wanted a birthday party, which appealed to the popular girls of Norwegian origin, and her mother did her best to fulfil their expectations.

Fourthly, how they are dressed also indicates the party’s symbolic importance in the building of friendship and definition of peer norms and culture. What to wear is also something talked about and discussed beforehand, and now wearing trousers instead of dresses or skirts was just as “in” as skirts. This has been teenage style for many years: wearing jeans or trousers at parties. Today Mitha demonstrates elements of the ”parroting” discussed previously, in that her clothes are very similar to what Nina (as the most popular girl) is wearing. In contrast, kindergarten girls usually love to put on their “nicest” dresses when going to birthday parties (note again “nice” (*fin*) instead of *kul*). The last “in” phenomena among kindergarten girls in Norway are all kinds of princess imitations. The shops have plenty of that on offer.

In sum, the cultural understandings of a *kul* birthday party for ten/eleven year-old girls thus include the following elements: It preferably takes place in a big house and in a room decorated with balloons and other objects perceived as non-childish, that
is to say no paper hats. The girls are dressed in teenage-inspired clothes, such as jeans, trousers or skirts, not pretty princess-like dresses. Pop music is played in the background. Food, such as homemade pizza and cakes, coca cola, snacks and sweets covers the table. Gifts are given and the “in” gifts are accessories and money. Activities are dancing and other games accompanied by popular music. And lastly, parents are to act as servants and stay out of the way. The understanding of a kul birthday party for ten/eleven year-old girls can be illustrated as follows:

It is worth noting that these elements are my interpretation of what their peer group understands a kul birthday party to be. I believe that most of these associations are shared by the girls in this study, particularly “pop music”, “teenage like clothes”, “dancing activities” and the “in” foods.

In the girls’ discussions concerning what to wear, peer norms are activated in deciding how to do girl in the social context of a birthday party. As has been shown, even though some of the girls want to be kul, they know they will provoke negative responses from their peers if they look too much like teenagers. This is important to remember, for Mitha’s popularity would definitely not have been increased, had she come to this party with heavy make-up, a push-up bra, and a sweater with a plunging neckline, exposing a bare midriff. In short, an overly revelatory aesthetic would have activated controlling peer norms and stigmatised the ones violating them. This might not have been the case if one of the popular girls, particularly Nina, started to do girl that way. This is so because the preceding chapters have shown how initiatives by the popular girls often spread to the other children. In the next chapter I will discuss how friendship and peer power works in the social context of romance.


Chapter 12: Girls, bodies and romance

Most of the elementary “going with” relationships I learned about were fairly distant. Various couples sent notes, talked on the phone, exchanged gifts on birthdays and holidays, and sat, danced, or skated together at group parties. Few went on dates (Thorne 1993: 153).

The extract from Thorne outlines characteristics in mixed gender and junior heterosexual interactions also found among the children included in the present study. This chapter describes and discusses practices in the social context of romance in which the practice similarities are peer interactions concerning the theme of girlfriends and boyfriends. The following pages explore in what ways the children relate and interact with one another in both play and non-play activities but which have stronger expressions of (junior) heterosexuality embedded in them than are to be found in the experiential spaces described previously. In what ways does this context and the interactions included relate to the sexualisation of childhood processes?

Ten/eleven year-old girls and boys differ in physical maturation and growth, which may have some influence as to whether and in what way they engage in the boyfriend/girlfriend culture. However, research shows that there exists no direct relationship between early developers and romantic interest, or of the correspondence of biological and social age (Thorne & Luria 1986, Johansson 1996, Kelle 2001). In general, the most popular girls and boys at both field sites are average in maturation; they are neither too small nor too big when compared to the others. When the fieldwork started in 2002 (when the girls were nine/ten years-old) only one girl had visibly budding breasts but they all do at the end of the 6th grade (twelve/thirteen years old).

Popular culture plays an important part in presenting cultural images for ideal body shapes, femininities and masculinities in the sphere of romance. Farou and Mitha have shown that they are acquainted with these body types and aesthetic (see Chapter 8). Therefore this chapter starts with a presentation of how the girl’s magazines write about these issues. The girls I got to know have knowledge of the magazines, but they are not read on a regular basis by any of them. However, I argue
that the magazines contribute to their understanding of romance and have a socialising impact on girls in these matters. In addition to magazines, the TV and other media present images for gender construction and heterosexual interaction. In other words, these sources of popular culture contribute to forming the girls’ understanding of romance. I argue and show that in spite of the amount of popular culture in the girls’ (and boys’) surroundings and the weight put on dating and having boyfriends, these practices in general also show ambivalence towards physical contact and involve little intimacy. Therefore, I suggest that the dominant characteristic in the social context of romance, as in the contexts described in Chapter 9, includes emotional dilemmas. This means that ambivalence and fear of physical contact towards a person of the opposite sex also prevails in the experiential space of romance. In the following I discuss these phenomena in more detail through illustrative events experienced by the children. At the end of this chapter I argue that peer norms play an important part in forming this pattern, which suggests continuity rather than change in children’s heterosexual relationships.

**Girls’ magazines, bodies and femininities**

During the last decades, Norwegian preteen girls have been offered an increasing amount of magazines featuring what the editors believe preoccupy this age group. Most of the magazines are imported from abroad and then translated, the most important ones being *GO girl* ("My first girls’s magazine"), *Witch, Julia* and *Girls*. Feminist researchers have studied how girls use teenage magazines, and argue that girls find pleasure in reading them, as they provide inspiration as to how to be “proper girls”, in accordance with what boys and men want (McRobbie 1991, Walkerdine 1984, Ussher 1997). In other words, the magazines present femininities in keeping with a heterosexual male gaze. The magazines provide images for heterosexual activity and focus on beauty and fashion as part of the “feminine masquerade” (Phoenix 1997:4, Holland 2004). At the same time, the magazines also poke fun at boys and men, which gives girls some inspiration to engage in subversive behaviour (Ussher 1997, see also McRobbie 1999). According to Phoenix, the magazines are common in northern countries, but not in other parts of the world, so they are both historically and culturally particular to countries with a

168 “Feminine masquerade” is understood as “using all the trappings of traditional femininity” (Holland 2004:12).
long tradition of capitalist market economy. The kul and popular femininities discussed in the preceding chapters are highly related to consumerism and the capitalist economy, and the way the magazines construct gender greatly resonates with that tendency.

In the Norwegian society, GO girl is aimed at the youngest girls and is filled with young pretty girls; it writes about hair and hairstyles, pets and pop idols. It’s about friends and friendship and one issue presents a comprehensive “personality test”. The outcome of the test is divided into four characters: “The perfect pupil,” “The daydreamer”, “The comedian” and “The blabbermouth”. The first character is described in this way: “You like school work and think that is important. But you are also a good friend and fond of your family. You are compassionate and will be a good doctor”. The next character, the daydreamer is described as: “You are relaxed and like everything creative which is not too noisy. You would enjoy being an actress or an author.” The third character: “You are relaxed and don’t worry about keeping dates. You prefer to hang around with your friends. You would be a good TV host”. And finally, the last character is addressed “Hi Miss Popular! You are hyper-social and want to be surrounded by your friends all the time. You are clever at school, but talk a lot!” (GO girl 0534). In other words, cultural ideals concerning looking good, being popular and having personality are introduced into girls’ life world at a very young age. As the preceding chapters have shown, the girls are understood to be motivated by such ideas in their femininity subject positions and peer relationships.

The girls in this study do not refer to the Go Girl magazine, I suggest they have grown out of it. Instead they refer to Witch, Julia and Girls as magazines they read every now and again. Of the girls I got to know, most read Witch. Particularly Farou, but also Nina read this on a regular basis in the 5th grade. The magazines are aimed at girls of between nine and fourteen years, and to a large extent feature teenage culture and femininities derived from popular culture. As an example of one femininity model, I will present the Witch editorial which had the theme “Topmodel” in an issue from 2005: 169

169 All the translations from the magazines are mine.
Imagine being a supermodel! Or at least a model for a day, as Cornelia experienced. To have an optimal appearance demands a real effort and is perhaps not what many girls want to spend much time on. But sometimes we want to look extra good. In order to receive some compliments from girl friends or maybe a long look from the boy of our dreams… In this Witch issue we have collected lots of smart witch advice for a magical make-over or two. We also show you how you can make trendy but personal effects into a real Witch image. You are also invited to practice as a fashion designer with the Witch gang as models!

Magical greetings from the girls in the Witch editorial group (Witch TEMA 5-05).

The magazine is thus filled with advice on how to look better, with much attention given to hair and skin, and more importantly to “finding your own style”. One of the sections is explicitly entitled “Find your own style”, and has the following introduction: “Playful, elegant or sporty? Irrespective of the style of clothes you choose, it should reflect your true self!” (ibid.). In other words, great emphasis is put on “finding your own style”, which, as shown in this and the last two chapters, is something girls at both field sites are concerned with (and which has inspired the title of this study). The correspondence between what is highlighted in these magazines and the girls’ actual practice is worth noting and is probably no coincidence. There are strong emotions involved in trying to find their own style. As shown previously, cultural notions connected to “personality” and “having your own style” are explicitly expressed in interviews with the girls and inspires them when buying clothes.

Regardless of who “created” these ideas first, the girls or the magazines, the point is that the girls’ magazines relay images of femininities based on the ideal of looking good. Moreover, they emphasise the importance of looking good in order to attract the opposite sex and generally “be happy”. The magazines are overtly heteronormative: One aim is to “receive maybe a long look from the boy of your dreams” by looking good (Witch 5-05). This implies having a nice, slim body, a good haircut and skin and clothes that “suit your personality” (ibid.). These points are further highlighted in the Julia and Girls magazines, which focus heavily on “how to get the boy of your dreams” (Julia 2005), how superstars relate to one another and who is in love with who among the celebrities. The cover page of Julia nr. 4-2005 features a smiling ten or eleven year-old with make-up and red lips and boasts these headings: “The spring trends: from cowboy to glamgirl!!”; “Look-alike Beyoncé”; “What is happening to my body? Everything you need to know about puberty”; “Meet Mischa Barton and Benjamin McKenzie”; “Fashion: you make the
spring’s coolest details yourself!”; “The world’s worst mistakes!” and last: “Reality: ‘I have the strictest parents in the world!’” (ibid.) Inside Julia there is a poster of Britney Spears (with “decent” clothes on).

Linked to the homepage of Julia magazine is a much-liked web game called Powerbabe (English name originally). The game is aimed at teenagers, but there are reasons to believe that Julia readers of all ages are players (Ny Tid 4/8-2006). By charging money over their cellular phones, the girls can dress their virtual dolls in different apparel, or if they wish, give their dolls “silicon-lips” or “Lolita curls”. The game refers to both sex and alcohol and thus violates the image of innocent childhood and children (ibid.). It is as apparent from the name Powerbabe as it is from the game’s message that Julia magazine is not bothered about protecting young girls from the world of older (hetero-) sexuality. On the contrary, the messages, if followed strictly, would result in the construction of small teenager-girls, in other words “girls older than their age”. This is also the conclusion to be drawn from this cover page of Girls: “Adam Brody, the most handsome man of the month!”; “The celebrities’ spooky phobias and obsessive thoughts”; “Eating disorders. Friends that lie and how you can help”; “Test: How do YOU get the boys. Are you mystical, sweet or a real flirt?”; “Ashton Kutcher: not asked to come home with anyone”. (Girls 2005).

These themes are presented to ten year-olds as if they were part of their lives, which, according to the girls I got to know, hardly engages a minority. But of course, if this minority is the popular group defining the norms of behaviour, as at Østli, the rest of the girls will to some extent get involved too (see also Hauge 2003). I argue that the magazines describe girls through the heterosexual male gaze and boys through the heterosexual female gaze where “sexy is the rule” for both. The issue of the Girls magazine described above has a photo of the R&B star Usher, with this heading: “Sexy secret. The hot R&B star Usher has revealed the secrets behind his sexy body” (ibid.). 170

170 The text beside the photograph reads: “The hot R &B star Usher has disclosed the secret behind his sexy body”. In the light of the present day focus on body projects that include a lot of work-out in order to achieve a sexy body, the article positively concludes that he does not exercise very much. The message may be read as appraisal of the “naturally” sexy body.
This representation resembles the advertisement for perfume by David Beckham in Chapter 8, and again points to the connection between sports, popular culture and perhaps an impending “metrosexual” masculinity.¹⁷¹ The focus on “sexy” men through a female gaze is also illustrated in the Norwegian women’s magazine *ELLE*, which selected “the most sexy man of Norway” in their October issue of 2006 (*ELLE* 2006).

As shown, the magazines for girls from an early age implicitly focus on the importance of looking good in order to achieve what may be read as “happiness”. Having many friends and getting a handsome boyfriend is envisaged as most important for being happy. Girls and boys may be exposed to heteronormativity and the importance of having a girlfriend/boyfriend as early as in kindergarten. Adults watching a little girl and boy enjoying the company of each other are sometimes quick to ask if they are “sweethearts” (*kjærester*). Aleksandra at Vestdal finds it very annoying that her classmates accuse her of being Geir’s “girlfriend”. They do spend much time together, but they are “only friends”, she says. She does not want to have a boyfriend yet, it is “too early”. She too draws on the developmental discourse mentioned previously (Kelle 2001). Her reaction also indicates that there may exist pressure among young school children to engage in the boyfriend/girlfriend culture.

¹⁷¹ The website Askmen.com recently announced David Beckham as the extra-man of the year......http://www.askmen.com/specials/2007_top_49/
The cited magazines contribute to such a pressure and to creating ideals for presentations of self.

The attractive hegemonic femininities and masculinities presented are not easy to match in real life. It is not possible for every girl to look like Angelina Jolie or for boys to look like David Beckham. The messages are often indirect and implicit about these things but are still quite clear. The presentation of these gender ideals starts as early as seven-eight years. By the time the girls are thirteen years old they do not read these magazines but rather those for teenagers and young adults. This indicates that the actual readers of the cited magazines are younger than is the intention, a recognised phenomenon in regard to teenage magazines writing much about sex. As such, the magazines contribute to constructing girls older than their cultural age. They also inspire them to be self-conscious and aware of their body shape and how this may be judged by others. In other words, the magazines contribute in the girls’ internalization of the male gaze both as subjects and objects. In the words of Russell and Tyler it can be argued that the construction of femininity within the Girls’ magazines “renders bodily dissatisfaction and the stifling of aesthetic imagination and creativity in the process of becoming a woman virtually unavoidable” (Russell & Tyler 2002: 631).

Of the girls in my research, Farou is the only one who spontaneously talks about being fat and “ugly”, as discussed before. The first time this happens is at the beach at Hudøy Island in the 4th grade. She is sitting near me reading Witch magazines brought from home. I say she is not fat at all, but she will not listen and tells me she has skipped breakfast that morning, and does not want to eat much dinner either. I ask when she started to believe she was fat. She refers to a TV show with Ricky Lake, featuring an extremely fat twelve year-old of about two hundred kilos. After that she has been afraid of getting fat.

As indicated in the described episode from the shopping trip (Chapter 8), the issue of weight is a theme she returns to quite often, particularly during the week at Hudøy, and is one we discuss regularly throughout the field work period. The theme is also somewhat apparent among some other girls. For instance, Christel’s mother said Christel does not like tight jeans but loose trousers, which she suggested was
because she is a bit chubby. Once in the wardrobe before a gym lesson many girls look at their tummies and comment on them being fat or not. Oda has a dissatisfied look on her face, she thinks her tummy is too fat. When skinny Solveig says the same, Farou stops her: “Solveig, you are not allowed to say that you are fat!!” Even if these girls do not often talk about body shape in public or “front stage” (Goffman 1959) it does not mean that the images of the ideal and slim body are not something they refer to when looking at themselves in the mirror. Many of the girls watch TV programs like “Extreme Make-over” and “Top model”, and discuss the looks of the women and girls involved. The ideal body aesthetic is as much part of the girls’ surroundings as they pervade Norwegian society as a whole, represented by the leading Norwegian gossip magazine Se & Hør (Look & Hear).

Se & Hør is released twice a week and is also widely read by the girls. Its dominant themes are celebrities, love relationships and who attends which parties. Detailed descriptions and evaluations of how people look dominate, with an overwhelming attention on bodies and whether one is “sexy” or not, first and foremost women through the heterosexual male gaze. The following describes how some artists were presented after a TV show: “Mira the sexiest at the party”, and “When Mira entered the stage, a sigh went through the audience. The same happened when sexy Mira arrived at the nachspiel at Grand hotel dressed in a tiny red outfit…”. Then in connection with another photograph: “The dress of Venke Knutson is made by her friend Ann Karin Pedersen, and reveals her good figure. She gets extra points for daring to show a lot of skin!” (Se & Hør January 2006).

Magazines for preteen boys are not of the same kind as for girls, which may indicate that the importance of good looks and appearance starts later in the lives of boys. Young boys read cartoons such as Spiderman and Superman and peek into girls’ magazines, such as TOPP. This is aimed at young and not-so-young teenagers of both sexes, indicated by the letters to the editors concerning sex. Both girls and boys write and ask questions. In issue no. 8-2006 the youngest girl writing was twelve years old and the oldest seventeen years old. The TOPP magazine is also filled with descriptions and presentations of sexy bodies, how to look better, celebrities and love affairs. However, young boys are exposed to the same older (hetero-) sexual influences as young girls, exemplified by an interview of two twelve year-old
entertainers on the Norwegian television (NRK1) during the summer vacation in 2002. Every morning between 8-10 a.m. the channel broadcasts the program *Sommermorgen* (Summer morning), aimed at children between five and thirteen years old. The journalist talks to these two boys about the prospect of being future stars, and ends the interview by asking if they find time to be with girls, or if they only have “one night stands”. The boys smile a bit embarrassed, but understand what he means. Incidences like these underline how adults contribute to a sexualisation of childhood without reflection, as seen in the organization of school discos (to be discussed below) and the presentation of bodies and gender. On the whole there is no doubt which femininities (masculinities) and values the above-mentioned magazines promote. They champion the good-looking sexy ideal. I argue that the magazines are influential sources in the construction of the girls’ perception of attractive femininities and (hetero-)sexuality. The ten year-olds understanding of being sexy, illustrated in the diagram in Chapter 8, show the resonance of these elements and the messages in the above-mentioned magazines.

The cultural ideal of being sexy, one which presupposes a slim and nice body, is thus omnipresent in the girls’ surroundings. As such it is present in the general context of romance. I have previously suggested that being sexy is not internalised by the girls, although the image of the slim body seems to be by Farou, partly Mitha and others. However, being sexy as they understand that to be, does not seem to motivate them in their presentations of self and heterosexual relationships. This postulation will be further explored in how they relate to each other in the social context of romance.

**The social context of romance**

**During swimming lessons**

“Fight”

The mentioned characteristic of ambivalence in mixed-gender contact also manifests itself in the arena of swimming. The institutionalisation of gender segregation means boys and girls have different wardrobes, and a lot of fuss is made about peeping into each others’ arenas. The aim of the swimming lessons is, of course, to teach children how to swim. Those who are already swimmers are free to do what they like, as long
as they do some sort of swimming. And similar gender patterns which I have already described emerge in this activity. First and foremost girls play with girls and boys with boys, until one or two of the opposite sex seek contact. The usual question is “Can I play with you”, and if the answer is “Yes”, everything is all right. If the answer is “No” there may be some arguing because the teachers do not “allow” the refusal of such a request. As noted, there exists an overall agreement in the classes that the children are to have an inclusive attitude towards each other. But symbolic power may work to the contrary. So instead of saying “No” to someone directly, the children find some other excuse: “We cannot play with more than two” (or three, four, depending on the situation) which is a more indirect rejection (see also Simmons 2002).

The same friendship circles as are described earlier observed in the water, and a special form of play has started between Oda, Ellen, Christel, Petter, Nina and Marit. The game is called Fight (Kamp) and consists of children in pairs fighting each other. Marit sits on top of Nina’s shoulders, Christel on Petter’s, and they wrestle and try to get the other into the water. This game is played with different actors at every swimming lesson, mostly with same sex pairs, but also mixed, such as Christel and Petter, or Oda and Petter. Sitting on the shoulders of a boy is experienced as an intimate thing to do for the girls, because they are usually shy about physical contact and scream if a boy comes near. Another indication of this shyness comes to the fore when the teacher instructs them in life-saving techniques, and asks them to try out some of these on each other. She shows them heart compression. A lot of giggling and light fear is shown when Petter asks if they also are going to practice mouth-to-mouth rescue. The teacher says this is to be done on a doll only, and relieved sighs are heard. Having to practice on each other when that other is the opposite sex would be experienced by them all as humiliating, regardless of sex. This is thus another example of the ambivalence of physical contact in the ten year-olds’ mixed gender relations.

---

172 I have included this game and the next “Baywatch” in the context of romance rather than in the context of (particular) play because of the strong elements of heterosexual contact and “loose” rules. The choice of whether to include these practices in this or that social context illustrates the overlapping and “fluid” character of contexts.
“Baywatch”

The first TV-inspired event to catch my attention in the 4th grade which is explicitly referred to, during swimming lessons is Baywatch. And again it is the group made up of Oda, Ellen, Christel and Petter who play this, as an extension of the Fight game described above. Baywatch is one of the highly popular soap series among teenagers, where the focus on fitness, coolness, good-looking bodies, love and sexuality (sex) is great. With the actress Pamela Anderson playing one of the key roles, the focus on sexiness, bodies and body shape comes as no surprise. The popular press has for a long time written about possible surgical procedures done on her lips and breasts, which are something the girls are acquainted with.

The TV Baywatch setting is a beach milieu, or more precisely, the activities of a group of swimming guards. The series focuses on what happens both inside the circle of guards and between them and the guests on the beach. In every episode some person has to be rescued and all sorts of rescuing techniques are applied. The atmosphere is filled with romance and sexual innuendos, not least because Pamela Anderson is a hot sex symbol for many boys. However, sexual impressions and expressions do not explicitly surface through the activities of the Østli children, who play Baywatch by swimming after and saving one another. The one who plays the guard role drags the drowning person to “the shore”, which is the edge of the pool. With the help of the others he/she tries to get the person over the edge. Then different life-saving techniques are attempted, including heart compression and massage. Accompanied by a lot of giggling, they discuss whether mouth-to-mouth rescue is necessary, but it is always vetoed. The incident highlights the fact that these children have seen Baywatch. They know the events, and thus are acquainted with the culturally defined attractive body ideals as well as aspects of older sexuality.

Walking back to school

On the way back to school after the swimming, I fall in line with Ivar, and behind us Christel and Ellen are paired up. Every now and again Christel and Ivar push into each other. They both pretend to be annoyed, but Ivar shortly after reveals that he likes the attention. I jokingly told him to leave the girls alone, whereupon he replied that “It is she who pushes into me! But maybe she thinks I am bit handsome?” I then
said “Isn’t that ok?” and he shyly said “Yes”. This episode again points to a discrepancy between what is said about contact with the opposite sex, and what is experienced, felt and done, well illustrated by Nina saying she does not like boys when we were at Hudøy, an incident to be described shortly (in the section on ”going out with”).

School settings

Morning gymnastics
The following event takes place at summer-camp at Hudøy, and is an example of how popular culture is used and implicitly informs children about older (hetero) sexuality in a school setting. I wake up every morning to loud disco music announcing the morning aerobics. All classes are invited to join in (voluntarily). The music consists of old and new hits. One of the young female teachers is the coach, and she lead the aerobics from the edge of the football pitch. About seven pupils (of approximately 200) attend the first morning, only girls, and some more the rest of the week. The practice of morning gym goes far back in Norway, and is connected to welfare institutions of all sorts. By integrating popular music in gymnastics the adults believe it becomes more attractive for the children, particularly the teenagers, but they do not turn up, they prefer to sleep. By playing this music the youngest children learn that this music is culturally acceptable even though some of the hits directly refer to people having sex (“Oa hela natten, oa hele da’n”. Oa all night, oa all day..”). This is an illustration of how older sexuality surrounds children in all kinds of settings without it being an explicit theme. This is so for all contexts infused with pop music, for instance the school discos to be described below.

The 4th grade Hudøy disco
The disco culture is an optimal representation of popular culture and focuses on (hetero-)sexuality, both in the music and the corresponding activity. It is therefore worth noting that the school arranges this for small children, considering the overall worry of children becoming “too old too soon”. They do this because they believe children enjoy it. I argue that many of the ten year-old girls and boys in my study are highly ambivalent to the disco activity, which will soon be illustrated.
On the second evening at Hudøy, the 4th graders had invited the 3rd graders to a disco. The teachers and the children have decided this together, but the children alone discuss and negotiate the details as to how the evening is to be arranged. The popular girls, Nina, Marit and Ida, want a “Pyjama party”, to which the boys objected loudly (probably because most of them slept in boxers…). Again the issue of peer power is illustrated in that the girls have the last word. They know that pyjama parties have a cool image, related to teenage party “culture”. Arranging such parties is something the girls have done and experienced before in connection with party “sleepovers” and which they have defined as worth doing. This was also so among the young girls at Vestdal.

On the evening in question, most of the girls dress in pyjamas, Nina in a short night gown. At the time, the fashionable ones are made of artificial silk and bought at H&M, Cubus, KappAhl or Lindex. I suggest those girls who possess such pyjamas did change, something Mitha and Farou had not. It is possible that the popular girls have secretly negotiated these subject positions and planned for a pyjama party which resulted in the leading girls taking the spotlight, at the expense of the others. Most of the boys do not change into nightwear. The exception again is Anthony, who amidst much laughter is the only boy dressed in pyjamas. Once again he has done something he believes eases his entrance into the girls’ world, as in the episode at the table cited in the last chapter. He is the only boy who explicitly shows an interest in girls and romantic relationships, and most importantly, he is not teased about it. This may be because the other boys (and girls) experience that the girls like him (more on Anthony later in this chapter).

Shortly after the 3rd graders arrive, the music is turned on. It is loud and comes from a CD player. The children do not seem to like the loud music or the invitation to dance. The floor has been cleared for chairs and tables. Only Tommy dances alone for a short while; a few others join him. None of the children dance with anyone of the opposite sex. However, the majority of the children were outside playing ball, and do not seem interested in disco dancing at all. At the end of the “party” they play a variant of Red Light inside, called the Dance game. The music plays, the children dance or just move around. When the music stops the children have to stand absolutely still. Those who don’t are out. The body movements of Marit and Ida
reveal that they have dancing experience and they instruct the others for a while. As such, they were more secure in this setting, and did perhaps expose their bodies more than those without these experiential structures. I have few observations to hold that the freestyle/disco dancing influences these girls’ heterosexual behaviour in the disco setting, besides them being of those few children who seemed to enjoy the event. The general impression is rather that neither the 3rd nor the 4th graders are overly enthusiastic about the disco arrangement, which continued with various other games until the 3rd graders retired to their “house.” When Elisabeth, Christel and Anne sum up the event, they “do not find it kul, because discos should have flashing lights, and the food should be pizza, not cakes!” In other words, they are acquainted with what “a real disco” should be like, and this one did not match these expectations.

The lack of enthusiasm for the disco, however, may indicate that disco is an activity initiated by adults who believe this is what children want, an idea borne of insufficient concurrence with children’s points of view. The episode suggests that children and adults have somewhat different understandings of what attractive activities for this age group are. Adults seem to believe that teenage culture is their first priority, which this thesis only partly supports. This impression is underscored some months later when the parents’ group at school arrange a school disco in the assembly hall.

**The School disco**

The school disco, organised twice a year, is an event surrounded by much anticipation and planning but also ambivalence among the children. Most of the children from Norwegian backgrounds attend, with many boys but only a few girls of non-western background. None of the girls who usually wear hijabs and non-western garments attend.

The disco is held in the assembly hall after school. The disco is an activity aimed at all the pupils from the 2nd grade upwards. The afternoon is divided into three parts, first the 1st and 2nd graders, then the 3rd and 4th graders, and lastly the 5th to 7th graders. I was supposed to join the children I knew best, the then 5th graders, but I had misunderstood, and arrived while the younger groups were still there. The pop
music was roaring from the hall just as at a teenage disco, and a DJ called out something every now and again. I spotted some of the seven year-old girls who sometimes joined the classes during outdoor school. Among those is the popular girl Cathrine. She is dressed in a very tight pair of trousers with a wide belt and a t-shirt with “I (a heart)” on. Her class mate Camilla wears the shortest top of all, showing most of her midriff. She is frequently seen dancing, something only a few other girls dare to do. The DJ tries to get more children out on the floor, but also here most of them prefer being outdoors or in another room. Maybe those who “dare” dance do so because they attend dancing classes after school and have dance as an incorporated practice? In this setting they are definitely acting older than their age. If that is not the intention, how is it avoidable in a setting explicitly inspired by teenage culture?

From the UK, Renold argues that there exists “a number of highly gendered and contradictory discourses operating here regarding the ways in which primary school girls’ and boys’ sexualities are regulated and policed” (Renold 2005:112, emphasis original). She analyzes the sanctioned “smooching” (slow dance) at a school disco event as an example of how the school mediate and regulate girls’ and boys’ relationships to fall in line with traditional heterosexual practices. When going out, couples were found kissing on the sport pitch. This was stopped because it was “inappropriate” sexual activity for their age group. In particular, it was the girls that were regulated and protected (ibid.:110), which does not resonate with the Norwegian situation. This cross-cultural difference supports my previous interpretation of Norwegian preteen girls’ cultural circuits of femininity overlapping the masculinity circuits more than in Britain.

An hour or so later, the older children arrive. The assembly hall has dimmed lights, with a single spotlight on the DJ, his desk and the space for dancing. He regularly explodes a smoke “bomb” and smoke floats in the room. Loud pop music fills the spacious hall. All the seats in the rows are in darkness. The atmosphere surely resembles the teenage discos in town. I tiptoe up to one of the rows at the back, in an attempt to sit and observe without being noticed. I spot many children from 5B on the dance floor: Nina, Marit, Oda, Daniel, Tommy, Aslan (wearing a cap), Ellen and Christel. This happening is a perfect example of how gender is negotiated both in the same-sex and the opposite sex group. The girls have discussed acceptable outfits
and hairstyles a long time beforehand, and the outcome illustrates the gender differences also within the “girl” category: their femininity subject positions are not identical, as I will show.

Suddenly Trine in 5A sees me and sits down, her hair is styled voluminously after having had it in tiny plaits for a couple of days. She is wearing fashionable black slacks with a wide belt, and a short-sleeved blouse. She does not think the disco is much fun, even though she in general is one of the few girls in 5A who aspires to being a teenager-girl. Her subject position as a kul teenager-girl is a mixture of elements from the berte and soss categories. But so far disco does not seem to be part of her understanding of coolness. She may experience some peer pressure to attend the disco, since most children do. Trine sits and comments on Nina and Morten dancing a “slow dance” (in this period they “were going out” with each other, see below). She says she will “never ever dance such a slow dance with anybody, not even a girl!” This points to the ambivalence of physical intimacy at this age, but also to how peer norm and practice are continuously negotiated. The couples dancing like this hold each other, which is something very few at this age feel like doing. Trine’s expression illustrates the ambivalence towards body contact, and Morten and Nina’s slow dancing emphasises the negotiation to go beyond that ambivalence. It is worth noting that it is two of the popular children (Nina and Morten) who lead the way in this regard. Nina and Morten may be in the process of establishing new peer norms for heterosexual interaction among the coming eleven year-olds at Østli (they were in their eleventh year) in that they voluntarily seek physical contact through dancing a ”slow dance” with a person of the opposite sex. Or alternatively, that their behaviour is an expression of them getting older and being guided by modified norms.

Trine and I sit and watch Tommy and Aslan who also slow dance with girls, and later Nina dances with Tommy. I am a bit surprised at this, but it indicates that Tommy has some status with the girls. In a discussion on popularity, Adler and Adler point to an interesting issue in their material from the US. They argue that it lowers a girl’s prestige if she interacts with a boy positioned low in the peer hierarchy, that she “performs a social suicide” by doing so (Adler & Adler 1998:52, see also Thorne 1993). According to them, this does not affect the boys in the same
manner. If these mechanisms have some resonance at Østli, it is likely to mean that it says something about the boy’s position if one of the popular girls dances with him, particularly a slow dance. It has turned out that Tommy is one of the few boys of non-western background regarded as a little bit *kul* among the girls. This is probably so because he has a sweet face with long eyelashes, says funny things (“funny remarks”), has some fashionable clothes and shows an interest in romantic issues and girls. In other words, he has some peer-defined, relevant personal capital qualifying him for popularity.

The girls and boys daring to dance at this event signal a budding identification and negotiations with teenage culture, which other children still keep at bay. They sit and watch. Today Solveig is alone, as her very best friend Synne is ill and absent. Solveig wants to sit in my arm and explicitly tells me she does not like being there. She has dressed up in a long black skirt and a black matching top. She doesn’t like the loud music which makes it difficult to talk, and her body language signals uneasiness. Soon after, Mona and Toril also approach my not so “hidden” seat after all, and say they do not like the disco much. They are not dressed in skirts, but are wearing trousers and sweaters in a sporty style more in line with what they wear at school (wide and comfortable). Their subject positions are different from the *kul* femininities of Nina, Marit, Oda and Mitha. Mona and Toril too exclaim that they will “never ever dance”! Mona and Toril sit very close together, until an older boy tries to drag Toril to the dance floor. She doesn’t want to go, screams laughingly, and Mona tries to hold her back. The boy wins, and soon after all three are out on the dance floor. They do not dance like the others; their bodies do not move much. The situation symbolises these girls’ ambivalence to the heterosexual setting in addition to having one foot in the teenage culture and one in the world of children. Their subject positions may be understood to be “located” at the middle of the continuum between the “girl-child” and “teenager-girl” (see Chapter 6). Trine, Solveig, Mona and Toril may feel pressure to attend the disco both from parents and peers, since it is not often that the whole class, or both classes, are assembled after school. Being there is thought to improve their solidarity and camaraderie as a class and as an Østli peer group. However, disco-dancing for ten year-olds is an example of how older heterosexuality is introduced and mingles with junior heterosexuality, incorporating
new experiences in these children’s bodies. “Slow” dancing to pop music introduces some physical intimacy into their primarily platonic heterosexual practices.

Then I observe Ida out dancing. I did not know she was there. She too has more voluminous hair than usual because she has been to Oda’s birthday party the day before. She is dressed in a short skirt, a top and long boots. Her subject position as a kul teenager-girl with elements of the berte and soss categories is very different from those of Mona and Toril. These two girls, in addition to Solveig, position themselves as vanlige, sporty and more girl-child-like at this disco. Nina, Ida and Marit represent the kul teenager-girl femininities: Nina wears tight, light blue jeans with a turquoise hooded jacket. Marit wears a short skirt with a matching top, also with voluminous hair like Ida and Trine. I observe Nina putting on lip gloss, but that’s the only make-up they have. No one in the 5th grade wears any other kind of make-up at the disco, but I spot a group of 6th graders that do. Assuming that the starting point for wearing make-up on a regular basis begins with wearing it in special situations, and that the situational wearing is the first sign of upcoming regularity, the display at the school disco indicates that the ten-year-old girls are not there yet. Although I never observed the girls at Vestdal at a disco, they say they use mascara and some other make-up when going to birthdays and discos. But in general, ten eleven-year-olds seldom wear make-up, even on special occasions like a school disco.

The dancing scene soon changes when the DJ announces a dancing competition. More children enter the stage and more intensity is observed in the dancing. Now Trine also dances, while Mona, Toril and Solveig sit and watch. The dancing resembles the freestyle/disco and pop videos, in that hips, bottoms and tummies gyrate and move. In other words, they express sexuality. The DJ finds four children worthy of extra attention. Their dancing has impressed him. Among those are Morten and Ida. They share applause, and the smoke bomb explodes for the last time. Shortly after the time is out, and the DJ says (in English): “That’s it! (then in Norwegian) Nice “partying’ with you!”(Gøy å feste med dere!). Then the girls and boys go home.

The discos illustrate some important points regarding girls, popular culture and romantic practices. The first is the variation in the girls’ interest in events such as
dancing, disco and teenage identification and thus for teenager-girl femininities resulting in different expressions of doing girl. It was evident that the girls who sat by me at the school disco felt the atmosphere to be unfamiliar, in that it was expected of them to both enjoy the music and the dancing. They (Solveig, Mona and Toril, also Inga and Anne who came later) did not like disco very much and felt uncomfortable with the explicit pressure on them to act older than their culturally understood age. In their case it is the adults’ interpretation of what children find exciting that has resulted in the organisation of the discos, in tandem with the wishes of some teenage-inspired children.

But the interest in such activities increases with age. How the girls like the disco setting two years later is thus discussed in the last section of this chapter. Now I will continue with a discussion on an event at the beach, the massaging in the woods and finally, the practice of “going out”. The latter is the ultimate example of heterosexual interaction and is at the core of the social context of romance.

**At the beach**

June, July and August are the summer months in Norway. When the sun shines, or almost shines, Norwegian children want to go to the beach. The temperature need not be more than 15 degrees, and if it doesn’t rain, swimming is an appealing activity. This is the situation at Hudøy on the first day of camp in 2003. It is not a warm day, but the sun is out. After lunch we go down to the nearest beach, and most of the children, girls and boys, undress and put their swimsuits (swim shorts) on. All the girls wear bikini tops or swimsuits, although most of them do not even have budding breasts. In other words, their bodies are those of girl-children. However, to swim “topless” is not an option for the girls. They have learnt that female breasts are not to be publicly exposed, even though their “breasts” only consist of nipples. As such, according to the Norwegian Minister of Family Affairs, bikinis for young girls (babies, see Chapter 1) “transform” sexually innocent children into objects of sexual interest. Bikini tops for girls without developed breasts have become widespread and common, highlighting their femininity and body from an early age. Putting bikini tops on young girls prepares them very early for a coming biological maturation and a (coming) heterosexual male gaze. As such, bikini tops are material
contributions in Norwegian gender socialisation. The following event at the beach at Hudøy shows the relevance of this.

The school at Østli is one of the schools in Oslo that has classes for newcomers to Norway of non-western background. There is one such class at Hudøy this year, and among the pupils is a boy named Paul. He is twelve years old, already has a broken voice and is very keen on girls, preferably with developed bodies as he repeatedly refers to the shape of breasts. When the children have finished swimming and start to dress, he goes around taking photographs. Nina, Marit, Ida and Oda keep their things partly excluded from the rest at one end of the beach, and Paul approaches them with his camera. Nina walks about in an alluring fashion with no top on, and although she is “flat as a pancake” there is a lot of fuss about this. “Look! Nina is there with naked breasts!” The girls had previously told me that they found it funny that the boys were so interested in their tits when they had none. The boys’ interest in girls’ breasts, which in fact look exactly like their own, may be read as an illustration of a cultural sexualisation of young girls’ bodies, which are learnt in the experiential space of many families as part of the up-bringing. This cultural sexualisation inspires Paul to take photos of girl-children’s bodies and other girls and boys come to watch. This is obviously an exciting thing.

Mona is about to change nearby, and wants me to hold a towel from her neck to her toes so that “nothing shows”, including her flat chest. Anne, who has not been in the water, is witnessing all this, and asks in a voice filled with both irritation and curiosity: “Why do the boys take pictures of the girls changing all the time?” I would say that they probably find it exciting and enjoy looking at the pictures when they get home. Anne then replies: ”Yuck, they are disgusting!” But the tone in her voice shows some excitement as well, and again, ambivalence is revealed. Another day Mitha is “arrested” for taking photographs of the boys lying in bed; the boys for trying to find out if some girls brought sanitary pads. Both the interest in (flat) breasts and physical maturation in general is thus of great interest and is enveloped in much secrecy, particularly as to whether some girls have started to menstruate. As noted, bodily maturation may be a personal characteristic that increases popularity, particularly if the boy is an early developer, because it is common that boys have childlike bodies longer than girls (Thorne 1993:139, Butkatko & Daehler 1998).
**Massage in the woods**

One recurring event that resembles play is the activity of giving massage. 173 Ida suddenly breaks the play she is in, runs away and says: ”I want to sunbathe and have a massage!” The children start massaging one another. Soon Oda, Christel, Ellen and Petter are sitting around a flat stone. Mitha is lying on her stomach on the stone in the middle, and Petter gives her massage. The one giving the massage sometimes sits across the “patient”. One after another is massaged, and say “Ah! Lovely”. Then Petter gets a massage from Oda (who at this time was “going out with” him). This scene of massage is the closest I got to observe what may be called “sex play” because the intimacy is close, and verbal expressions and sighs of pleasure are heard. However, I suggest that from the children’s points of view, no conscious association to sexuality is present, even though Petter was massaged (= touched and stroked) by his girlfriend Oda.

Nearby, Synne and Solveig are massaging one another too; they are often intimate and physical in their relationship, again illustrating homosociality (Ambjørnsson 2004). The inspiration for the massaging for all involved may be read to emerge from both inside and outside their bodies. It may be motivated by sexual desire and TV soaps and knowledge of fitness centres and what goes on there. Some have parents who visit these regularly, such as Ida’s mother. Health, body and fitness are familiar areas and are closely connected to the sports and dancing milieus many of the girls are acquainted with. Fitness centres advertise SPA and massage and to increasing degrees make their activities interesting for young people of both sexes.

Nearby, Marit, Nina and Ida are into tying each other up. While finishing the massage, they bind Nina’s feet and arms and jokingly threaten to pull her trousers down. The boys find this very exciting, and line up around them. But the trousers are kept on and the “game” calms down. This event again shows expressions of junior sexuality and how ten year-old girls and boys are interested in bodies and nakedness.

---

173 I first interpreted it as a variant of particular play, but as the masseur is not playing a role, but being “Mitha”, “Nina” or whoever, I find it more correct to say it is a non-play activity filled with (junior) sexuality undertones.
The curiosity and ambivalence concerning the opposite sex is illustrated in all the above-mentioned events with the exception of the massage. The socially accepted attitude for ten/eleven year-old girls, however, is to say that boys are silly, stupid, disgusting, no fun, but they nonetheless seek their company. This is amply illustrated in the practice of “going out”, to be described below.

**The practice of “going out together” (være sammen)**

As stated before, the notion of “going out” is the ten year-olds’ term for “love” or romantic relationships. Barbro Johansson has studied seven to twelve year-old children’s love relationships in a Swedish setting. According to her, falling in love happens in all age-groups, also among the very young and the very old (Johansson 1996:179). However, she argues that the preteen’s romantic relationships are qualitatively different from older people in that it is a collective rather than a private affair. Therefore she studies their love life as a variant of play on par with other sorts of play. This is because engagement in the boyfriend/girlfriend culture follows certain rules which are absent in teenager’s love relationships, such as using a messenger to arrange the relationship, that is to ask if “one will go out” with another (ibid.: 179, my translation). In addition, she views the game of love as part of the peer group’s socialisation of one another (ibid.). As will be shown, her analysis resonates well with the organisation of romantic relationships among the children in my research, which may be understood as a variant of “play”, as defined in Chapter 9.

Johansson reports that some of the children in her study were deeply in love, but that many did not involve themselves much in the love game at all (Johansson 1996). The girls in my research talk about being in love and liking someone, and the motive for asking a boy to “go out with” them needs only be some sympathy, that is positive emotions. Sympathy also holds for answering “yes”. The negotiations before such a proposal is made can last for many days and weeks. It seldom happens that the couple concerned “propose” directly, which is one reason why researchers term the preteen’s love activity as a collective rather than a private affair. Thorne calls it a

---

174 This illustrates the methodological advantage of participant observation instead of just interviews. Nina’s behaviour is not in accordance with what she says, as will be shown soon.
175 Johansson 1996: 183: “fråga sjans” (Swedish), ”spørre på” (Norwegian).
“group activity” (Thorne 1993: 151). Everybody in the peer group knows who is going out with whom. A best friend or another “brave” person contacts the boy or girl and functions as go-between or messenger (see also Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005, Johansson 1996). They may also be used for ending love relationships, which may be done already the next day. That is another reason why Johansson prefers to talk about preteen’s love life as “play”: “When love is a game (lek) it is transitory and interchangeable with other games (leker)” (Johansson 1996:184, my translation).

The use of intermediaries is also common in the love relationships of very young teenagers (twelve-thirteen years old) at Østli. One of the teachers told me about a recent episode with some tough and “teenage” positioned 7th graders, who acted in the same manner as the 5th graders when trying to get in contact with the wanted boy. However, this practice subsides during secondary school when the relationships become more serious, private and mature. In the words of Johansson: “What terminates the period of taking turns in ‘going out with’ one then another, when love is a social construction and a group activity, is the entrance into puberty” (Johansson 1996:196). In other words, the research of Johansson also underlines the dialectical relationship of physical bodies and cultural practices, in that physical maturity is related to change in junior heterosexual practices.

A related and equally important motivation besides sympathy in the “going out with” practice is the quest for popularity. Those girls I interpret as identifying with kul teenager-girl femininities expend a lot of energy trying to establish going-out pairs, also for themselves. High prestige is connected to going out with somebody, as it is part of teenage culture and signals a distancing from the world of children. The leading girls had defined “going out” as important in the peer image of being kul. The prestige is enhanced when one of the popular girls or boys are involved (more on this at the end of this section).

In the 4th grade classes at the summer camp at Hudøy it is well known that Nina and Morten are going out with each other. They have done so since the beginning of the school year, that is, for many months. Petter and Oda have recently broken up after many weeks of going out. It is impossible, however, to find out about the liaisons by
just observing the children. Nina and Morten do not spend more time together than other girls and boys, nor did Petter and Oda. On one of the first days at Hudoy, I observe Nina and Petter spending a lot of time together on the swings, engaged in the usual habit of bumping into one another and then coquettishly complaining (Nina). They also spend time on the swings the next day, occupying them most of the time. Marit sulks nearby because both Nina and the swings are out of her reach. She also may experience Nina’s popularity with the boys as being greater than her own. Concerning Petter and Nina, he also sits beside her at the girls’ table during the meal as the only boy. That makes the other children a bit suspicious: “What’s going on between Nina and Petter?? Isn’t Nina Morten’s girlfriend?” This concern points to a peer norm connected to morality and monogamy (discussed below). After dinner, they occupy the swings again, and suddenly Nina gets a headache and is allowed to go up to the dormitory to rest (this was only permitted if they were not feeling well). Shortly after, Petter has a headache too, and must also be permitted upstairs. After some time there is a lot of fuss, and it turns out that somebody has discovered Nina and Petter lying in the same bed! And the rumour soon spreads that they have been kissing.

All this interaction happens despite the fact that Nina has just told me at dinner that she does not like boys very much. Still, she rushes out with Petter, takes part in the “headache stunt” and later also repeatedly approaches the boys territory. All this also illustrates the characteristic of ambiguity in junior heterosexual relations. It shows too how peer norms are continuously negotiated and may start to change, particularly if that change is initiated by the most popular girl or boy. Nina (and Petter) violates the norm of no intimacy in junior heterosexual interaction by lying in the same bed and probably kissing. In addition, the other children’s concern about what they were doing underlines the importance of the platonic norm. This point to an interesting discrepancy between the peer situation at Østli and in the British area Renold studied. Among the children in her study it was obviously ok for boys and girls to snug up, semi-naked, in bed together. This happened with two “going out” pairs on a school trip, and was noticed by one of the teachers and stopped (they were found in the same room in two beds beside each other) (Renold 2005: 111). In other words, the peer norms in the British setting seem more in touch with older sexuality than at Østli.
Later that day the teachers arrange a carnival, a *fair* (*Tivoli*). It had lots of amusing activities, competitions and homemade money, all of which are very popular. This event is the most anticipated of all during the camp. One of the attractions is a fortune teller, and in front of his tent the girls and boys of all ages stand in particularly long queues. The themes focused on here are football and love: How is the future of your favourite football team and will you get the girl/boy of your dreams? The activity is so popular that an additional tent is set up. Queued up behind one another are Morten, Petter, Nina, Marit and Oda (in that order), and it is indicative of what had happened that Petter stands beside Nina, not Morten. On the whole it does not seem unproblematic that Nina and Petter have spent so much time together. Morten looks very unhappy and has been teased by some boys about Nina liking Petter instead. It is worth noting that teasing about liking someone of the opposite sex is not usual when a going-out relationship is established, only before and after and later concerning how the relationship develops.

The teacher later tells me that Nina had a hard time on the bus back to Oslo. She cried because of something about Morten and Petter. The teacher suggested that “this was their first experience of love and infidelity” and thus that a “love drama” had happened at Hudøy. The teacher’s interpretation points to the issue of morality concerning monogamy indicated above. Of the boys and girls in this study, the peer norms concerning having one boy (or girl) friend at a time is strong. Violation of this norm, as Nina was suspected of having done, resulted in scorn and condemnation from her peers. All their concern and attention illustrate how peer norms lead to surveillance of practices but also how they are continuously negotiated. Nina was unhappy on the bus back to Oslo because she had been “unfaithful” and everybody accused her of being so. In a subsequent conversation with Mitha and Farou on the *Norway Cup*, these strong norms on fidelity and romantic monogamy were emphasised when Mitha told us about Nina’s new boyfriend, from another school. “He is no good because he is being unfaithful; he has been going out with two girls at the same time.” These strong norms are also reported by Adler and Adler: “It was absolutely forbidden, from elementary through high school, to be engaged in romantic relations with more than one person at a time” (Adler & Adler 1998:190).
Considering the importance attached to fidelity, it’s now time to explore details and the meaning of the practice of “going out”. How do the children practice their first experience of romantic love, or “with what exactly is the child engaged?” (Garvey 1977/1990: 8).

On one of my first visits in the 5th grade Farou spontaneously tells me that there is a “love epidemic” in their class. There are four pairs, all of Norwegian origin: Nina and Morten, Oda and Petter (they were now going out with each other for a second time), Ellen and Nils, Christel and Jens and later Marit and Ola. I spend some time with Oda in the schoolyard trying to figure out more on the “going out” practice. I ask her what they generally do when they are going out with someone. She looks at me with a blank expression, shrugs her shoulders and says quietly “I don’t know”. I ask again and get the same answer, but she adds ”I wouldn’t be going out with him if I didn’t like him”. Today Mitha is around and obviously wants to help them get along as “sweethearts”, because she thinks Oda shows too little interest in Petter. When he comes along, she says “Petter is coming! You must at least look at him!” Later when he again approaches, Oda looks up, and Mitha praises her: “Yes, now you did it right!” It later becomes apparent that “sweethearts” sometimes go to the cinema, and Nina sometimes visits Morten at his home together with her little brother (saying they go there to play with Morten’s kittens).

The impression from Østli (and Vestdal, see below) is thus that heterosexual love relationships between the children is in the realm of junior sexuality and lacks physical contact; in other words they are usually platonic. One exception regarding physical intimacy is the playing of massage by Petter and Oda, but no one commented or associated that activity with them going out together. I suggested in the last chapter that this activity is an expression of junior heterosexuality. But from the children’s points of view the massage was part of another context, that of non-play, and is not associated to their understanding of romance. This latter may include that some hold hands occasionally, but kissing is not part of the going out practice for the 4th and the 5th graders, which again is illustrated by Nina and Morten.

One winter day I observe Morten and Nina fighting in the schoolyard. He pulls her down in the snow and puts it down her back. It doesn’t look very affectionate, and I
ask Christel how that could happen since they are going out together. She says the affair is over: “Morten broke up because Nina wanted to kiss, and he didn’t”. He later confirmed this in an “interview”. This kind of contact is apparently too intimate for him. Put another way, he does not want to act older than his age. However, Nina again negotiates and tries to go beyond the norm of no physical intimacy but does not have the power to change the practice. Morten and the peer group can rather be interpreted as having the power to resist this change: He broke off the relationship with Nina. The broken relationship may indicate that Morten not only has a stronger position than Nina, but also the strength of the peer norm.

What goes on between ten/eleven year-olds who go out together is also described by the children at Vestdal. Both the girls and the boys say in interviews that there is only one girl in their class who really cares about boys, who is “mad” about boys, and that is Karine. I observe that she often wants to mix with them, and she is particularly fond of Erlend. He likes her as well, therefore they go out with each other. Håkon and Christoffer assert that this pair even kisses, they kiss “for real”, which, as the expression would indicate, was not common. This is also underlined by Hilde and Thale:

Mari: Do you care about having boyfriends, is that something that occupies your mind?
Hilde: No
Thale: Only Karine’s mind. She even kisses.
Mari: Does she?
Thale: Yes!
Mari: Does she have a boyfriend at present?
Thale: Yes.
Mari: And he is part of your class?
Thale: Yes, his desk is here (points to the desk besides her, the interview is in their classroom).
Mari: So they kiss…
Hilde: Yehees.
Thale: Yes, I don’t really know if Erlend does it voluntarily…Karine is much madder after him than the other way round….and because Kari and Karine made a bet on being the first to kiss, and then Karine won. So I guess that’s why they kiss, I don’t know.
Mari: But when someone goes out with one another, how “do you go out?”
Thale: What happens is, or, nothing happens, they don’t do anything else than….It was Karine, she has a total crush on Erlend, and she kind of says “Hi!”, and Erlend he sort of tries to avoid her, I think they find it a bit embarrassing, and then they run off.

The conversation shows the same “going out” pattern as at Østli, although it seems that the pair of Erlend and Karine engage in somewhat more intimacy (kissing) than, for instance, Nina and Morten do at Østli. Still, from how the other children describe
the former relationship, it seems that kissing is not very common in a going out relationship at Vestdal either.

Anthony at Østli is Karine’s counterpart, known by all to be interested in girls, as shown previously. At a time when there is an exhibition of “School diaries” among the girls, he is the only boy who brings one and engages in that culture. As such, he constantly tries to cross gender borders and implicitly to increase the possible masculine subject positions. Moreover, he is not stopped by the others in doing so, because he has some position as attractive. At the carnival at the Club he told me that he was the handsomest boy in the class, the “girls had told him so”. Eventually Petter joins his interest in girls’ activities, and Christel and Mitha say Petter is best liked of the all the boys “because he can show his emotions, something the other boys cannot”. Anthony and Petter have been going out with many of the girls, and rumour has it that Anthony has kissed Christel. At the end of the camp at Hudøy, he receives a diploma from the teachers reading “you know girls so well”. He is a boy who watches a lot of TV and as such is probably influenced by all the heterosexual information there. His romantic interest is illustrated by the following drawing of the Fair at Hudøy in the 4th grade, where the red balloons are formed as (love) hearts:

---

176 In a “School diary” the children write about friendships, interests, romantic issues and the like, and they write messages in each other’s books as well.

177 All the children received a diploma emphasising a personal characteristic revealed during the camp week. During this happening the children had surrounded the teachers. When Morten’s name was announced, Petter says his text should be that “he strongly attracts girls”. The fact that Petter says this suggests that he is jealous of Morten because Nina in the end “went back to him” after her little “flirt” with him at Hudøy.
In the second half of the 5th grade, it is known that he goes out with a girl at another school, whom the girls in his class do not like. Therefore, when they are informed that the relationship is broken, they clap their hands in approval, and Mitha exclaims: “Now Anthony will be flirting again, particularly with Nina!” This utterance underlines (again) that Nina is the most popular girl both among girls and boys, and also Anthony’s reputation as being “crazy about girls”.

Anthony is the only boy who most often makes sexual comments and talks about sex, and during the camp in the 6th grade he is constantly surrounded by giggling girls and boys. When I approach to find out what is going on, he is warned by the others, hides something behind his back and stops talking. The children say he is talking about sex. Anthony’s interest in girls and older sexuality has been present among the children pretty much from the 1st grade, but has increased in intensity with age and physical maturation. He is an “early” developer, being one of the few boys in the 7th grade today with a broken voice, and is therefore a bit admired by the others (see also Thorne 1993). Anthony and his interests are special in that he is so explicit about these matters, and when going out with someone, would like more intimacy than the peer norms permit. He says he likes to read books about love, and prefers to spend “romantic evenings” with his girlfriends. 178 Therefore, the other children are very engaged in what he does and says. As such, Anthony is a boy who informs his peers about older sexuality. However, the poem he wrote (in English!) at Hudøy in the 6th grade shows that he (still) perceives himself as an innocent and small boy:

I am just a little boy

It was a beautiful night
I was the red knight
It was so high
I fly like a butterfly.
Oh baby, I know how to love,
Give me a chance for love.
I am the best like in a test,
So baby give me a chance.
What do you want for a chance,

178 But he could not describe a “perfect” romantic evening, suggesting that he didn’t really know what it should be like.
You wanna make me fancy,
I am sorry man, but I am
Just a little boy.
I am no toy
I am just a little boy.

The rain is falling
And I am just rolling like a little boy.
I am not a toy, I am just a li-t-t-le boy
The sun is clear,
And I am at my home and reading
Stinking books.
I am not a toy
I am just a little boy.

Anthony, 12 years, at Hudøy 2005

The poem may be said to express a longing for love but also of defensiveness concerning what he experiences as the difficult issue of heterosexual relationships. It shows how he, as one of the more mature children in the game of love, still feels ignorant and a bit helpless in that he “is just a little boy”, implying “don’t expect too much of me”. This may be a feeling he shares with many young girls and boys, that they feel a pressure of acting too old too soon, as in the case of Solveig, Mona, Toril and partly Trine at the school disco. I will return to that later because the discussion of the “going out” practice is not complete. So again, with what exactly are the children engaged?

At both field sites, the girls report that the couples going out sometimes go to the cinema accompanied by other friends, because the practice is that the pair does not do anything alone. The quotation from Thorne at the beginning of this chapter confirms this overall pattern (Thorne 1993:153). It is thus amazing and interesting how the descriptions of “going out with” of the children in this study correspond to those made by Thorne (1993), Adler and Adler (1998), Merten (1996), partly Renold (2005) and Johansson (1996). The children in Johansson’s research support the above argument that there is little intimacy in junior heterosexuality. She asks them: “What do you do when you go out together?”

Boy 1: Nothing special. We can play together at school and such. Or at the scouts, as I do for the most part. She is always chasing me.
Johansson: Do you hug and kiss each other?
Boy 2: Well, I suppose one can. Talk to each other. Maybe go to the cinema.
Johansson: Hugs and kisses?
Girl 1: If they have been going out with each other for a long time, then maybe. When we care about each other. If we live near by the boyfriend, then we surely meet. And sometimes talk to each other.

Johansson: Kissing?

Girl 2: Yees…., if the boy doesn’t run away. They don’t always want to.

(Johansson 199.:183, my translation).

The children in this conversation confirm the attitudes among the girls and boys in my study, and thus illustrate the common characteristics in junior heterosexual practices of minimal intimacy. It also points to a gendered difference: that girls more than boys want to kiss (want physical intimacy). Even the starting point for the practices seems to correspond (nine/ten year-olds). Adler and Adler describe very well how the interest in the opposite gender starts developing during the 4th grade with the most popular leading the way and “loosening up the constraining social norms” (Adler & Adler 1998: 175, Thorne 1993). Of the children I got to know, this is illustrated by the case of Nina and Morten and Petter and Oda, but also by Anthony and Christel. They have all experienced going out with someone in the 4th grade. In the 7th grade, about half the girls from Norwegian backgrounds have had this experience, the others none at all. This shows the “going out with” practice in the intersection of gender, age and socio-cultural background in that more children participate with age and that the girls and boys of Norwegian origin dominate the girlfriend/boyfriend culture.

With their statement on norms, Adler and Adler underline the important but somewhat underestimated phenomenon in children’s social life, namely the prevalence of peer norms and peer-imposed social constraints influencing their agency. These were first introduced in Chapter 8 concerning ten year-old girls’ attitude to accepted body exposure and presentation of self as “mere” ten year-olds. The social norms concerning how they are to relate to a person they are going out with are equally strong, as the statements of Håkon and Christoffer illustrate above. Violation of the norms results in teasing, stigmatisation and embarrassment (Adler & Adler 1998:189), which Nina and Petter experienced after the “headache - affair” at Hudøy. The important point worth noting is that, my own findings notwithstanding, Thorne, Adler and Adler and partly Renold show the overtly platonic nature of the “love” relationships, also described by Don E. Merten in his analysis of twelve-
thirteen year olds’ “going out with” practice (Merten 1996, see also Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Renold 2005). According to him, the following statement typifies such a relationship:

Grace: I went with Dale Walthers, that’s John’s brother. He was really nice and he’s really cute. But I didn’t go with him for that long. It wasn’t like I had a boyfriend because he never called. The only time I saw him was at the pool. He was really shy and I never talked to him (Merten 1996:468, emphasis added).

This shows that “going out” for children two years older than the children in this study may still involve this platonic aspect. But the issue of dating, as cited in the quotation from Thorne in the introduction, increases in relevance with age; “going out with” and “dating” are not the same practice. Dating implies a one-to-one relationship with some expectation of physical intimacy. In short, dating is a more mature heterosexual variant of “going out with”, and thus is also more strongly associated to adolescence, teenage culture and older sexuality. Merten also describes how young teenagers have strict norms concerning acceptable intimacy among “lovers”, implicitly according to age. These were referred to in terms of “bases”, a baseball metaphor:

..first base involves kissing; second base refers to petting above the waist (“going up the shirt”); third base involves petting below the waist (“going down the pants”); home refers to sexual intercourse. It is worth noting that even though both males and females routinely use these references, they do so only when describing what males do to females (Merten 1996: 474).

The children in my study spoke about the activities of dating and kissing, but nothing more advanced than that. However, the 9th graders are well acquainted with the cited practices and norms and a tiny minority are believed to have gone “home”. Even if I overheard boys, particularly Anthony and Petter, express interest in older sexuality matters (I’ll return to this in Chapter 13), the time when the junior heterosexual “love” relationships move away from being platonic varies. In other words, when their romantic relationships stop being variants of play varies. In general it seems to start from the 7th grade and upwards which is well illustrated at the school disco I attend in the 7th grade.

This school disco takes place in the same assembly hall as before, and has been talked about a lot beforehand. It is worth noting that even though more girls and

---

179 Of course, it is possible that they do so in the backstage contexts which I did not attend.
180 According to the teenagers I interviewed at Østli.
boys do dance this time, almost half of the girls spend the evening together in the kitchen, away from the pop music and dance arena. Much screaming and fuss occur because some girls try to make Assam dance with Farou. He wants to very much, but she does not. Therefore she sits in the kitchen with the not so kul girls. Anne, Inga, Solveig and Synne are also in the 7th grade dressed in nice, girl-child-like clothes and they are all twelve-thirteen years old. Marit and Lisa are the only ones wearing some make-up (mascara and lip gloss) and “sexy” clothes. Marit is wearing a singlet showing her cleavage and a miniskirt and Lisa is wearing a similar singlet and tight jeans. These two girls are the most developed physically, so in their case there is a correspondence between physical maturity and older heterosexual practices (dressing “sexy”). However, there is no direct relationship between biological maturation and cultural practices, such as use of make-up, as mentioned before. It may just as likely be late developers who initiate teenage practices (see also Thorne & Luria 1986, Thorne 1993), like Ida at Østli, who was the only girl showing her midriff on the first day of school in the 4th grade.

Besides dancing, the most conspicuous activities at this disco concentrated on getting the “going out” couples to kiss in front of the others. This reveals that kissing is (still) not something the going out pairs do on a regular basis and that the peer group want to “help them along”. On this particular occasion it happens first with Nina and Ola (a new liaison in the 7th grade) in the hall amidst some clammering: “Nina, Ola; Nina, Ola; Nina, Ola!!” and is continued outdoors in the schoolyard with the other two pairs (Lisa and Morten, Toril and Martin) towards the end of the evening. That these activities are moved outdoors into the dark indicates a wish for these events to happen away from adult surveillance and observation.

The interest in heterosexual contact has surely increased with age (and physical maturation). Ridge writes that “age was an important factor in children’s perceptions of clothes and the age of 12 seems to be a critical age for self-awareness and self-esteem” (Ridge 2002:67). Likewise, Helga Kelle argues that the preteen children’s discourse of development is sexualised in that they re-conceptualize the relations between the sexes according to age. This reiterates what I have previously described as peer norms according to age: “Hello – we are only in the 5th grade!” Kelle holds that “at the age of twelve an intensification of sexualization by discursive means is
noticeable” and that the “new code induces a collective developmental step” (Kelle 2001:100). Among the girls and boys in my study a lot of activity is going on in this regard at Hudøy at the end of the 6th grade. Anthony and Petter are central in this. In addition to all the sex talk by Anthony, they both write love letters to girls and ask them to go out with them. According to the girls, Petter asks one after the other, but is turned down every time. A new era in how to approach the opposite gender might have begun, one in which he lacks competence, as older heterosexual practices are different from junior. Adler and Adler hold that dating and flirtation vary with age and thus social and physical maturity, and suggest:

Flirtation generated popularity for boys and girls by commanding attention from members of the other gender. It indicated to people that they were moving out of the realm of childhood and becoming more mature. Precisely when individuals were ready to make such a move depended on their physical maturity, their family background (sexual attitudes and behaviour), their relation with other siblings (if they had them), and the popularity of their social group (Adler & Adler 1998: 182).

The quotation points to an interesting relationship between flirtation and popularity indicated previously in connection with Nina and Morten both being popular and going out together. They actively relate to the opposite sex, go out with each other, position themselves as teenager-like and are classified as kul and populær by their peers. Their personal capital has given them the power to achieve this. The quotation points to flirtation as early identification with teenage culture, and flirtation as related to physical maturity. In my study more children are engaged in the girlfriend/boyfriend culture in the 7th grade as illustrated in the events at the school disco. Implicit in this lies the relationship between flirtation and being kul and popular. Flirtation and dating have gradually become included in their subject positions of girlfriend/boyfriend. The twelve-thirteen year old children are more responsive to the older teenager heterosexual culture, which deactivates the previous going-out practice of no intimacy in the girlfriend/boyfriend relationships. The change in their understanding of romance and heterosexual relationships over time can be diagrammed as follows:
The dotted line between “flirtation” and “going out with” indicates that flirtation is not much present in that practice. However, I suggested that a kind of flirtation is included in the different play activities of pushing and bumping into one another. These can be taken to be expressions of junior heterosexuality. As the figure shows, the main difference in these age-based cultural understandings of romance is whether there is physical intimacy, or older heterosexuality.

A boy in Adler and Adler’s research puts the maturation process in the cross gender contacts into words when he says that a change in mixed gender relations occurred in the 4th grade: “We no longer had boys chase girls and stuff. It just wasn’t that immature any longer. It became, like, cool” (Adler & Adler 1998:175). In short, this shows the connection between the subject positions of kul femininities and masculinities and an interest in the opposite sex, in that having a girl/boyfriend becomes an important part in the teenager subject positions. And as shown at the beginning of this chapter, girls’ magazines give inspiration in this regard. As such, the understanding of romance includes associations on how to attract the opposite sex, where flirtation is increasingly an essential ingredient.
The last points concerning the connection between flirtation, going out with/dating and being cool are also made by Renold (2005). In her analysis of preteens in two school settings in England, she shows how they position themselves in the boyfriend/girlfriend culture influenced by similar popular cultural sources as outlined in this chapter. She too shows how the existence of popular culture in the schools, such as the school disco, influences the children’s heterosexual relationships. The going-out relationships of the children in Renold’s study are also relatively platonic (holding hands and sometimes kissing) (Renold 2005), although not as platonic as among the children in my study (seldom even holding hands). Most importantly however, is the connection she draws between being cool and being engaged in the boyfriend/girlfriend culture, which resonates with the findings in my study. Renold argues that “coming out” as a potential girlfriend or intermediary is essential for being classified as cool which is also a goal among the children in her research (but seem to be closer associated to boys than girls) (ibid.) Nina, Marit, Christel and Ida (first and foremost as intermediary) were the first who came out as girlfriends at Østli.

The conceptualisation of “coming out as a girlfriend” is illustrative of what happened among the girls during my fieldwork period. This concerns particularly the Østli girls in 5A, who were not much engaged in the context of romance before the end of the 6th grade. But at the school disco in the 7th grade, Mona, Toril and Trine are all going out with someone, and have become part of the kul group. This happened as a gradual process. Particularly Mona and Trine have achieved a solid kul position by being good at football. In addition, they also care about fashionable clothes, teenage culture and other accessories, such as sports gear. Competence in teenage culture has probably also been inspired by their three year older siblings. Mona and Toril’s femininity subject positions towards peers had thus changed from being primarily girl-child like and sporty in the 4th (5th) grades, to being kul, sporty and teenager-girl like during the 6th grade.

I have previously argued that the ten year-olds’ understanding of being kul does not include being sexy. I have also suggested that this may change as they grow older. The experiences at the school disco in the 7th grade, particularly Marit and Lisa’s
way of exposing their bodies through scanty and tight clothing and the peer pressure
to start kissing, support this assumption. I return to this issue in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how preadolescent girls (and boys) are surrounded by
sources of popular culture inspiring them to act older than their culturally
constructed age. Girls’ magazines, films and TV promote femininities and
masculinities with strong emphasis on attractive appearance, slim and fit bodies,
sexiness and dating. “Finding your own style”, “individual personality” and “how to
attract a handsome man” are the themes introduced to girls in these magazines.

Popular culture also becomes part of their lives through adult initiated activities,
such as discos. The preceding pages have shown the ambivalent interest in these
activities from the majority of the youngest girls in this study. But it has also been
shown that the popular group defines aspects of popular culture as worth striving for.
They have defined discos and the going-out practice as necessary ingredients in
doing girl as kul and “in” femininities that distance them from the world of girl-
children and the childish.

For the themes in this study the “going out” issue is of particular interest. How
preteen girls and boys act out their “love” relationships is the ultimate indication of
the sexualisation of childhood. Put another way, it is primarily the junior
heterosexuality expressed in these romantic relationships that is underlined by the
practices being similar to other play activities. As demonstrated, the overall picture
involves little physical contact, or no sex at all in these relationships. I have argued
that important reasons for this are the existence of strong peer norms, which lead to
teasing and humiliation when violated. The norms go against intimacy in the “going
out” practice, as the discussions above have illustrated. But the platonic practice
gradually changes with physical maturation and age, illustrating a dialectical
relationship between physical bodies and cultural practices. It has been shown that
dating and flirtation include more aspects of intimacy than just “going out”, and that
peer norms are also influential here. With age, the understanding of the subject
positions of girlfriend/boyfriend include dating, flirting and physical intimacy which substitute the “childish” and platonic “going out” practice, as shown in the diagram.

The children have peer norms concerning “monogamy” as well. It is not “allowed” to go out with two people at the same time. This was also stressed by Mitha and Farou during a conversation concerning the different liaisons in their class. Their indignation at the “infidelity” is interesting in view of the lack of intimacy in the love relations; it indicates that the practice of “going out” is the start of the social initiation into romance and adult love relationships. It was also argued that “going out” is an element in their understanding of the kul, which again is an element in the understanding of popularity.

The peer norms also concern dress codes and make-up, with the result that ten year-old girls don’t dress as sexily as their five year older siblings. Remember Farous’ statement “I am only ten years old” and Thale’s “Come on! We are in the 5th grade!!” All this suggests that change in preteen heterosexual practices is dependent upon change in peer norms, or rather, that there is a dialectical relationship between norms and practices.

In sum, the findings in this and the preceding chapters make it possible to argue that even if sexualisation of childhood processes exist in the children’s surroundings, these do not make them refrain from different forms of play activities or influence the way in which they relate to each other in love relationships. The above descriptions of what went on between the “sweethearts” can hardly be defined as anything other than expressions of junior heterosexuality. As such, if physical intimacy is used as the ultimate indicator of change, the heterosexual relationships between the children in the described Norwegian localities show more continuity than change. I’ll return to this discussion in the next chapter, which focuses on intergenerational interpretations of teenager-like preteen girls.
Part VI: Girls and childhood past and present
Chapter 13: “I want to be kul”: The intergenerational gap of interpretation

Every time I visit “Femmanhuset” (a mall in central Gothenburg) I see at least a dozen little children, eleven to thirteen years old, wandering about dressed in tight sexy clothes, and then I just wonder one thing. Why let children be sex objects so that the clothing companies are able to make money? Clear away everything that can be attractive or offending to adults (from Göteborgs-Posten, in Torell 2004).

This quote from Göteborgsposten introduces the main theme to be analysed in this chapter. It focuses on what I understand to be an intergenerational gap between how things are put to use and how they become subject to interpretation in how young girls do girl and femininities. How to understand this gap and thus the media reactions cited in Chapter 1? In the following, I argue that the gap is related, firstly, to an adult lack of understanding of children as both physical and cultural entities, and a lack of competence in understanding them from their own perspective. Secondly, the gap is related to an applied older heterosexual male gaze in observing the girls. I also argue that young girls, as child-like, “unfinished” bodies (Shilling 1993) in combination with peer and parental norms, seem to withstand (older) sexualisations of their everyday practices. Ten year-olds are primarily interested and engaged in different forms of play and sport activities, not in acting “older than their age”. This is particularly well-illustrated by how they relate to the opposite sex as girlfriends and boyfriends in the social context of romance discussed in the last chapter. I will now explore these issues further.

I start the chapter by presenting some examples of non-western childhoods and the notions of childhood sexuality and dress codes in these, as compared to childhood(s) in Norway. This is because I want to sketch cross-cultural similarities and differences on these issues. The discussion shows how the definition of childhood is socially constructed and makes relevant the study of children as owners of physical bodies. I then focus on aspects of Norwegian children’s sexual socialisation and education, followed by a reconsideration of the heterosexual male gaze. This is done to deduce which phenomena make up the children’s experiential structures and reference frames on gender and sexuality, and thereby constitute elements in their understandings of these issues. The chapter ends with an analysis of the story about
the “arm bracelets”, to illustrate an extreme gap in intergenerational interpretation and the role the media can play in the sexualisation of childhood.

**Non-western childhoods**

*Age-related (hetero-) sexuality*

The point of departure for this discussion is how childhood is perceived as being different from adulthood in western societies, in which the spheres of sexuality, violence and drugs are specifically targeted as undesirables in the children’s arena. This way of thinking has had consequences for practice and has become an attainable goal thanks to improved material standards of living. Firstly, children and adults usually live their characteristic “adult” and “child” lives separated into kindergartens, schools and workplaces during the daytime and in organised paid activities after school. The general improvement of the Norwegian household economy during the post war years has resulted in better and bigger houses, aided by social democratic housing policies aimed at self-owned houses for all.181 More rooms make it possible for adults and children to spend time apart in the private sphere as well. As shown in the tables in Chapter 11, many Norwegian children aspire to or have a room of their own, and many have a TV there. On the other hand, the increase in family income has also resulted in families spending more time together on adventurous activities, trips abroad, and has inspired them to take the children to restaurants. This was a rare phenomenon in the 1960’s and 1970’s, but is today a common sight, not least because of the increase in family-oriented restaurants such as *McDonalds*, *Burger King* and different pizza places (Bugge 2005). Taking children to restaurants is a more commonplace in southern European countries, such as Spain and Italy; they may have inspired Norwegians to do likewise subsequent to holiday visits to these countries.

In poorer and warmer countries outside of Europe and Northern America, children and adults are often not separated in the same manner as described above due to a different organisation of labour and production and lower standards of living. In rural, peasant areas all over the non-western world, the family as a whole usually takes part in the production of goods, where many children from an early age are

---

181 [http://www.ssb.no/](http://www.ssb.no/)
given responsibility for younger siblings or household chores, particularly girls. Residing in small houses or huts makes it impossible to keep children out of the sphere of adults. This was also the case in many parts of pre-industrial Norway (see Brøgger 1993). As a consequence, children living in small houses or huts have also observed or sensed adults having sex, and may have become acquainted with sex and sexuality from an early age. There exist many descriptions of this in ethnographic literature, for instance by Margaret Mead from New Guinea and Samoa (1930/2001, 1928/2001), Marjorie Shostak on the !Kung in The Kalahari Desert (1982), Harald Beyer Broch from Bonerate (1991), Signe Howell on the Chewong in Malaysia (1984), Thomas Gregor on the Mehinaku in Brazil (1987) and Simeran Gell from the Muria in India (1992). What these descriptions all have in common is that children sleep with their parents until the onset of puberty (approximately) and in this way occasionally experience adults having sex. Gregor describes the Mehinaku as very adulterous, which also results in children seeing and knowing the lovers of their parents (Gregor 1987). The common attitude of the adults in the above-mentioned societies is, however, that adult sexual activity is to be performed away from children or when they are asleep, which is not always possible. As such, it becomes part of the sexual socialisation of children (Shostak 1982, Gregor 1987). However, the importance of these observed experiences should not be overestimated. In the book Sexual Conduct 182 (1973/2005) John H. Gagnon and William Simon argue for the importance of understanding children’s sexuality from their points of view. They underscore that children’s interest in bodies and genitalia belong in what I have previously defined as the social contexts of play (ibid.). In the following I will give some cross cultural examples of childhood sexualities, starting with the Mehinaku.

Gregor describes the Mehinaku as a “sex positive” society, which results in children being free to explore and practice sex before puberty. 183 Small children may follow older kin into the gardens on their assignations, which lead Gregor to argue that the ten year-old Mehinaku children are far more sexually “sophisticated” than their

182 Gagnon and Simon are both sociologists, writing this book while working in the Institute for Sex research at Indiana University, USA.

183 By “sex positive” society he means a society that is openly positive to sex, in contrast to “sex negative” societies that repress and find sex sinful and full of shame. One example of the last is parts of Northern Ireland (Gregor 1987, Scheper-Hughes 2001).
American peers. Children’s play imitates sex and marriage, and some may drift off to experiment in sexual practices (Gregor 1987). Also the !Kung children engage in sex play from an early age until puberty and marriage, but it is an activity they are told is not “nice”, that it is to be done out of the sight of adults, but is not prevented. The sex play involves the touching of genitals of both the same and opposite sex, and imitation of intercourse, but no penetration (Shostak 1982).

Similar activity is reported from Norwegian kindergartens, where the limits for acceptable sex play have been debated and still are, depending on the situation in each kindergarten (Friis & Hannevig 2000). In October 2007 the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* presented a kindergarten in which sex play was permitted to an extent unknown in other similar institutions (*Dagbladet* 16/10-2007). It still varies from one kindergarten to the next, depending on the attitudes of both personnel and parents as to how liberal and permitting children are allowed to be concerning sexual experimentation. In general, some sex play is always allowed, showing the overall acceptance of children as sexual beings. The discourse of the innocent and asexual child does seem to exist in parallel with the discourse of children as sexual beings. The latter is widespread in other parts of the world. However, Broch reports no (observed) sex play between children at Bonerate; the children have been instructed to refrain from it. But the adults ignore children who touch their own genitals. In this (Muslim) society, girls are to be virgins at marriage, which may explain the strict attitude to sex play among children (Broch 1991). The !Kung have no such ideals (Shostak 1982), and also in Norway, virginity is no longer an ideal at marriage. A common practice for young couples in Norway today is to live together and even have children before getting married (if they ever do).

The above descriptions indicate some aspects of children’s sexuality, a sexuality different from that of adults in that its practice is probably less premeditated, more spontaneous and related to play activities such as “Let’s play mummies and daddies!” Sex play is one example of play imitating adult activities as preparation for later adult life (Erikson 1963/1993). Erikson says the following about childhood sexuality:

Infantile genitality, of course, is destined to remain rudimentary, a mere promise of things to come. If not specifically provoked into precocious manifestation by special frustrations or
special customs (such as sex play in groups), it is apt to lead to no more than a series of fascinating experiences which are frightening and pointless enough to be repressed during the stage which Freud called the “latency” period – i.e., the long delay of physical sexual maturation (Erikson 1963/1993:86).

Children are curious; they observe that girls’ and boys’ bodies are anatomically different, and it is exciting because many adults signal a “hide your genitals” admonitory attitude. The “sex as play” argument is emphasised by Gagnon and Simon who hold that children’s sex play “occurs most significantly in social scripts that are manifestly not sexual (e.g. doctor-nurse)” (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005:26). Refuting Freud’s notion of a strong sex drive stemming from a biological substratum, they emphasise the importance of the interplay between biological and cultural forces in forming sexual practice, understanding and identity. In other words, children are socialised and acquire cultural sexual competence through learning, experiencing and bodily practice. This implies that it is not enough to be taught theoretically about sex and sexuality. If the child is to understand the depth and implications of the adult sex words, it must experience the bodily practices.  

These practices become sexual as an adult knows them only through experience and conditioning (ibid.). I therefore suggest that the ten year-old girls and boys in my study do not understand sexuality in the same manner as adults because they lack the (older) sexual bodily experiences, both the maturation and practice, behind the words and symbols. Other researchers argue in similar veins, most importantly Epstein et al. (2003):

Thus primary school children may be strongly invested in heterosexual forms and may talk about boyfriends and girlfriends, for example, or about who they fancy, but the meanings they give to this kind of talk and practice is usually different from that of secondary school students and adults. Age, in this context, is also a discursive space framed by our understandings of what it means to be a “child”, a “teenager”, an “undergraduate”, and “adult” and so on. All these categories have socially and culturally constructed meanings, which can, and do, change in different historical, geographical, institutional and political locations (Epstein et al. 2003:3, emphasis added).  

---

184 Most children do not have this sexual experience. The exception is sexually abused children, who also often are reported to behave older than their age in this regard (Killén 1988, 2000, Myhren & Steinsbekk 2000).
185 I find their argumentation particularly valid because their study is influenced by post-structuralism and queer theory and as such prompts us to think “otherwise” about children and sexuality. Their research shows and criticizes how British primary schools promote and regulate heterosexuality as totally “natural”, and how sexuality intersects with other differences that make a difference (Epstein et al. 2003:2). The purpose of their book is to “queer” heterosexuality by making the familiar strange (ibid.:8). By underlining that children’s sexuality is different from older sexuality, their work does not think “otherwise” in quite the same manner as Renold (2005)(see Chapter 2 and 4).
It is worth noting that their argumentation resonates with that of Gagnon and Simon, even though the former are writing thirty years later and with an overall queer theoretical perspective. In a similar vein, Johansson refers to the Swedish editor of a children’s magazine *Kamratposten*, who argues that adults misinterpret children’s sexuality because they, as adults, associate love with sexuality while preteen children don’t:

It is important to distinguish between children’s and adult’s sexuality. Children surely have sexual feelings. They can feel sexual desire and enjoy touching their own bodies, but the sexuality is not eroticized as it is in the teenage years (Annica Frithiof in Johansson 1996:198, my translation).

These texts support the theoretical positions discussed in Chapter 2 on junior and older sexuality, and are important stances also for considering childhood sexuality in other parts of the world.

The childhood sexual experiences are different among the Maasai in Kenya/Tanzania from the childhoods just described. Among the Maasai, the cultural norm is that pre-pubescent girls take part in sexual activities in order to grow into mature women (Talle 2004/2007). According to Aud Talle, girls as young as ten years of age engage in sexual relations with the unmarried men, the *morans*. Through careful experimentation they do not penetrate the girl before her body is estimated to be mature enough. This evaluation is made both by the girl’s mother and the lover, to ensure that the girl is not injured in any way. The most attractive girls are the most mature ones (ibid.). This parallels what the teachers at the two Norwegian field sites expressed: The prematurely physically developed girls (and boys) are given more attention and receive more sexual comments than their peers who may be slower to develop physically (see also Thorne 1993). 186 As mentioned before, of the girls in my study, none was conspicuously precocious in this respect. They were fairly similar in physical maturation, which makes it difficult to discuss here the implications of early physical maturation for junior heterosexual relationships and femininity subject positions.

---

186 For instance, Hey argues that “evidently many men seem to find the juxtaposing of the ‘innocent’ powerlessness of the schoolgirl within the physically developed body of a woman erotically indispossession” (Hey 1997:103: note 12.) Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* is a case in point.
Talle’s description of the sexual lives of the Maasai, and particularly the tradition of sexual activity between very young girls and adolescent men, is a good illustration of different cultural ideas related to childhood innocence and sexuality (ibid.). It also illustrates how cultural traditions interact dialectically with (the cultural interpretation of) biological processes. Among the Maasai the young girls are expected to engage in sexual activity with older boys as part of the cultural ideas concerning proper prepubescent behaviour:

The “play” between the very young girls and adolescent men at these events (special places designated for this, an esoto house. Mari) has a societal meaning transcending pleasure. The morans’ “work” on the immature girls, despite the occasional use of brutal force, are acts of regenerating a moral and ordered world (Talle 2004:10, 2007).

Embedded in this “moral and ordered world” is the view that semen is essential for the maturation of young girls into women, which implies that sexual intercourse is necessary for this to happen (ibid.). Talle’s analysis indicates that some force is used in order to make the young girls conform to the cultural sexual expectations, which raises the question as to what extent they voluntarily want to take part in the activities. The pre-pubescent practices of the Maasai are extreme compared to the Norwegian context, but show that young girls’ sexuality and practices can be culturally shaped to become more adult-like. As noted above, Talle’s study also underscores the dialectical relationship between biological maturity and cultural ideas in the construction of culture-specific sexual practices. Most importantly, she shows that bodily maturation is not irrelevant in this regard in that penetration is not reached until the girls are understood as physically “ready”, and because the Morans prefer the most physically mature girls.

A similar study to Talle’s is the research done by Simeran Gell on the Muria of Central India. The Muria have institutionalised the possibility of premarital sex in the organization of the Ghotul (Gell 1992). This is a special house at the centre of the village where children of both sexes start to sleep when they reach puberty. They move out of their parents’ house and into the Ghotul where they stay until marriage. Again, puberty is a milestone. The children, particularly the girls, do not move to the Ghotul before they have reached puberty. As a consequence, the Muria experience 187 A similar argumentation is used concerning young boys needing semen from older boys and men in New Guinea (Herdt 1981).
premarital pregnancies. The Muria case is an illustration of a liberal sexual attitude regarding adolescents but not necessarily pre-pubescent children. Her research shows that the young girls’ attitude to moving to the *Ghotul* is ambivalent and negative rather than positive. As such, it is another example of how physical maturation plays an important part in forming sexual attitudes both in children and towards children. The above examples thus point to puberty as a possible universal milestone in older sexual practices among human beings. The examples also point to how cultural particularities relate to biological processes and to the importance underlined in my study of the difference between junior and older sexuality. This is also implied in the following argument by Gagnon and Simon:

Essential to our perspective is the assumption that with the beginnings of adolescence – and with the increasing acknowledgement by the surrounding social world of an individual’s sexual capacity – many novel factors come into play, and an overemphasis upon a search for continuity with infant and childhood experiences may be dangerously misleading. In particular, it may be a costly mistake to be overimpressed with preadolescent behaviours that appear to be manifestly sexual. In general, it is possible that much of the power of sexuality may be a function of the fact that it has been defined as powerful or dangerous. But this overenriched conception of sexual behaviour (to the degree that it is possessed by any individual) must largely follow upon considerable training in an adult language that includes an overdetermined conception of sexuality. Thus it does not necessarily follow that the untrained infant or child will respond as powerfully or as complexly to his own seemingly sexual behaviours as an adult observer (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005:11, emphasis added).

They point to physical maturation as culturally interpreted to give a person more sexually interest, both as subject and object, but warn against assuming that preadolescent children’s sexual behaviour is experienced as such by the children themselves. They also suggest that there is no necessary continuity between sexual play in childhood and mature sexual experiences. In other words, they hold that junior and older sexuality is different and that the latter is not necessarily a continuation of the former. The suggestion of such a breach is most important for the understanding of an intergenerational gap in the interpretation of sexual symbols. Put differently, according to Gagnon and Simon, the ten-year-olds’ understanding of sexuality is different from that of sexually experienced older people, and the onset of puberty plays a role in this regard.

**Age-related clothing-fashion codes**

While writing up this thesis, I went with my family on a three-week vacation to Costa Rica. My anthropological interests made it impossible for me not to observe
phenomena relevant for this study. I could not but notice the ease with which children and adults mixed in public social settings. The sharp demarcation line between the world of children and adults did not seem to be that important here. Children stayed up late in the evenings playing in the streets or in the yards of the small houses and flats in the proximity of adults. This lack of demarcation lines may be understood to have consequences for young girls’ femininities and presentations of self and how this is interpreted by older generations. Some impressions from Costa Rica will thus serve as an introduction to the theme of heterosexual “gazes” to be discussed in more detail in the next section, or of the extent to which that which is in the observers’ head (and eyes) determines what they see or interpret. This directly concerns the processes of internalisation of cultural notions of children, gender and (hetero) sexuality.

Costa Rica is a predominantly rural country, but the capital San Jose is like most big cities: filled with streets, houses, shops, cars, old and young people, women and men. In one of the green parks many children run about and it is not difficult to differentiate between girls and boys. Even the tiniest little girl is adorned with feminine aesthetic, be it pierced ears, a hairband or hair ribbons or a dress. The grown women of all ages and sizes often wear tight jeans and short clinging tops, which reveal body shape and skin akin to what would be interpreted as both vulgar and too alluring for middle-class norms in Norway (Klep & Storm-Mathisen 2005). The women wear these clothes with apparent pride and no shame, indicating that this is ordinary dress in their context, and involves no intention of being exceptionally sexy. In an article about Latina girls’ femininity subject positions in Sweden, Lundstrøm argues that

Latina women – when visible – tend to be represented in sexualized ways. This tendency is particularly obvious in the emerging Latin music boom with artists such as Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera and Shakira, whose ethnic “origin” as Latinas suggests sexual appeal (Lundstrøm 2006: 205).

In other words, this suggests that Latina girls’, including Ticas’, codes for dressing “normally” feminine may include more exposure than the ordinary feminine codes in Norway. This ease concerning what we interpret as too much public “sexiness” surprised me in view of the traditional role of Catholicism and

---

188 In Costa Rica, females are called “Ticas” and males “Ticos”.

---

331
patriarchal family structure in many Latin-American countries. Regarding public behaviour in Costa Rica, it became evident that some general cultural notions of femininities permitted more body and skin exposure than dominant femininities adhered to for Norwegian women. This seemed to be so concerning young girls as well.

As will be remembered, the Norwegian fashion industry marketed string briefs and bras to preteen girls, as if their bodies had developed breasts. These small bras and briefs were subsequently withdrawn from the market after recommendations from the Minister for Child and Family Affairs, on the basis that they sexualise young girls. In Costa Rica however, big grocery chains (Pali) offer similar tiny bras, so small they can only fit a very young girl below the age of ten. The same small bras are also on sale in small village markets outside of San Jose (in the village of Brasilito). The Costa Ricans are not much smaller than Norwegians, so it is obvious that the bras are intended for young girls. Pali also offers small string briefs, and on the beach all small Tica girls, even babies, wear a bikini or swimsuit. In short, the early gendering of girls includes material items and aesthetics associated with teenage and adult femininities, items which in the Norwegian context were withdrawn from the market by the Minister for Child and Family Affairs because they changed “childhood into something different from what it is” (Dåvøy in *Verdens Gang* 31/3-2005).

The overall impression from the observed interactions between girls and adults during the stay in Costa Rica is that the demarcation lines between children and adults exist but are not threatened by young girls wearing clothes that in Norway would be seen as being suitable only for older girls. Gender marking has a long tradition in such countries, where young girls have their ears pierced at a very early age. Said differently, it is unclear whether the Costa Rican adult view of young girls wearing clothes similar to their older sisters or mothers leads to interpretations of these girls as being older than their age and thus sexually alluring. In any event, the contrast to Norway is striking.

---

189 I later learned that, in general, religion does not have a strong hold on how people live their lives (personal communication with a student in Costa Rica).
190 Pali corresponds to the Norwegian grocery chain Rema 1000.
These examples remind us of the importance of cultural relativism as a methodological tool in interpreting cross-cultural gender construction. Most importantly, this stance inspires understanding of how it is that young girls’ presentations of self are interpreted according to the reference frames of the interpreter on femininities. In the Costa Rican context, young girls may be understood to be childlike girl-children even though they wear bikinis, small bras, tight jeans and short tops, if these are parts of the cultural aesthetic of suitable clothes for these age groups. Older (hetero) sexuality may not be associated with these items **when worn on girl-child bodies** as much as it is in Norway and many other western countries. Pedersen and Larsen report a similar situation among young girls and older girls in Cuba, where revealing the body and its sexuality is part of the cultural image of being feminine (Pedersen 2000, Larsen 2006). The context dependency (here cross-cultural) of the clothing-fashion code concerning young girls is here illustrated.

This leads me in the next section to the perceptual gap in interpretation between the generations, not the “cultures” as above. I will start with a presentation and discussion on how and what Norwegian children learn about sex and sexuality, or from which sources their understanding of sexuality is constructed. This understanding makes up their reference frames for interpretation of fashion and material items used both in doing girl and in peer relationships.

**The intergenerational gap of interpretation**

**Norwegian children’s sexual socialisation and education**

Norwegian children engage in sex play in kindergartens and elsewhere as part of growing up and learning codes of behaviour (Røtnes 2000, Iversen 2007). Renold argues that the primary school is a “key social and cultural arena for doing ‘sexuality’ ” (Renold 2005:1). The preceding chapters have illustrated the existence of junior (hetero-)sexuality at Østli and Vestdal. The school arena is very important for learning and acting out different femininities and masculinities. I observed no explicit (older) sex play but doing one another’s hair, giving massage, sitting on one another’s laps and chasing each other were interpreted to be expressions of junior heterosexuality. The children I got to know had passed the age of curious, open and
spontaneous sexual experimentation and I have no data pertaining whether such activities go on among them after school.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, between the 3rd and the 4th grade, when I first accompany Anthony, Oda, Ellen and Inga to the Club, I find the children engaged in sex talk, more precisely in talk about the phenomenon of homosexuality. It is evident that they do not know what it is. I explained that a homosexual was a person attracted to the same sex, and Anthony replies, “It is the same as lesbian”. The talk is thus of an inquisitive kind; wanting to find out about sexual issues, mostly accompanied by exclamations of disgust (“uh, it’s yucky”), disbelief and embarrassment. Seven year-old Cathrine tells us about a boy at the Club who repeatedly pinches her in the butt, which she does not like. She finds him “yucky”, and has told him to “piss off“. According to the staff at the Club, sexual harassment does not often happen, but sexuality is talked about and sometimes explored by children in secrecy in hidden corners in the basement. I suggest that a process of socialisation into older sexuality is going on and that the kindergarten’s childish spontaneity about sexual matters now is more secret and kept hidden from adults (and maybe also other children). In other words, sexuality has become more private and guilt-ridden than was the case previously (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005), but is discussed in places like the Club where popular (teenage) culture is a strong official influence from the leaders, an argument I elaborate on below.

My first visit to the said Club is during the summer holidays in August 2002, when the “after school institution” (Skolefritidsordningen, SFO) arrange organised activities for children while their parents are at work. On this August day, the programme is a Carnival at the Club. The children are free to dress in any costume they prefer, and many have bought one in a shop. A girl of seven years had dressed like a “disco babe” (her own words) in tights and a short top that reveal her tummy and navel. Being a disco babe fits well into the overall organization of the carnival, in that the main room is furnished as a disco. In the middle is a booth with a DJ, playing loud pop music continuously. It is hardly possible to have a conversation inside. A man, one of the club leaders, announces that “four girls are going to have a show, come and watch!” and the children sit down on the chairs by the wall. The four girls between ten and twelve years of age, two dressed in tight disco clothes, the
others in *shalwar khamis*, dance freestyle/disco style to some pop hit. Later, the two disco girls and a third dressed in a grass skirt and a very short top, dance another disco dance. On the whole, very few of the other children enter the dance floor. One exception is a mentally retarded girl dressed in tight white clothes who dances on her own most of the time.

Outside the disco room, two young leaders offer to body paint the children, and the queues are long. One seven year-old dressed as “Britney Spears”, wants a tattoo on her stomach, so does her best friend the disco babe, also baring her tummy. Most of the other children only get their faces painted. Then it is time to eat, and new queues form for hot-dogs and ice cream, before the whole arrangement comes to an end.

The reason why I include this event in this section and not in connection with the discos described earlier, is to give further illustration of how teenage and popular culture is introduced and becomes part of the lives of preteen children without them having (explicitly) asked for it. Previously, I have described disco arrangements organised by the school and how the school uses popular culture. I argue that all these events and influences work in introducing older sexuality to the children, both the lyrics and the dances, which thus become part of their childhood experiences. One of the most impressive TV broadcasts in this regard is the MTV pop music videos. Of the children in my research, the majority do not watch these videos on a regular basis, and those who occasionally do so spontaneously express dislike and disgust at all the physicality and nakedness. For instance Geir and Erlend at Vestdal, who explain that they are not very interested in music videos:

Geir: Except Michael Jackson and Elvis…
Erlend: Yes….., and then there is something that is a bit yucky then, on some of the videos…
Mari: Something you find yucky?
Erlend: Yes, when there are such rappers, they always have to show women in only underwear who are into…yes…
Geir: Yes, that is silly…
Erlend: Yes, it’s very silly. Once there was this video with women in the background, everything was in red. Red room, red sort of plastic in front of their faces, red lipstick and extremely white faces. On that lady.

These boys like Elvis Prestley and Michael Jackson, but say they do not like music videos depicting lurid women. Alternatively, they find it difficult to admit finding these pictures a bit exciting as well. They are both exciting and offending because
they are so directly sexual, and they probably have ambivalent feelings towards these videos. The fact that these boys and the other children express a dislike of sexual scenes is partly supported by the work of Gagnon and Simon (1973/2005), who, as noted above, argues that children understand adult sexuality differently from adults. Again Epstein et al. (2003) agree:

Children, then, are neither ignorant nor innocent of sexual knowledge of various kinds. For the most part, they will not have the same ways of understanding sexualities within their micro-cultures as older people (adolescents and adults) do. But children’s play and talk is profoundly heterosexualized (Epstein et al. 2003: 20, emphasis added).

Above all, the conversation sheds light on the fact that these boys, either because of their physical and cognitive immaturity or culturally learnt ideas of childhood innocence and sexual guilt, find the explicitly sexual symbols permeating popular music and culture intruding and embarrassing. This is also the case among the girls aspiring to be *kul*. For instance Marit expresses, although to the giggling consent (indicating ambivalence in that it also is a bit exciting) of Nina and Oda, that “Christina Aguilera is a bit yucky, because she strips!” 191 They do not even designate these sexual symbols as *kul*, which teenagers are more likely to do, but as “yucky”. In short, I suggest again that the preteens and teenagers relate to and interpret the symbols somewhat differently. This interpretation is also supported by Gagnon and Simon in the previous quote, that “many novel factors come into play” (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005:11) in adolescence as opposed to preadolescence, which modify or change their existing understanding of sexuality. The older sexuality embedded in popular culture becomes part of the children’s informal and unconscious sexual socialisation and their notions of sexuality which, I suggest, are modified or changed over time. This argument also holds concerning different films and TV programs, and even if girls and boys say that they do not like sexual scenes, those subconsciously contribute to how they gradually are to understand sexuality and heterosexual attraction including the image of being sexy.

As discussed before, the girls say they know what “sexy” means, but have difficulty expressing it in words. In other words, I suggested in Chapter 8 that most of the girls have not been motivated by the idea of being sexy in their presentation of self.

---

191 It is interesting that she mentions Christina Aguilera, given the interpretation by Lundstrøm above. This emphasises sexiness associated to Aguilera (and Latina girls’ “normal” femininities?)
During the conversations on this issue it is obvious that some feel uncomfortable about the theme; that it is not a common word in their everyday talk, and that they would rather not tell me what it meant. The most extreme case of reluctance is in this conversation with Aleksandra, Mina and Andrine at Vestdal:

Mari: I just want to ask you the same question that I asked the other children, even though you might find it strange. Do you know what the word “sexy” means?
All of them together: YES! (followed by giggling)
Andrine: I’m the first to say I don’t want to! (say what it is)
Mina: Pretty and such, sort of…
Mari: Pretty and such??
(Aleksandra asks if I could repeat the question)
Aleksandra: Yes, I know. Or rather, I know what it really means, but it is used for something quite different than what it really means.
Andrine: Ok, what does it really mean then?? (in a bit irritated voice)
Aleksandra: Yuck! Yuck! (æsj)
Mari: Does it mean “Yuck” (æsj)??
Aleksandra: I won’t say it!
Mari: You won’t say it? That’s ok! Then don’t.
Aleksandra: I know what it means, but I won’t say it.
Andrine: But what do we use it for then…?
Aleksandra: About people sort of wearing less clothes and in a way looks pretty and…
Mari: But you think the word is a bit yucky?
Aleksandra: Yes.
Mari: But what about you two (Andrine and Mina), do you want to say something about it?
Mina: I said the same as Aleksandra said it was used for.
Aleksandra: But it is really something quite different…
Mari: But it is used so often, that’s why I am asking you about it. It is used so much everywhere.
Andrine: It is really a very yucky word, I think.
Mina: None of us uses it.
Aleksandra: It is used about those who are looking really beautiful, really feminine. When it is used on girls they become sort of extra feminine.
Mari: Do you think any of the pop stars are sexy?
Mina: Britney.
Mari: Britney is sexy?
Mina: And Christina Aguilera. And Lopez. (Note again that these Latinos are mentioned).
Aleksandra: And models have been told to be that.

As the conversation reveals, the girls are highly ambivalent about the theme, but are acquainted with the notion of being sexy. They know it has to do with looking good, sometimes wearing few clothes and exposing a lot of body and skin, and also with something “yucky” that they resist expressing. Aleksandra repeatedly says that “it is really something quite different” and I suggest she is thinking about some sexual matters, sexual intercourse, which they would not put into words. They also know that both pop stars and models are sexy, and that it is part of the game of being a model: “Models have been told to be that”. The knowledge concerning these matters
has been “snapped” up from films, TV, magazines and general popular culture; it is primarily experienced as yucky.

Most of all, I suggest that the use of the word “yucky” indicates that the girls and boys find the sexual messages somewhat too direct, explicit and intrusive. I argue that there is a relationship between what is yucky, sexy and cool, and that some of the yucky and sexy subconsciously mutates into cool in the process of constructing a desired teenager-girl femininity. An indication of this is in the different opinions the girls at Østli express concerning a book that is read aloud in class, a book the teacher reads to them while they eat. The scenario in the book is about some children, who among other things find a condom. The teacher asks if they know what that is, and some children laughingly answer “yes!” (Farou, Marit, Mitha). The teacher asks if she is to explain what a condom is? And continues by saying that it is “something people who sleep together use to avoid having babies”. Oda looks at Mitha and says “Yuck!” Later, Mitha and Farou spontaneously tell me about the book because they find it so yucky. Later I ask Oda and Ellen if they like the book, and they said “it is kul”. Farou hears this, and her answer is:

Farou: It is weird.
Mari: What do you mean “weird”?
Farou: It is yucky. It is perverse.
Mari: Why do you think it is perverse?
Farou: Because it is about condoms and that sort of thing.
Mari: But do you know what a condom is then?
Farou: YES!!!
Mari: How do you know that?
Farou: I just know it!
Mari: Have you read about it somewhere?
Farou: NO! I just know it.

The dialogue reveals that Oda, Ellen and Farou have somewhat different opinions concerning the book. The first two find it kul, but Farou, Mitha, and also Nina, Marit and Solveig say it is “yucky” (the last three girls were asked later). I suggest that processes of learning (new) codes about (older) sexuality are going on, and that the sources of the knowledge are difficult to know for the children themselves.

According to Gagnon and Simon, parents seldom seem to inform and teach their children about sex and sexuality, a postulation that is supported by the children in the present study, as will be shown soon (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005, Epstein et al.)
2003). This gives sustenance to the suggestion that cultural ideas concerning sexuality are learned from different sources in the media and popular culture without them being consciously aware of this (see Epstein et al. 2003). But most importantly, children learn among themselves. Anthony “talking about sex” at Hudøy and the referred conversation among the girls and boys at the Club above, are examples of peer transmission of sexual “knowledge”. Thorne and Luria argue that “informal, gender-segregated groups are powerful contexts for learning”, because they are more attentive to one another outside the surveillance of adults and the opposite sex (Thorne & Luria 1986:179). Boys and girls probably talk about sexual matters on backstage arenas. This may have important consequences for children’s understanding of sexuality. Gagnon and Simon say:

Given this framework of avoidance and, more rarely, imprecise and ineffective repression of misunderstood events by parents, it is not surprising that the child gets most of his sexual information, though not his attitudes, through peer relationships. Though the parents are not providing cognitive information about sexuality for the child, they are creating postures and orientations through which information from other children will be filtered. In the peer relationships, since no children – or, at most, few – have accurate information about even reproductive functions, they will systematically misinform each other just as they are systematically misinformed by their parents about being brought by the stork, being brought in the doctor’s bag, or having been found in a cabbage patch (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005:29).

The authors point to an important mechanism in children’s sexual socialisation, namely that new understandings are filtered by the attitudes of their parents. How does this apply to the girls of non-western backgrounds; have they been informed about sexuality at home and do they know what “sexy” means?

Through our informal talks, they do not seem to be much informed about older sexuality and reproduction, but still know the meaning of “sexy”. Mitha, Farou and Samira are the girls who have the most friends among children of Norwegian origin, and thus often participate in their everyday life. Aila, Sumitra and Elizabeth are not as socially integrated, but they also produce a loud and giggling “YES!” when I ask about the meaning of “sexy”. They discuss who is to tell me; as with the others, none of them want to, and Elizabeth at last says “it’s when a person is ‘hot’ (deilig) or something like that. And sometimes, young boys only think about the boobs of the girls” (a lot of giggling). Later in the conversation these girls reveal a profound interest in what happens to their bodies during puberty, and ask a lot of questions about menstruation and pregnancy, but not sex. It is evident that they do not know
much about the normal biological processes they are soon to experience, which suggests that the school so far has not had such themes on the agenda and that their mothers have not informed them. This leads me over to a discussion of the more formal socialisation or education about sexual matters undertaken by the Norwegian school authorities.

The school curriculum in the 4th grade includes nothing about sexuality, but it is a relevant theme when they are closer to puberty, which is estimated to begin in the 5th grade. At the end of that school year the health visitor visits the classes, and talks first to the girls and then the boys. Gender segregation is done here because they believe the girls and boys then are less embarrassed and will dare ask questions. I attend both sessions. The health visitor explains in detail what happens to the body during puberty. She talks about oestrogen in girls and testosterone in boys, and how the bodies mature. She asks if anybody has a boyfriend, which Oda and Christel say they do. The health visitor then says that sexual activity is not legal until they are sixteen years old, and that in general, “it is not a good thing to have sex with too many”. Morality is thus embedded in the sex education.

In the days before the health visitor comes, the children are advised by their teacher to write down anonymously on a piece of paper any themes they would like to know about. These questions are then handed to the health visitor, which she answers in class. In general, the questions and the sessions do surprisingly not reveal much experience or knowledge of older sexual issues, despite the flow of information surrounding the children out of the school context. As such, the situation of the children I got to know corresponds to what Gagnon and Simon found more than thirty years ago, regarding which they say “There is nothing in this peer-peer learning process which suggests that the children have any integrated body of sexual knowledge “(ibid.: 29). However, the British children in the work of Renold (2005) and Epstein et al. (2003) seem to express some more knowledge than the Norwegian children in my study, but such a comparison is only tentative. The seeming lack of knowledge is worth noting considering the increased sexualisation of western societies in general: Children still seem rather ignorant about adult sexuality. In the lessons with the health visitor the girls are mostly preoccupied with the bodily changes they were beginning to experience, the on start of menstruation and other
changes. The most advanced question from the girls is “What is an orgasm?” The health visitor blushes and replies that “it’s not easy to answer that question in a simple manner” and says something about “pleasurable feelings” and leaves it with that. Christel then says in a grumbling voice that “the boys say yucky things that have to do with sex, and we don’t like it!” This confirms that they do engage in sex talk, and that this is primarily so of the boys. After the session with the boys, Oda asks me:

Oda: Did the boys ask about many “pervo” things?
Mari: What do you mean about “pervo” things?
Oda: About such yucky things – girls and such.

She suggests it is Tommy and Anthony who ask most of these questions indicating that they often engage in sex talk, but I do not tell her about the boys’ session. In general the boys do not ask questions concerning bodily maturation, but about the practice and techniques of sexual intercourse, for instance “How do we do it?” and “How did people invent having sex?” As such, the questions asked indicate different interests related to gender and heterosexuality; the boys are interested in the sex act itself, the girls in bodily changes. In a similar vein Thorne and Luria report that the girls in their research are preoccupied with romantic issues, and the boys with heterosexual activity (Thorne & Luria 1986), like the Norwegian boys above. The gendered difference of interest probably reflects what boys and girls talk about in their sex segregated arenas, for instance that boys peek into sources of pornography. But in general the whole session in the Norwegian school suggests that the boys are not very knowledgeable about sexual issues either. They are acquainted with and use a lot more words and expressions than previous generations because these words and expressions have become parts of public discourses. Still, without personal experience of older sexual practices the words are just words without much depth or understanding (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005, Epstein et al. 2003). This is often not understood by adults, parents and teachers alike, who may suspect children with a rich sex vocabulary of being sexually active as well (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005).

---

192 That was one of my methodological strategies in gaining and keeping their confidence, telling them that I did not tell anybody about the things they talked to me about.
In short, there seems to be a gap in how the boys (and girls) use sexual terminology as assaults, and their knowledge concerning what the expressions really denote in practice. This postulation is supported by Thorne and Luria, who implicitly also stress the difference between junior and older sexuality:

In elementary school life the overtly sexual is mostly a matter of words, labels, and charged rituals of play. In identifying this behaviour as "sexual", we are cautious about imposing adult perspectives. When children say words like “fag” or “fuck”, they rarely share adult meanings, as was apparent in their use of “fag” essentially as a synonym for “nerd” and as an epithet occasionally applied to girls as well as to boys (Thorne & Luria 1986:185).

The words are used as a means to sustain gender boundaries: If girls play too much with boys they are teased for having a “crush” on someone or of being a tomboy, while a boy playing too much with girls risks being accused of homosexuality or of being a sissy. In this manner, the heterosexual hegemony works to uphold gender boundaries. Anthony, however, was never suspected of homosexuality despite spending much time with girls. He avoided such suspicion because he dated girls and spoke and acted according to norms of heterosexual masculinity and competence.

The use of sex words in these matters increase with age, and is mostly found among boys. At Østli I heard utterances such as “Petter has fucked Mona”. According to Johansson it is quite common that adults take such utterances literally, that they suspect preteen children of having sex when they go out with someone (Johansson 1996). In the focus group interview, the Østli girls a year older than Nina, Farou and the others, shed light on this parental suspicion by saying that parents always ask “What did you do??” when they had spent time with a boy. This phenomenon also underlines the intergenerational gap of interpretation concerning junior and older heterosexuality.

However, the overall conclusion concerning the Norwegian children’s sexual expertise and knowledge is that it is surprisingly limited in view of all the sexual information and symbols permeating everyday life. This constitutes the background (and the backbone) of the generational gap concerning girls’ femininities and presentations of self in addition to the theme of the heterosexual male gaze.
The heterosexual male gaze reconsidered

The cultural image of being sexy permeates all kinds of advertising, not only clothes for preteen girls and teenagers, but also furniture, cars and particularly perfume, as exemplified by David Beckham. I argued in Chapter 8 that he is primarily constructed to a heterosexual female gaze. The sexualisation of advertising and of public spaces in general is inspired by pornography, which in essence is constructed through and dominated by a male gaze. The sexualisation of young girls’ fashion and clothes may be read as the ultimate illustration of gender asymmetry, heterosexual hegemony and male power. The objectification of young girls is made without them being aware of this at all.

The Swedish grandfather’s way of thinking in the beginning of this chapter introduces the existence of a gap in the interpretation of ten year-olds’ presentation of self. Frithof cites a similar attitude when parents suspect their preteen children of having sex when they have a girlfriend or boyfriend, because of their strong (adult) association of love and sexuality (in Johansson 1996). Torell discusses this gap in understanding under the heading of “Adults and Children Debating Sexy Girls’ Clothes” and shows both the divergence of opinion among children and among girls and adults (Torell 2004). Important to the debate discussed by Torell is the depiction of different relevant femininities: the childish girl-child, the kul and the sexy teenager-girl. Some of the girls involved in the debate endorse string briefs and argue for the freedom to wear what they want without being labeled “bitch” and “slut”, while other girls say they are too young to wear string briefs, which they find uncomfortable, yucky and too exposing. They want to be free not to use such underwear. As argued previously the cultural notion of being sexy is not found to motivate the youngest girls in my study, but does motivate some of the eleven year-old girls in Torell’s article. This point to the variations of femininities cross-culturally, and of the importance of different peer cultures and peer power for deciding what is “in” and when. The article debate also shows how the dialectical relationship between biological maturation and cultural practices find different expressions, as in the quote below from a girl opposing the use of sexy clothes for her age group. It also shows, contrary to the girls in my research, that the word “sexy” is part of their spoken language:
Do you need to look like a bitch at school parties? Everyone in my class has a v-cut top, leg-warmers pressed down over the buffalo-shoes, and transparent skirts so you can see the sexy briefs. Is it necessary to look that stupid? (Torell 2004: 263).

The extract is an example of the diversity in girls’ femininity subject positions and of how preteen girls’ construction of gender is inspired by different cultural images of doing girl shared by both girls and adults. The girls I got to know who argued that “I am only ten years old” (Farou), and Thale’s “Hello, we are only in the 5th grade!” may be read to share similar ideas for young girls’ femininities as the grandfather and the girl in the quote above.

In Chapter 6 the most important femininities for the ten year-old girls in my research were visualized as being distributed along a continuum of teenage identification. Related to the themes in the present chapter, the “sexy” teenager-girl femininity may be added to that illustration, making it look like the one below:

```
Vanlig
Soss
Nerd

Nerd     Berte
Kul
Sexy

Girl-child-------------------------------------------------Teenager-girl
```

The ten year-olds’ femininity subject positions of a kul teenager-girl, however, does not overlap the sexy subject position, but is likely to do so more when they become actual teenagers. The development of the understanding of the kul related to heterosexuality and age can be diagrammed as follows:
The dotted line between being sexy and being kul is to underline that being sexy need not be a conscious and wanted part of the thirteen year-olds’ presentations of self. I thus propose that the main difference between the ten year-olds understanding of being kul and that of the thirteen/fourteen year-olds’ is closely related to the quality of their heterosexual experience. Being sexy is legitimate and motivating among teenagers and adults, and as the preceding pages indicate, the ten/eleven year-olds I got to know do not identify with that extreme yet. 193

Drawing on theories from psychoanalytic research, Torell argues that one reason for the gap and the reactions like the one from the grandfather in the introductory quotation is the adult’s unconscious “aim at protecting themselves from the unwanted desire for children’s bodies” (Torell 2004: 270). I find this postulation to be rather extreme but related to the adults’ fear of children being sexually abused. I suggest this fear, in addition to fear of an earlier sexual debut and the increasing number of teenage pregnancies, is strong motivational forces behind the moralistic reactions towards girls acting older than their age. 194 However, it is too early to hold that, for instance, the eroticization of young girls’ fashion indirectly leads to more sexual abuse. As indicated, prematurely developed girls may in general be more at risk than others because they get more attention and naturally look older than their years. The intergenerational gap in interpretation clearly does not reduce the chances for sexual abuse. Still, it is worth remembering that pedophilia and sexual child abuse concern only a tiny minority of men (and women).

As introduced in Chapter 1, the public media and governmental discourses on young girls imply that they are not to act older than their age. If they do they mess up our social classification system and are thus viewed as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1997). This is because the culturally learnt images of preteen girls depict them as child-like and sexually innocent girl-children, not sexually alluring teenager-girls. In other words the cultural notions of preteen girls and boys view them as different

193 An alternative presentation is conceptualizing “being kul” (and the other diagrams depicted in the same manner in previous chapters) as a cultural model or schema with the different elements as parts of its connectionist network (see Strauss 1992, Strauss & Quinn 1997).

194 The theme of sexual abuse is extremely important but too complicated to be addressed separately in this study.
from adults concerning sexuality, which this study has conceptualized through the concepts of junior and older (hetero-) sexuality. This point to an unrecognized contradiction: When children are understood to be sexually different from adults and are expected to act according to the commonly held femininities of their age, that is as girl-children, why do the media and others believe they understand sexual matters in the same way as adults do, implying they are “similar”, as opposed to “different?”

In other words, if they are different from adults are they not likely to understand (older) sexuality differently too? If the implications of children’s lack of older sexual experience are to be taken seriously, this latter way of thinking implies that the girls neither understand sexual symbols in the same way nor do they signal sexual contact when dressed in fashionable (sexy) clothes. I argue that this unconsidered contradiction lies hidden in the gap in the intergenerational interpretation of girls merely wanting to be kul and fashionable, not sexy. 195 The story of the “bracelets” exemplifies this gap and concludes this chapter.

The story of the “arm bracelets”

During the autumn of 2003 and spring 2004, I notice that many of the children, both girls and boys, wear plastic bracelets of many different colours. In particular, Erlend at Vestdal has many. Both his underarms are covered in bracelets, one side red and the other green. In general I do not find the children much preoccupied with the bracelets, other than looking at and exchanging them. However, in March 2004 the Norwegian TV News and leading newspapers announces that primary school children were being encouraged to participate in advanced sex activities by wearing these bracelets. This is because each colour symbolizes a sexual activity, and by wearing a certain colour the wearer communicates interest in certain activities. Alternatively, that he/she already has participated in them. The denoted activities vary from advanced sexual practices (oral and anal sex) to just giving a hug. The “game” consists of breaking a bracelet on another’s arm, obliging that person to do

195 This gap was most evidently expressed in Dagbladet (14/12-07), in an article with the title Blikkfang (Eyecatcher), discussing the sexualisation of girls and boys through celebrities like Paris Hilton and David Beckham. The article also underscores the increased focus on being sexy, thus supporting my argument that “Sexy is the rule” (Chapter 8). However, the article starts with the heading “Of course ten year-old girls and boys want to be sexy” (ibid., my translation). How does the journalist know? There are no references to ten year-olds’ opinions, illustrating this female journalist’s application of an eroticized adult gaze in her interpretation of fashionable ten year-old children (Trude Ringheim in Dagbladet 14/12-07).
the activity prescribed by the colour of the broken bracelet. The media writes with alarm about the bracelets and explains in detail the meaning of each colour.

The plastic arm bracelets

The headmaster at one Norwegian primary school forbids children to wear such bracelets to school, apparently because the rings and their symbols are given too much attention in class and are disturbing the teaching. In addition the bracelets lead to too much focus on sex, which “should not preoccupy the minds of these children and which it is our duty to protect the children against” (*Dagbladet* 25/3-2004, my translation). The existence and workings of the cultural image of the innocent child’s (sexual) protection is here very well illustrated and may be read to have motivated the headmaster’s reactions.

These bracelets, called “Fuck bracelets” (*Pulebånd*, but usually only *P-bånd*), “Sexbracelets” or “Whorebracelets” by some of the users, but not the producers, were first introduced by Madonna and other pop stars in the 1980’s. They were then called “jelly bracelets”.* When they were introduced in 2002-2003 they were known as “sex bracelets” in some parts of the US. It is not known if Madonna and the other pop stars connected the rings to sex. I first hear about them at a party. The shops selling them in Norway (*Glitter* and *Cubus*) are advised by the authorities to withdraw them from the market, and the week after the articles and broadcasts, the bracelets are barely to be seen in the shops or on children. Erlend’s underarms, which had been decorated with green and red rings, are now empty. His mother has taken them away, “I don’t know where”, he says. Similar stories are told by other children. Parents are ashamed and worried and the children were not allowed to wear them. The reactions indicate that shameful associations are connected to childhood sexuality in public Norwegian contexts.

---

196 Tommy at Østli said that it was Anthony who told the others about that name….


198 Just as with the baby bikinis and small bras and string briefs mentioned previously.
During my many months of fieldwork nothing had reached my ears or eyes concerning sexual practices connected to these bracelets (or older sexual activity at all). Therefore, I wanted to hear the children’s points of view on both the bracelets and the media debates. In the following I will first present a conversation with Mitha and Farou, then with Vilde and Carla a year older.

Mari: I know you wore such arm rings. How did you use them?
Both: We exchanged them!
Mitha: It was popular at that time with sharp colours and such.
Mari: What was popular about them?
Mitha: The colours.
Farou: Just to possess them, to have as many as possible, maybe your whole underarm or something.
Mari: Exactly, many different colours. But how did you choose the colours?
Mitha: We bought them, I bought one colour, for instance pink, yellow or green, there were about 12 in a package, they cost 20 kroner, and I exchanged one with another colour.
Mari: But what did you think when you read about the meaning of the colours in the newspaper?
Mitha: I thought that we did it as play only, I cannot believe that others took that seriously.
Mari: But now they are not as popular, are they?
Mitha: No, now it’s Pokémon cards.
Mari: Is it the case that the bracelets are left at home and Pokémon is “in”?
Mitha: Yes. But some children took it a bit seriously. The 7th graders did break one another’s bracelets, but they did none of the things described in the newspapers. It was a game.
Mari: Was it a game like Pokémon?
Mitha: Yes.

In other words, the girls classified wearing the bracelets as a game on par with playing Pokémon, that is solely as play. The 6th graders express the same opinions as above, but also irritation, anger and embarrassment about being suspected for doing the things denoted by the colours.

Mari: How did you react when you read about the arm rings in the newspaper? Were you surprised?
Vilde: Yes, I thought it was a bit silly.
Mari:?
Vilde: We don’t do anything with them, we understand that much!
Carla: It is sort of embarrassing if our parents believe we do such things, it is a bit silly that they broadcast it, because we don’t do it, not many, if any, do it!
Mari: But at this school in Bergen, the headmaster said the children were not allowed to wear the bracelets to school. What do you think about that?
Vilde: It is very very stupid! It is really far out! They have to understand that we are able to use our brains and think! We are not as stupid as we look, so to speak! (they all agree).

These girls, who I believe are representative of the practices and opinions in the dominant peer culture because of their strong association with the popular groups (Mitha and Farou as associates to Nina, Marit and Ida and Vilde and Carla being the popular girls in their grade) argue that they are able to “use their brains” and “think
themselves” about what is proper sexual behaviour and what is not. They feel humiliated at being suspected of being unable to judge what the right thing to do is. They find it particularly humiliating that their parents get information about this, and may believe their daughters are engaged in the activity. When I ask Nina what she thinks of the articles, she blushes and says “it was all yuck”. It is evidently far removed from their intention to even think about taking the codes and symbols seriously. They didn’t even know what the practices implied. In this case, the argument from the marketing industry that children are competent consumers (Brembeck et al. 2004) is illustrated in that commonsense competence motivates them to ignore any ultimate discovery of sexual symbolism. Here this competence also serves as a barrier against becoming “too old too soon”. The debates in the newspapers and on the internet show that all children there expressed similar opinions to the girls included in my research. As one US teenager remarked: “It’s kind of outrageous and ridiculous. I think the media is making an issue out of nothing”. 199

The ironic consequence of the media debate is that instead of protecting childhood innocence, the media contributed to informing many children about sexual practices they only suspected exist. In other words, the media represents the sexualisation of childhood when the intent was the contrary, namely to protect children’s sexual innocence. A similar point is made by Gagnon and Simon in the argument concerning the ignorant knowledge of children in sexual matters:

Unfortunately, these belief systems and their origins among children have not been systematically studied, and the most likely reason for this is that the research itself must be a sort of sex education. In the exchanges between child and interlocutor the child will not remain unchanged, and even if he is asked only the meaning of certain terms, he will be in that moment informed or made curious (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005:29).

The reactions among Norwegian children depicted in the newspapers and among those I got to know indicate that they were not much informed about the bracelets’ sexual connotations when they were at their most popular in the autumn of 2003. However, after the debate, more children became versed in different sexual practices than before, and do not want, or are not allowed to wear the bracelets. So in a sense the moral reactions or panic among the adults spoiled an “innocent” game of enjoying bright colours and making exchanges, and most ironically, resulted in

199 (http://msn.com/id/3676755).
fewer sexually innocent children than before. As such it is more the media reactions than the bracelet game itself that contribute to sexualisation of childhood.

Even if the children in my study did not know much about the sex codes behind the bracelets, or that the bracelets were associated with something sexual, the fact that they knew they were called Pulebånd made the bracelets introduce older sexuality to some extent into their everyday lives. As such, the very existence of arm rings of that name, contribute to the sexualisation of childhood as it was defined in Chapter 1. I will return to this issue in the concluding chapter.

Adults seem to believe or fear that children understand sexual symbols in the same way as they do and that they have interest in the same sexual themes. I have argued that this is paradoxical and not so. Children are sexual beings from before birth and lead their own (junior) sexual lives in their own spheres. Their sexuality is, however, not the same as adult sexuality because they do not have the same cognitive and physical maturity and bodily experiences.

Adults also fear that children are easily led into sexual activities and easily abused. The anxiety and suspicion are first and foremost a result of the acknowledged power asymmetry between adults and children and the amount of reported criminal cases. It is not known whether acting older than one’s age leads to more sexual abuse. But given the present sexual climate in some contexts in western countries and Norway there are reasons for concern. Girls have been exploited through internet contacts and some are easy prey in the search for excitement and maybe a desire to belong “somewhere”. But in general, the impressions from the fieldwork emphasize children as more competent in these matters than adults often think. Adults’ anxiety may indicate a lack of trust in children’s ability to judge and demonstrate common sense in sexual matters, as expressed by Vilde above.

**Conclusion**

The bracelet story is an extreme example of an intergenerational gap in the interpretation of the same material items. What makes this case special is the role the media played in the different interpretations. Prior to the debate, the bracelets were
just plastic rings in bright colours for most people, young and old, men and women. After the announcement of their symbolic connection to sex, they became highly ambiguous and sinful. I have argued that the reasons for this, and also for adults interpreting girls as sexy, when they perceive themselves to be merely fashionable and kul, are twofold. The reasons are connected to different understandings concerning sexuality and the interpretation of meaning. Being sexually mature and active provides other associations than virginity does in the understanding of older sexuality. Despite children’s engagement in sex play and in using sex words, virginity and sexual inexperience still dominate the sexual arena and practices of preteen children.

The girls’ ideas of sexuality result from bodily experiences and sexual socialization and are different from adults’. As such, the gap in interpretation of sexual symbols can be understood as the result of uneven biological and cognitive maturation underlining the fact that children (and adults) are not only social constructions but also living physical beings. This argument also explains why the ten year-olds understanding of being kul does not include being sexy. As Prout argues, children are “both material and representational entities” (Prout 2000:1-2). Thus the gap underscores the interpretative importance of viewing children both as being and becoming for understanding children’s everyday practices.

Another related reason for the gap in intergenerational interpretation is how humans categorize their social universe into age categories, involving culturally correct codes for age-related behaviour. This way of thinking explains our response to “sexy” girls as a reaction to matter out of place, muddling up our internalized social categories. All this constitutes the perceptions of why so many in our society react when young girls present themselves as “older than their age”. The adult reactions also point to a possible ignorance of the existence of children’s own peer norms and experience-near categories for understanding continuity and change in junior heterosexual practices, as the preceding pages have shown. The concluding chapter will draw this line of argumentation to an end.
Chapter 14: Continuity and change

The view of childhood as a social and cultural construction is thus to some extent a relativist one. It reminds us that our contemporary notion of childhood – of what children are and should be – is comparatively recent in origin, and that it is largely confined to Western industrialized societies. The majority of the world’s children today do not live according to “our” conception of childhood (Buckingham 2000:10).

The extract emphasises Ariés’ (being one of the first, but not the only) argument concerning the category of childhood being socially constructed (Ariés 1962). My study has described aspects of Norwegian childhoods and shown that Norwegian preteen girls and boys are much engaged in different sorts of play and sports activities. Some of their particular play reflected impressions from popular culture and TV films, which illustrates that these sources inspire children to some extent. Most importantly, the strong and widespread interest in different forms of sports for girls and boys alike at both field sites indicates the importance placed on sports in the Norwegian society through schools and mass media. The widespread participation of both genders was read as indicative of gender equality. Being healthy and sporty were seen as being inherent in the notion of the Norwegian “good childhood”. This includes notions of sheltered and wondrous innocence, in addition to outdoor activities, fresh air and free play (see Chapter 1, note 3).

This chapter concludes the study by first discussing the findings in the light of continuity and change by answering the research questions regarding the sexualisation of childhood as defined in Chapter 1. Then I discuss the ramifications of the findings concerning new clothing-fashion codes, new femininities and new sexualities. The chapter ends with an overall conclusion.

The sexualisation of childhood?

In the following suggestions on continuity and change I draw on conversations and interviews with the teachers at both field sites and historical material from three generations of women presented by Nielsen and Rudberg (2006). In addition, my memories of my own childhood in the late 1960’s are part of my reference frame for interpretation, and obviously the experiences as expressed and observed in the girls
(and boys) already analysed. Through a presentation of the overarching research question concerning the sexualisation of childhood, I present a careful suggestion of what seems stable and what has changed in preteen girls’ femininity subject positions and peer relationships.

In Chapter 1, I defined the “sexualisation of childhood” as processes where adult conceptualisations of sex, sexuality and sexual signs and symbols permeate pre-adolescent children’s social contexts, (peer) relationships and sexual practices. What do the preceding pages tell us about these processes? I argued that the sexualisation of childhood operates on two levels, which are considered dialectical in nature. The following discussion will draw these levels and the empirical findings together. I start with what was introduced as “the second level” in Chapter 1, which is the children’s wider milieu or the Norwegian society in general. It includes different forms of commercialism, such as television programs, magazines, films, pop culture and fashion. Embedded in the overall surroundings are also the presented notions of the pure and innocent childhood. I have argued and illustrated that sexual signs and symbols are existent in many of the various commercial elements and suggested that this is something “new”. This is indicated by the various reactions in the media by the (Child) Ombudsperson and the political authorities to what they interpret to be an eroticisation directed at young girls. All these “new” phenomena are viewed as part of the “commercialisation of childhood” issue, in which an increasing number of children’s experiential spaces are endorsed by the market economy (see Chapter 5). One example is the vast amount of paid, organised leisure activities; another is the production of small bras, string briefs and baby bikinis, and lastly the “sexy” advertisement in 2001 for school sweaters (see Chapter 1, page 4). These examples also reflect the relationship between childhood, gender and the consumer society.

The preceding pages have also presented examples of girls’ magazines and how they focus on body, appearance and the importance of being sexy. The pop videos and popular culture in general are also filled with sexual innuendo and symbols. Fashion for young girls has increasingly imitated teenage fashion, which resulted in a leading Norwegian teenage shop, *BikBok*, opening a shop in 2005 aimed specifically at
“tweenagers”. 200 In general, the clothes are teenage clothes in small sizes, but the sexy aesthetic has been somewhat downplayed. Elin Borg supports the claim that clothes for children have become more adult-like over the last fifteen years (Borg 2006). She has studied how gender is presented on children in four *H&M Rowells* catalogues from 1987-2004. 201 She finds that the clothes increasingly show an adult design in both colour and form, being clingier for girls in 2004 than in 1987. This is interpreted as an indication of a sexualisation of childhood, exemplified by the case of girls (ibid.: 90).

In short, the girls’ many social contexts and wider surroundings are filled with representations of sexy (and sporty) femininities. The sexualisation of childhood is reflected in these commercial sources and inspires doing girl through the intermingling of the *kul*, sporty and sexy. The *kul* has many ramifications, for instance in relation to sports, where eroticisation is also represented. The different sport idols increasingly sport a sexy image, such as David Beckham advertising for boxer shorts and perfume and the cyclist Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjå for clothes. Advertisements for sport items and clothes clearly show elements of the sexy trend also discussed in relation to the *Norway Cup* arrangement (Chapter 8).

The primary level in the sexualisation of childhood concerns the girls’ social interactions, experiences and presentations of self through bodily representations (clothes, make-up, hairstyle, language and body language), femininity subject positions and different practices. The levels are considered to be dialectically related, in the sense that the second level influences the girls’ presentations of self through femininities depicted in magazines, films, pop videos and advertisements, which the girls relate to and sometimes imitate. This again inspires these sources to continue their presentations, “because this is what young girls want”. As we may recall, the dominant femininities presented are those of being *kul* and sexy, which for girls implies a revealing body attitude, much like the *berte*. However, being *kul* and sporty is also a theme. I have argued that the issue of sexualisation is found to be present in both the cultural understanding of the *kul* and the sporty, through a focus on the body and *kul* clothes, in that fashion and advertisements increasingly

200 They used the term “tweenagers” in their advertising in connection with the opening of the shops.
201 *H&M Rowells* is a mail order catalogue.
play on older (hetero)sexuality. As such, sources in sexualising girls and boys are definitely as pervasive almost everywhere in their surroundings as they are in society at large. Therefore it was worth noting that the girls emphasized that being sexy was not something they considered: “Hello – we are only in the 5th grade!” In other words, their understanding of the kul did not, consciously at least; include older heterosexuality, or being sexy.

Sexualisation is illustrated by the fact that make-up is introduced to ever younger and younger girls, although the youngest girls in this study did not wear make-up on a regular basis; they mostly used it for play and occasionally at discos, and I only observed lip gloss. But young girls in 2003 definitely know about and possess more make-up than previous generations, which represents a change in cosmetic consumption (Berg 2004). So far, peer norms and parents resist make-up on ten year-olds as an everyday practice. There seems to exist little difference between the working-class dominated Østli and upper-middle classes at Vestdal in this regard. There is a slight tendency, however, to use make-up on a regular basis a year later at Vestdal, that is in the 8th as opposed to the 7th grade. The organised jazz dancing in the area was also interpreted as being less explicitly influenced by (sexualised) popular culture than the freestyle/disco at Østli. If these are permanent and lasting tendencies, they may indicate that femininities associated to the childish girl-child motivate girls for a longer period at Vestdal than at Østli as part of their family history and experiential structures. This again gives some support to Walkerdine’s postulation that the eroticisation of young girls meets less opposition in the working classes, and that it is the middle classes that first and foremost worry about the disappearance of childhood (Walkerdine 1997). However, possible class differences related to the interpretation of a kul subject position for ten year-old girls do not undermine a postulation of a direct relationship between kul femininities and the consumer society. In other words, the research clearly shows that the kul subject position is constructed in the intersection of gender and consumerism.

202 I visited Østli in June 2006, and observed that four of the girls used make-up, all of them of Norwegian background. Two of them belong to the popular group described in the study. They are thirteen years old in 2006.
Besides the fact that fashion and aesthetic for young girls has become more teenage-like and is often eroticised, there is another dimension in the girls’ and boys’ presentations of self that has changed in the last decades. That is the use of sex words in everyday language, a use which is gendered. The words “fuck”, “homo”, “whore”, “mother fucker”, and the like were used in fights and when assaulting one another at Østli. It was first and foremost boys’ language, where accusations of homosexuality dominated and thus emphasised the heterosexual and masculine hegemony (and homophobia). However, as discussed in the last chapter, there are reasons to believe that the majority do not know the meanings and implications of the words because they lack the sexual maturation and experience denoted by them (Gagnon & Simon 1973/2005, Thorne & Luria 1986, Epstein et al. 2003). It may also be that knowledge and use of the words varies according to social background, in that working-class fathers are more apt to use such swear words than upper middle-class white collar workers (see Willis 1977, Bourgois 1995). 203

This change in verbal language is also related to how young teenage girls talk about their best girl friends in a love language, for instance “darling”, ”baby”, “I love you so much”, “hugs and kisses” and the like when they chat on msn. The ten year-old girls in this study did not engage in this activity in 2003, but do now as twelve/thirteen year-olds. It reflects a change in how girls talk about, without necessarily relating to, physical intimacy. The language is more intense and sensual than previously, which paradoxically is not reflected in how they relate to the opposite sex as girlfriends and boyfriends in the social context of romance. As discussed in Chapter 12, the boyfriend/girlfriend culture was characterized by ambivalence and often fears of intimacy among the ten year-olds, and was hardly physical at all. As twelve/thirteen year-olds, moderate physical contact has ensued, as witnessed at the school disco in the 7th grade (holding hands, kissing).

These details on heterosexual relationships among preteens were also supported by other researchers (Thorne & Luria 1986, Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Merton 1996, Nielsen & Rudberg 1989, 2006, Renold 2005, Johansson 1996) and are crucial findings in my research. This is because they counteract rather than support the last

203 My fieldwork did not reveal such class differences, maybe because I did not get to know the boys (and their fathers) well enough.
parts of the postulation on the sexualisation of childhood as defined above. It is my conviction that if children today are more deeply influenced by older sexuality than previous generations, this would particularly show itself in their intimate relationships with their boy- and girlfriends. They would probably also show more interest in other teenage activities besides all sorts of sports and play. The preceding chapters do not confirm this.

The teachers at both field sites support my interpretations. Two of them have worked as teachers for more than twenty years, the other for ten, and all remember how their generation related to the opposite sex. The 5th grade teacher at Vestdal, Inger, grew up at Vestdal in the 1960’s, has raised three children and still lives there. So has Kjersti at Østli. As such, they are representative informants on continuity and change in children’s culture over the last thirty years. As experienced teachers, they have been close observers of hundreds of children’s everyday lives. Inger does not think the children of today are much different from the children in her childhood:

We were very interested in boys when I was eleven years old. I remember we played a lot, but so do the children today. They play a lot and have done so all along, maybe a little less this year (6th grade) than before. That may be because they are a year older, but also that the reorganization of the classes has resulted in bigger groups, and then it might have become important to not be too childish….Recently I observed that they had started playing Cops and Robbers again, and in this game both sexes participate. So that’s something. And then I have observed some of the girls playing ‘horses’, they sit on each others backs (the horse) and run relay. This is childish play. So I don’t think their activities have changed much.

Inger points to two important themes already discussed in the study, namely the issue of “play” and “childishness”. From the adults’ point of view, children are “childish” as long as they engage in lots of play activities, which she argues they have done through the 5th grade and also in the 6th grade. However, she indicates, as the preceding pages also do, that from the children’s points of view it is important not to be classified as childish by one’s peers. They thus have to strike a balance between not being too childish or too teenage like.

Inger holds that eleven year-olds in 2003 do not seem to be different regarding heterosexual relations than she and her generation was. This view is supported by Kjersti at Østli:

Mari: Do you think children today grow up too fast, that they act as teenagers earlier than in the 1970’s?
Kjersti: I don’t really think so. I don’t think, not when they are that young, not most of them, if we talk about the majority. I don’t think they do, because I can not really see big differences from my own schooldays. There are boy and girl cooties, there is the catching of caps, giggling and excitement, it’s just the same things. Even among the girls I thought had skipped all the children’s books and gone right into the *Spice Girls* culture, you see? But I have not observed great differences concerning the relations between the sexes.

In other conversations, the teachers share the view that “children are to be children as long as possible”. They are thus critical of girls acting older than their age, which strengthens the validity of their statements. Kjersti says some girls start early with make-up and serious dating but not as young as ten/eleven year-olds. Marie, the other Østli teacher, says she has observed an increase in heterosexual interest in the 5th grade, but “not much, just in a very childish manner, that kind of childish ‘being in love’, (være forelsket) but no more than that. That’s my experience anyhow.” The poem by Anthony in Chapter 12 suggests some innocence also a year later. The cited work of Johansson supports this interpretation of the same junior love pattern (Johansson 1996) and is understood as a variant of play by her and in my research.

In their previously cited intergenerational study on girls, Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) describe the lives of girls across three generations. The first was born around 1910, the second 1945 and the third around 1970. They show how life, career expectations and femininities have changed considerably over the years, but that the earliest start of serious dating is relatively constant: thirteen-fourteen years of age. It is worth noting that their material shows that working-class girls have serious boyfriends earlier than middle-class girls do. Among the youngest generation born in 1970, the working-class girls start serious dating in secondary school (thirteen-fourteen years) and middle-class girls in high school (fifteen-sixteen years). As such, Nielsen and Rudberg support Walkerdine in that working-class girls are eroticized earlier than middle-class girls (Nielsen & Rudberg 2006, Walkerdine 1997). In other words, working-class girls engage in older heterosexuality earlier.

The older girls at Østli exemplify slight signs of class distinctions by starting to use make-up and string briefs earlier than the girls at Vestdal. But serious dating does not seem to start earlier today than among the youngest women (born around 1970)

---

204 By “serious” dating I understand dating that includes physical intimacy like kissing and maybe genital touching.
included in Nielsen and Rudberg’s work, that is at its earliest when they are thirteen-
fourteen years old. Therefore I reiterate that peer heterosexual relationships 
demonstrate more continuity than change, which would not indicate that the 
practices of children of 2002-2004 illustrated older rather than junior 
heterosexuality. Of the children in my study, this also includes the leading and 
popular girls. They essentially keep their boyfriends at a distance. Nina was thought 
to be an exception in trying to go beyond, or negotiate the norm of no intimacy. This 
was demonstrated by the incident at Hudøy Island with Petter and she wanted to kiss 
Morten, which made him break off the relationship. Alternatively, what she 
indicates is that the peer group is approaching puberty, which will lead to different 
peer norms for all, as illustrated at the school disco in the 7th grade.

To sum up: The answer to the question concerning the sexualisation of childhood is 
both yes and no. The eroticized teenage and popular culture and aesthetic is part of 
increasingly younger girls’ and boys’ everyday lives; popular music is played in 
kindergartens and primary schools, and young girls play Spice Girls, 205 Britney 
Spears, Baywatch and Sex in the City. Sexualisation is significantly reflected in the 
children’s many commercialised contexts, as in public space all over Norway. 
However, these do not seem to have sexualised the children’s heterosexual practices 
in an adult manner, if their love relationships are to be used as the prime indicator. 
As cited in Chapter 2 on psychological gender (note 38, page 26), Nielsen and 
Rudberg hold that “gender identity” is more easily changed than the “gendered 
subjectivity”, which is more stable (Nielsen & Rudberg 1993). Nielsen and 
Rudberg’s perspective thus sheds light on my argument about more continuity than 
change concerning preteen heterosexual intimate relationships, in that the platonic 
and “innocent” doing of “love” as preteen children is embedded in gendered 
subjectivity from early socialisation.

I have argued that the girls’ activities primarily are part of a child-like, not the 
teenage world, through the different forms of play and non-play activities discussed 
in Chapter 9. But aspects of teenage culture such as teenage-inspired fashion for 
young girls, have resulted in more options for doing girl than before, in that the

205 As indicated by teacher Kjersti above and experienced with my own daughter. See also Lidén 
2005.
teenager-girl subject position today is a new option for preteen girls. As such, ten year-old girls who act out kul femininities may be interpreted as sexy by people outside their peer group. Therefore the intergenerational gap in interpretation of ten-year-olds’ fashionable and kul femininities as sexually alluring, is an expression of the sexualisation of childhood processes and a direct consequence of new aesthetic and clothing-fashion codes for preteen girls. Before concluding this study I will briefly discuss the cultural and historical variability in the cultural notion of being sexy, which has been shown to have an ambivalent and unclear relationship to gender construction and peer-relationships among the ten year-olds.

**New clothing-fashion codes?**

According to Davis, new fashion always develops from the existent, in that every new fashion is not fundamentally different from the old. Fashion history shows how hem linings have gone up and down; how clothes are primarily loose or tight-fitting and vary as to how much skin and body shape is to be revealed. As cited previously, fashion today is also “democratised” in that haute couture fashion is mass-produced and made cheaper and available to most people, not just the privileged classes. The low-price chain shops most popular in Norway, such as H &M, Cubus and Lindex were said to be examples of the democratisation of fashion in which Coco Chanel was a pioneer (English 2007). Another characteristic of present day fashion is its “pluralism” (Davis 1992). It is not just one aesthetic or style which is “in” but many exist in parallel and in combination with one another. The ambivalence behind fashion today thus seems apparent. Which combinations are fashionable varies from one subculture to another and it is also possible to combine clothes from a cheap chain store with garments from an exclusive one. This was often done by teenagers at both Østli and Vestdal. Many thus combine garments from different shops and styles, the most interesting is perhaps the Asian inspired knee-length dresses, tunikas, and shirts over jeans or tights. In Oslo this trend started in 2006 and is by the end of 2007 to be found “everywhere”. These combinations may be inspired by the Norwegian Muslim girls wanting to wear jeans, whilst simultaneously hiding their bottoms, as indicated by Sumitra in Chapter 8, and may illustrate how fashion develops dialectically in a multi-cultural society.
In general, of the girls (and boys) I got to know, the definition of what was fashionable lay in what the *kul* and “in” shops had to offer. As discussed in Chapter 8, their understanding of fashion was much in line with Joanne Entwistle’s definition, that “It is dress that embodies the latest aesthetic and which is defined at a given moment as desirable, beautiful, popular” (Entwistle 2000:1). At the beginning of the fieldwork, tight-fitting jeans and short low-necked tops were hot fashion among teenagers, giving the most fashionable a sexy look. Put differently, being fashionable and sexy included showing a lot of body and skin. The next year it was fashionable to wear long tops underneath the short ones, covering the midriff and navel. In 2006, the trend continued to move away from showing much bare skin and in 2007 tunikas and short dresses covering bottoms are hits in parallel to tight jeans and clingy tops tops. To illustrate how fashion develops dialectically, I will present a short article from the Norwegian *VeroModa* fashion catalogue distributed in their shops during the summer of 2006. The article shows clearly how images of what is deemed (heterosexually) attractive and sexy are dynamic and culturally constructed. The presentation sums up much of what has been discussed on fashion in my study and boasts the title

**Long Live Queen Victoria:**

*If you thought Britney Spears in mini-skirts and low-necked tops was what being sexy was about, think again. Right now it is all about covering up.*

Don’t even begin to think that covering up can’t be sexy. Just look at Chloe, Alexander McQueen and Yves Saint Lauren. The latest runways were full of retro references to the eras of Queen Victoria and Edward VII, who reigned after her. It was a time of decency, modesty and innocence. Indeed, so modest were the times that it is said that not even the table’s legs were to be seen in public. Showing anything besides the face and hands was considered to be entirely inappropriate, which can be hard to imagine today when nudity, body consciousness and on-stage sex is part of the norm. But you may like to reconsider today’s flesh-feast, because after years of rock stars, models and actors baring all, designers have had enough. And as you know, an overdue trend always creates a new and opposite one, which is precisely what has happened. So covering up is hot again!

Wrapping your body is the new sexy – especially when the wrapping is topped with decoration like transparent lacing, drapery, fringes and tassels.

---

206 *VeroModa* is a popular and relatively cheap clothes chain for teenagers and young women.
It is all part of a hot trend, a fashion flashback to the Belle Epoque (literally the beautiful era), the time between the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras, which was marked by a general mood of optimism and belief in progress. After decades of borrowing decorative styles from the past, the time was right for a new aesthetic. That was the feeling then. Today, a lot of designers feel the same way, only this time the new aesthetic is all about a new way of thinking about what is sexy. According to the runways, it is all about flirtation. So instead of baring everything, the new sexy message is conveyed through the eyes, the mouth and your gestures. Seduction may be in the blink of an eye or the innocence of your smile. You might even discover that far from a plunging neckline, a bare ankle or a slice of semi-transparent lace may be all you need to turn heads.

Hollywood-stars and It-girls have already taken the style to their hearts. As always, fashion is about contrasts, so look out for softness, opulence, bell shapes, puffed sleeves and a laced décolleté. Jewellery adds the finishing touch. Lingerie is also a hot topic this season and don’t be afraid to let it show. In a sophisticated manner, that is. The key word is detail, and it makes a welcome change to the more strict and minimalist trends that you will also see a lot this season. Thankfully, these opposites are happily coexisting, and isn’t that really what fashion is all about these days? Everyone is welcome at the fashion party. Just make sure you cover up! (Vero Moda Magazine, Autumn 2006:58. English original, emphasis added).

Many aspects concerning clothing-fashion codes are worth noting from this article. The most evident is that fashion is and always has been about (hetero)sexual attraction, expressed through a dialectic of the erotic and the chaste (Davis 1992, Entwistle 2000, English 2007). The dialectic relationship illustrates the heterosexual hegemony in this industry despite many designers being homosexual or gay, as mentioned previously. The article reveals how female fashion is created through the heterosexual male gaze, which also lies implicit in Cross’s argument about the erotic and cool fashion for young girls having its origins in the notion of wondrous innocence (Cross 2004). In this sense, teenage-inspired clothes for young girls also show the ambivalence embedded in the clothing-fashion code and aesthetic for very young people: Are the clothes intended to construct eroticized young girls, constructing them as teenager-girls instead of childlike girl-children? By designing clothes that include more eroticism than chastity for young girls, two traditional boundaries are violated. Firstly, the age boundary (child/teenager), and secondly the overarching boundary between childhood and adulthood is blurred. As such, how
young girls are to present themselves through clothes, or deal with the aspect of how they are to do girl, is much in the hands of these designers. In other words, they contribute to the presentation of which femininities preteen girls are to act out. Implicit in this argument are norms and values as to what future girlhood is to include, and with that follow power, responsibility and ethical dilemmas.

The second evident information to be drawn from the *VeroModa* catalogue is the dialectical nature of fashion design, which I have referred to already. Most of all it shows the cultural relativism implied in the understanding of what is “sexy”, giving support to the previous discussion on “sexuality”, of which arousal and desire is understood as culturally learnt. In 2007, “covering-up” is as much present as its opposite, and the “tunika” trend may be read as an illustration of this. Nevertheless, I believe (hetero-) sexual attraction is as important as before when teenagers (and others) dress up. However, the relativism connected to what is deemed “sexy” clearly shows the close dialectical relationship between the body and the clothes put on that body, without which sexuality would not be present at all. This is well expressed in the *VeroModa* article quoted above: “Seduction may be in the blink of an eye or in the innocence of your smile”. The relationship between the body and the clothes put on it has been shown to be highly relevant in the different femininity subject positions available for the girls in my study. In the next section I summarize discussions on “old”, “new” and overlapping femininities as options for preteen girls.

**New femininities?**

The preceding discussion on clothing-fashion codes is closely related to variations in femininity subject positions, or to the theme of gender difference as girls. As this study understands gender to be process and relation-based in the material body, I will discuss the theme of “femininities” in relation to both variants of femininities and masculinities.

The present research has understood femininities and masculinities to be based in the subjectively experienced sexed body as either female or male. However, the expressions are taken to be entirely socially constructed, in the sense that
theoretically, masculinities in one society can be femininities in another. I argued that gender is more or less always relevant, and from an analytical point of view, girls do femininities and boys do masculinities. I have suggested taking the stance that all that girls do (whilst experiencing themselves as girls), as variants of femininity, has the analytical potential of going beyond gender stereotypes and thus working towards gender equality, equity (and perhaps gender neutrality?). By thinking this way, the focus will be on the implications for gender relations and options of femininities, when girls participate in arenas previously associated only with boys and vice versa. This also includes aesthetic and the use of material items traditionally associated with males or females. Compared to other research on the preteen age group, it seems that the Norwegian and Swedish girls and boys engage in more mixed activities than their peers in the UK and US, indicating that the former have more options concerning femininity subject positions than the latter. In addition, I believe the girlie aesthetic or hyperfemininity is more common among ten year-olds in the UK than in Norway (see Hey 1997, Reay 2001, Renold 2005, Carlsen 2007). The general Nordic visions of equality and sameness also include equality between the sexes, and may have resulted in Norwegian (and Swedish?) girls experiencing themselves on more equal terms with boys than in other countries. Compared to the alleged situation in the UK and the US, Norwegian preteen girls seem to have more options concerning athletic activities (ibid.). In Norway, the risk of being stigmatized and labelled as lesbian if playing football or doing other traditionally “masculine” activity is far less today than previously.

By thinking in the above vein regarding gender reference frames, subversive gender performances over time result in more “femininity” options, not in “girls doing masculinity”. As such, I have aimed to go beyond gender stereotypes as a liberation strategy for both sexes. I read this way of thinking to resonate with the aim of Jørgen Lorentzen, who in his book Maskulinitet (Masculinity) ends the introduction with the following: “It is my hope that men will read the book and that it will contribute to liberating men from any notion of there existing something or someone who will be classified as knapsu (womanlike)” 207 (Lorentzen 2004:14, my translation). I argue that this aim is more easily achieved if we regard all that men do as a variant of

207 Knapsu is from the book Populær musikk fra Vittula (2001), by the Finnish novelist Mikael Niemi.
masculinity or as part of the masculinity circuit, and refrain from referring to “femininity” at all. In a similar vein, the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* recently wrote about a research project on men’s friendship, with the heading “New Men” (*Nye Menn*). The postulation was that men’s friendship relations seem to change and resemble those of women regarding trust and intimacy (*Aftenposten* 22/07-07), implying that the latter “feminine” characteristics were now also to be found among men. In the terminology promoted in my study, the newspaper may be read to suggest that the masculinity and femininity circuits on friendship overlap more than before, in that a new masculinity “friend” subject position has emerged.

The challenge with new options for doing boy or girl is that power is unevenly distributed among the different masculinity and femininity subject positions. The study has shown how the dominant femininity subject position of the *kul* teenager-girl, however imprecise and fluid that concept may be, is infused with power, and involves an increasing amount of children on their way to puberty. It was also shown how the *kul* subject position was directly informed by consumerism, symbolized by the term “tweenager”, and thus is related to financial resources and the capacity for consumption. As such, Norwegian femininities are constructed in the intersection of gender, sexuality, age, class, socio-cultural background and the consumer society.

The social context of football is the best Norwegian example of how a large number of girls have entered a traditionally masculine arena. There is no doubt that the last decades have seen an increase in mixed-gender activities among Norwegian children. Johansson reports the same from Sweden: “An increasing number of girls participate in different sports activities. The Scouts, 4H and many other activities attract both girls and boys, the disco and dancing as well“ (Johansson 1996:194, my translation). She underlines that the official school policy of encouraging mixed-gender activities and general gender equality have resulted in more girls and boys doing activities together. The Swedish situation resonates with the Norwegian one in that gender equality is highly prioritized in the schools’ everyday lives.

In relation to boys and masculinity, the most conspicuous traditionally “feminine” arena where Norwegian preteen, teenage boys and men have entered is concerns consumer products related to appearance, in particular hair, perfume and make-up.
Most of the ten year-old boys at both field sites in my study had “something” in their hair and had started to use deodorants, while perfume and other make-up were not (yet) seen (or smelt). However, the “metro-sexual” subject position seems to be spreading, and most importantly, a boy with styled dyed hair, hair gel (and foundation) is nevertheless interpreted as doing boy or masculinity by his peers of either sex. Interestingly, his parents or grandparents are inclined to say he is “feminine”. Put another way, the younger generation has adopted a new gender aesthetic and has included cosmetics in their understanding of masculinity, while the same products are parts of older generations’ understanding of femininity. These examples of gender crossing over time are illustrations of expansions in the femininity and masculinity repertoires or circuits. New ways of doing girl and boy often imply that traditional gender arenas overlap, which downplays and probably diminishes the traditional gender stereotypes over time. In the last thirty years, Norwegian girls have been taught both in the media and school that they are as capable as boys in all respects, meaning few girls openly express that “boys are better”. In the words of Butler, these changes have come about through repetitive subversive gender performances (Butler 1990).

In the preceding chapters I have used the overarching analytical concepts of “girl-child” and “teenager-girl” in order to grasp the gender dynamics and relationships. These concepts were placed at the extremes of a continuum of visible identification with teenage culture. Many of the girls’ femininity subject positions were distributed along this continuum and, over time, an increasingly number of girls can analytically be placed close by the kul and berte (and maybe sexy) teenager-girl, as discussed in relation to the 7th grade school disco in Chapter 12.

208 According to the TV magazine FBI (Forbrukerinspektørene), the spending among boys and men has increased enormously: from seven million kroner per year in 2001, to forty-six million kroner in 2007 (FBI 3.12.07).
209 I am writing “yet” because perfume will probably be applied when they are teenagers, as most teenagers do today (see Berg 2004).
210 This postulation is based on general observation and the reading of advertisements and magazines.
Furthermore, it has been illustrated that the sexualisation of childhood occurs in all the preteen children’s social contexts. It is not known today how this focus on sex and bodies works in the subconscious as time passes. Nevertheless, as has been shown, there are few indications that a fundamental change in heterosexual relationships will happen in the near future among Norwegian preteens. However, if Thorne and Luria are right, following Gagnon and Simon, in that “the gender arrangements and subcultures of middle girlhood prepare the way for the sexual scripts of adolescence” (Thorne & Luria 1986:182), 21st century children have more knowledge than previous generations. The 5th grade boys in their research from the 1980’s, share pornography of soft-core magazines, which there is reason to believe Norwegian boys in 2002-2004 also did. 211 In addition, the internet is installed in most homes, making it easy to watch not just more porn, but more hardcore porn than previously.

Are there any indications that the heavy focus on sex, older sexuality and “perfect” bodies will contribute to a change in adolescent heterosexual relationships, for instance in the form of an earlier sexual debut? Existing research points in that direction. The works of Willy Pedersen (2005) and Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) all report a change in teenage sexual practices, which I comment on below.

**New sexualities?**

Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) give an illustrative insight into changes in doing gender and doing sexuality in the last century. Their already cited book includes three generations of a total of 22 women, where the youngest generation has been the point of departure through repeated interviews (ibid.). The oldest generation tried to follow a norm of no sex before marriage, which became less moralistic, but was still a norm among their daughters. The introduction of the pill and generally improved contraceptives in the post war years led more girls and women to practice sex before marriage, and a formal engagement served as moral justification. Women born before and around 1945 did not usually have a serious boyfriend before fifteen-sixteen years of age, while their daughters started a couple of years earlier. But it must be remembered that the working-class girls in their material had serious

211 The rumours said that a boy in 5B had a porn film at home, which a few of his male class mates had seen.
boyfriends before their middle-class peers, who usually did not begin serious dating earlier than their mothers, which was in high school. Nielsen and Rudberg report, however, that attitudes towards pre-marital sex have changed dramatically in the youngest generation, where many are sexually experienced by the age of eighteen. Virginity is no longer an ideal; on the contrary, it is embarrassing to be a virgin for too long. As a consequence, many feel great pressure “to have done it”. When the time is considered “right” to start practicing sex depends, again, on socio-cultural background and most importantly on the norms in the teenager’s peer group.

In the youngest generation in Nielsen and Rudberg’s material, the average debut age was 17.4 years, while their mothers were two years older. The working-class girls started having sex at fifteen-sixteen years of age, while their middle-class peers were seventeen-eighteen years of age. In Norway as a whole, the debut age in 2002 was 16.7 years for girls and 18 years for boys, which is one year earlier for both sexes than in 1992 (Pedersen 2005). According to Pedersen, this constitutes a major change. Teenage sexuality, particularly among girls, has changed dramatically since their great grandmothers’ time. However, the arrival of menarche has not changed in the last decades. Girls in Norway get their first menstruation around thirteen years of age and this can not be used to explain the increased sexual activity among older teenagers (Walhø 2004, Juliusson 2007).

Pedersen describes not only a change in debut age, but also a change in sexual practices. It is not uncommon for girls to engage in sex with one another without being lesbians, or with boys they are just friendly with (Pedersen 2005). In Chapter 8, it was suggested that this tendency was symbolised by the Miss Sixty t-shirt at Norway Cup, “Sex confusion is sexy” and may be an illustration of the spread and popularity of queer ideas outside of particular cultures of academia (ibid.). In this study I have, however, not discussed other sexualities than those apparent among the children included, which were influenced and organized by the heterosexual matrix. This does not imply that heterosexuality necessarily must be viewed as “natural” or

212 The Norwegian film “Bare Bea” (2003) focuses on these issues, similar to the American film “American Pie” I (1999).
the most “normal”, but I believe alternative sexual practices are not considered as options before preteen and teenager girls and boys have lived according to the heteronormative expectations for some time.

In short, teenagers today seem to be more sexually experimental and experienced than previous generations (Pedersen 2005). It may be that this change is influenced by all the sexual information and symbols in those teenagers’ childhoods, but it is impossible to know whether and in what way this will affect the mixed-gender relationships and general love lives of the children included in my research.

Conclusion of the study

This research has described and analysed Norwegian preteen girls’ gender construction and peer relationships in the light of a presumed sexualisation and disappearance of childhood by the media and elsewhere. The dominant femininity subject position was that of the kul teenager-girl with the childish girl-child at the other extreme. The Norwegian way of doing girl among the girls I got to know included many forms of play and sporting activities but also the traditional feminine masquerade of fashionable clothes and some make-up. The kul subject position was an important element in the “mystery” of popularity, and is related to popular culture and the possibility of participating in the consumer culture. As such, the hegemonic femininity subject position was perceived as connected to the capitalistic market economy and indirectly constructed by it, particularly through the concept of “tweenager”. Lack of financial resources was thus found to be a hindrance in the construction of a kul teenager-girl femininity. As a result, the girls’ construction of gender was understood in the intersection of age, sexuality, class, socio-cultural background and the consumer society.

By doing participant observation over a two year period in two school settings in Oslo, I concluded that the sexualisation of childhood exists in their social contexts and wider milieu, but does not dominate their overall everyday practices and mixed-gender relationships. These are still filled with sports activities and different forms of both traditional and particular play. Most importantly, the ultimate indication of any (senior) sexualisation, how they “do love”, still qualifies as variants of “play”,

369
not as older heterosexual practices. This is so because the love relationships are performed according to strict norms or rules. In the first place, they are directed and followed up by the peer community. In the second place, they are a collective rather than a private affair, and lastly, they include a minimum of physical intimacy.

Their girlfriend/boyfriend culture was understood in the intersection of gender, age, sexuality, class and socio-cultural background. Ethnicity appeared in interactions between girls of Norwegian origin and girls having non-western backgrounds when the latter were dressed in traditional clothes from their country of origin and acted according to their culture. Skin colour was found to be irrelevant if other relevant Norwegian cultural codes were known and followed.

The study revealed a relationship between the relations of the kul – sexy –love and girl-child – teenager-girl, whose meaning changed over time to gradually include senior heterosexuality. Another way to describe this relationship is to underline the dialectical relationship between maturing physical bodies and cultural practices. The study shows how the subject positions of the kul and of girlfriend/boyfriend did not relate to images of the sexy before the peer group had reached puberty (being aware of individual exceptions). The research illustrated how the preteen girls’ peer relationships and love practices changed from being part of junior heterosexuality to becoming part of senior heterosexuality with age, bodily maturation and cultural expectations all having a role to play.
REFERENCES

Addams, J. (1905): “Work and Play as Factors in Education”. In Chautauquan 42, pp.251-255


Bryld, T. (2005): ”Ikke et ord om sex”. In TÆNK, no. 56-2005


Bugge, L. (2002): ”Pierre Bourdieu’s teori om makt.” In *AGORA*, no. 3/4-02


Csordas, T. (1988): "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology”. In Ethos 18:5-47


Enerstvedt, Å. (2004): ”*Vil du vite hvordan….Barn lekte i gamle dager?”* Bergen: Eide Forlag


Harris, A. (2004): “Introduction”. In Harris, A. & M. Fine (eds.): All about the girl. London: Routledge


Hauge, M.I. (2003): "Jenter i virvelvind”. In Kvinneforskning no.3., Oslo

Helland, H. (2005): "Perspektiver på klassesamfunnet.” In Sosiologi idag, no.4-2005


Holst, K. (2005): *Feminism, Epistemology & Morality.* Dr.polit. Thesis. The University of Bergen


Kampmann, J. (2003): ”Barndomssosiologi”. In *Dansk Sosiologi,* no. 2-juli 2003


Kochuyt, T. (2004): ”Giving away one’s poverty: On the consumption of scarce resources within the family”. In *The Sociological Review*, 52 (2):139-161


Lundstrom, C. (2006): "Okey, but we are not whores, you know": Latina girls navigating the boundaries of gender and ethnicity in Sweden.” In Young Vol.14, no.3


Robertson, P. (1976): ”Home as a Nest: Middle Class Childhood in Nineteenth Century Europe.” In L. de Mause (ed.): *The History of Childhood*. London: Souvenir


Rysst, M. (2005b): “Det koster å være kul: Om tweenagers’ opplevelse av tilhørighet i en flerkulturell setting i Oslo”. In *Tidsskrift for ungdomsforskning*, no.2-2005, pp. 5-26


Statistisk Årbok for Oslo (2001). Oslo: Byrådsavdeling for Finans, Oslo Kommune


Walhø 2004: [http://www.aftenposten.no/helse/article887981.ece](http://www.aftenposten.no/helse/article887981.ece).


Newspapers and magazines:
*Dagbladet Magasinet* 24/1-2001
*Dagbladet* 25/3-2004
*Verdens Gang* 31/3-2005
*Witch* TEMA 5-05, Egmont, Serieforslaget
*Girls* August 2005, Egmont, Serieforslaget
*Julia* no. 4-2005, The Bonne Bell Company
*Go Girl*, 0534, Egmont, Serieforslaget
*Verdens Gang* 10/2-2006
*Dagbladet Magasinet* 26/8-2006
*Dagbladet* 6/8-2006
*Dagbladet* 14/8-2006
*Ny Tid* 4/8-2006
*Dagsavisen* 17/9-2006
*Vero Moda* Catalogue, Autumn 2006
*Dagbladet Magasinet*, 25/11-2006
*Aftenposten* 27/11-2006
*ELLE*, October 2006
*Se & Hør* January 2006
*Topp*, no. 8-2006
*Dagbladet* 14/12-2007
*Dagbladet* 16/10-2007
*Dagbladet* 14/12-2007
*Aftenposten* 22/7-2007
*Forbrukerinspektørene* (FBI), NRK TV1 3/12-2007
*Tekstilforum* 2003