

LOVING AND FORGIVING?

Emotions and Emotion Work in the Youth Organization Equmenia

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This article examines how members of a Christian youth organization in Sweden relate to and reflect upon emotional aspects of their involvement, looking at how they describe the emotional atmosphere within the groups they belong to and their role in creating and sustaining this, but also their experiences of not feeling comfortable in certain situations. The empirical material consists of interviews with youths aged 15–23, and the theoretical framework is centred on emotion work and feeling rules. The findings show how the emotional expectations tend to be communicated not only implicitly, but also explicitly, and how an emotional atmosphere and emotion work that can be expected to create affective bonds between the members and strengthen group cohesion, in some cases might have rather the opposite effect.

Keywords: emotions, emotion work, youth organizations, Equmenia, Sweden

Jesus Christ is the Lord. That is the foundation of Equmenia. Everything we do and want is about that. In a thousand different ways. (Equmenia 2013, author's translation)

Every week, thousands of children and youths all over Sweden take part in spare-time activities arranged by various organizations and associations. They are out in the woods with the scouts, play ice-hockey or soccer with the local sports team, sing in youth choirs at a church or take care of animals at 4H farms¹ and so on. To be active in an organization or association does, however, not only entail participating in the activities arranged. It also includes interacting with other members of the group and

spending time in an environment and context that is coloured by a certain set of values and expectations, whether it is the scout law, ideals about fair play, or expectations of civic participation. There is, consequently, several factors that may contribute to if a person wants to keep up the involvement in an organization or a particular cause. That emotional aspects of different kinds play an integral part in this, has been shown in studies on social movements, NGO:s and activist groups (e.g., Eyerman 2005; Flam & King 2005; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001; Gould 2004; Jacobson & Lindblom 2013). It can be a question of evoking enthusiasm and solidarity or in other ways create affective bonds that increase group cohesion and make the participants experi-

ence a sense of belonging and community and of sharing the same ideals. But the process of creating such a feeling of community, as well as the process of adjusting to the values and expectations within a particular group, may require quite a lot of emotion work from the individuals involved.

In this article I will examine young people's involvement in a Christian youth organization in Sweden – the free church youth organization *Equemenia* – from such a perspective of emotion work. The traditional Swedish free churches, which have roots in the revival movements of the nineteenth century, are commonly counted among the popular movements of Sweden, alongside with for instance the workers movement and the sobriety movement, which originated around the same time. They are thus associated not only with religion and faith, but also societal and civic participation, associational life and popular education (Cyrillus 2008; Lundberg 2005; Micheletti 1995; Vogel et al. 2003: 18). In 2011, three of these free churches, the Mission Covenant Church, the Baptist Union and the Methodist Church, joined together and formed the *Equemenia* church, thereby becoming the second largest religious denomination in Sweden (SST 2014). The youth organizations of the different denominations had merged already a few years earlier, and *Equemenia* today organizes around 30 000 children and youths, through scout groups, choirs, orchestras, sports groups, youth groups etc. all over the country (*Equemenia* 2014).

Starting from the research participants' accounts of and reflections on their involvement, I will discuss three main themes in the article: the communication of feeling rules and emotional expectations, the role of emotions and emotion work in the processes of creating and upholding involvement, and, finally, how emotion work may be involved when individuals need to adjust to expectations and rules within a particular setting or group. The analysis is based on the theoretical concepts feeling rules, collective effervescence, ritualization and containing.

Emotions, or feelings, is a complex phenomenon, and may be discussed from a number of angles and through different concepts. In this article I will

primarily use the term “emotion”, as it is the term commonly used in the literature I build on.² This rather broad concept may include both seemingly clear-cut emotions such as fear, joy or anger, and less easily defined aspects such as compassion or guilt. Arlie Hochschild uses the terms “feeling” and “emotion” synonymously, saying: “I would define feeling, like emotion, as a sense, like the sense of hearing or sight. In a general way, we experience it when bodily sensations are joined with what we see or imagine” (Hochschild 2003: 17). She distances herself from the idea that emotion is a sealed biological event, and underlines that emotion is something we do, as a response to, or to handle an inner sensation (Hochschild 2003: 27). Like Hochschild, I am not interested in the biological or neuro-psychological aspects of emotions,³ and since the aim of the analysis is not to single out or define particular emotions, I will not go deeper into discussions about “what is an emotion” or the relation between emotion, feeling and affect.

The article opens with a discussion of the study's contribution and relation to existing research, followed by a presentation of the research procedures. Building on a discussion of the theoretical concepts used, I then examine how the emotional expectations and feeling rules within the youth organization were described by the interviewed youths. This prepares for an analysis of the role emotions and emotion work might have in encouraging and sustaining commitment and participation in this kind of organization, as well as of the youths' experiences of not feeling comfortable in certain situations and of handling different emotional expectations, before the article finishes with a concluding discussion.

Research on Youth, Religion and Emotion

Sweden is generally, alongside with other countries in north-western Europe, regarded and described as a highly secularized country (Berger, Davie & Fokas 2008; Pettersson & Riis 1994; cf. Pettersson 2009; Zuckerman 2009). Still, according to statistics from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society,⁴ 14% of Swedish youths in the ages 16–25 are members of a religious organization. This is markedly less than the amount of youths who are members in a sports

organization (40%), but alongside cultural associations (11%) and school/student associations (16%) it nevertheless constitutes a significant part of the organizational or associational activities of Swedish youths (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2010: 102). Moreover, the country has a strong Protestant tradition and history mainly through the Church of Sweden, which was a state church until 2000. Even though the number of members has decreased since the Church was separated from the State, around 66% of the population are still members, albeit not necessarily active ones (Svenska kyrkan 2014). The traditional free churches represent another important part of this Protestant tradition, and still have an important position within the religious landscape in Sweden, at least when it comes to the number of members (SST 2014).

Even so, not much research has been done on young people who are active in free churches or free church youth organizations. Studies on religiously active youths tend to focus on other categories. There are for instance a number of studies on Muslim youth in Sweden within religious studies, such as Jenny Berglund's work on identity construction among Muslim youth and Mia Lövheim's research on young Muslim women's blogging (Berglund 2012; Lövheim 2012; cf. Berglund 2009). Certain Christian youth groups have also attracted attention; Önver Cetrez' research on Assyrian youths in Sweden and Anders Lundberg's studies on Swedish youth with a Catholic background, are two examples (Cetrez 2005, 2010; Lundberg 2012). Within ethnological research, religiously active youths have not been much studied at all, even though the works by Pia Karlsson Minganti represent one significant exception. She has studied young Muslim women, looking at their organizational participation and the relation between religion, gender and ethnicity from an intersectional perspective (Karlsson Minganti 2007, 2010).

In the few cases where youth within the Swedish free churches has been given scholarly attention, it is generally connected to aspects such as sexuality or alcohol consumption, while there has been little focus on the youths' views on or experiences of being

members of or active in an organization (cf. Persson 2003; Lalander 1998). Through its focus on youth in a free church youth organization, this article thus contributes to the existing ethnological youth research as well as to the multidisciplinary research field youth and religion.

Another contribution the article tries to make, is through its focus on emotion and emotion work. As mentioned above, these have been prominent theoretical perspectives in research on social movements, NGO:s⁵ and activist groups of various kinds, for instance in discussions of why people choose to become and stay active in a particular organization (e.g., Eyerman 2005; Flam & King 2005; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001; Gould 2004; Jacobson & Lindblom 2013). Such attention to the emotional aspects of people's organizational and ideological involvement, can be related to a broader trend of increasing interest in the role and significance of emotions, which has been evident in several disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (Corrigan 2004: 5). Within the study of religion, scholars have for instance looked at the emotional aspects of religious involvement, practices, language, beliefs or morality (Collins-Mayo & Dandelion 2010; Corrigan 2004; Fish 2005; Moore 2010; Riis & Woodhead 2010; Wilcox 2004). Such an "emotional turn" has also, at least to a certain degree, taken place within Swedish ethnological research, in the sense that emotions have come to be the object of investigation and theories on emotions more commonly are used as analytical tools in recent years. There are a number of studies that exemplify this, which cover a wide range of topics; museums, sexuality, identity issues and narratives about the Holocaust are just some examples (Gustavson 2013; Meurling 2010; Nylund Skog 2009; Svensson 2011; cf. Zackariasson 2006, 2009).

This article contributes new perspectives to this rising interest in the emotional aspects of people's everyday life mainly through that it combines influences from all these three research areas, and in a sense is positioned in the intersection between them. I look at involvement in a religious organization, but I do this from an ethnological perspective,

which means that it is not the religious aspects in themselves that are the main centre of attention, even though the Christian foundation obviously is a fundamental part of the activities within Equmenia. Instead I draw inspiration from research done on social movements, NGO:s and activist groups, and want to underline the parallels and similarities I see with other comparable groups or associations. A similar kind of analysis could in other words be done in other kinds of groups and organizations, but at the same time I would argue that it is of great importance that Equmenia is a Christian organization, since that influences the central values and expectations within the groups and also how these are communicated. And it is, furthermore, highly significant that Equmenia is a youth organization, which is evident for instance when it comes to the relations between the youths and the adult youth leaders or youth pastors who are involved in organizing the activities.

Research Procedures

The empirical foundation for the article consists of qualitative interviews with youths, aged between 15 and 23, who were, or recently had been, active in Equmenia.⁶ Even though a large number of children and youths participate in activities organized by Equmenia, the youth work differs significantly between the local congregations of the Equmenia church. Some have no children or youth activities at all, while others have a very active youth organization. In order to get in touch with individuals who wanted to participate in the study, I therefore selected congregations within the Stockholm area, which had an active youth organization and contacted the youth pastor or youth leader there. These would then invite me to one of their gatherings where I could present my research and let people sign up if they were interested in being interviewed for the project. This approach did, however, turn out to be not quite as successful as desired. Several of the youth pastors or youth leaders whom I tried to contact, did not reply, and those who did, and who were principally interested, could not always find a time and day that semester where a visit from me would be appropriate. On the occasions

when I did get a chance to present my project to the youths themselves, quite a few individuals expressed an interest and gave me their contact details. But when I contacted them, it did in several cases turn out to be very difficult, or impossible, for them to find space in their busy schedules of school work and spare-time activities where an interview could fit in.

Since I also aimed at getting a varied sample concerning gender, as well as the extent and type of activity the youths were involved in, the result was that the youths I finally interviewed, ended up coming from several different local Equmenia groups from not only Stockholm but also some surrounding towns. Towards the end of the project, I, furthermore, worked actively with reaching youths who were active not only at the local level, but also regionally or nationally, which was a category that had proved particularly hard to get in touch with. A few such youths were eventually found through contacts with the national Equmenia organization, which extended the geographical area even further, since some of these youths lived or had grown up in smaller towns in other parts of the country. To facilitate the process for the interviewees – and thus increasing the chances of them actually finding the time to participate in the project – I offered them a chance of choosing where the interview would take place. This meant that most of the interviews were carried out in cafés and coffee shops in the local neighbourhoods of the youths, or close to the central station in Stockholm – places they could easily get to.

Among the interviewees there were, in other words, youths who were active only at a local level, as well as youths who were also active at the regional or national level of the organization. And, likewise, youths who were mainly participants in the activities arranged by the youth organization, as well as youths who took part in organizing them, as scout leaders, youth leaders or through other assignments. Another aspect that varied between the interviewed youths, was their relation to and attitude towards the religious foundation of the youth organization. Even if the youth organization is linked to the Equmenia church and has a distinct Christian basis for its activities, there are no explicit demands that children

and youths who take part in the activities share the Christian faith or regard themselves as Christians.⁷ This openness concerning the religious foundation was quite evident among the project participants: There were some who were thoroughly involved with the youth organization, but nevertheless firmly stated that they did not believe in God and/or did not regard themselves as Christian. Others described themselves as in the middle of a process, not being quite sure if they believed in God or not, while yet some decidedly declared themselves to be believing Christians.

Feeling Rules and Emotion Work

As mentioned, there are a number of studies that discuss how emotions may work as a driving force in individuals' involvement in organizations and commitment to various causes. Anger at perceived injustices can be one kind of motivation, but also compassion or shame may create affective bonds, which play a central role in why people become and stay committed (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001). Several researchers, like Deborah Gould and Randall Collins have highlighted this, for instance through using Émile Durkheim's notion of *collective effervescence*, focusing on how large and intense gatherings tend to create emotional bonds like solidarity, enthusiasm and empowerment, through the experience of being one in a large group of likeminded people (Collins 2001: 27–28; Durkheim [1912]1995; Eyerman 2005; Flam & King 2005: 4; Gould 2009: 207; Yang 2005: 83).

But other kinds of emotional aspects and emotion work, which might appear less spectacular and notable, may be equally important for keeping individuals engaged and involved in particular causes, on a more long-term basis. Scholars have pointed out how affective bonds that are created through the everyday, routine activities within local groups, may contribute to sustaining individuals' engagement in an organization (Flam & King 2005; Jasper, Goodwin & Polletta 2001: 16–22). Kerstin Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom, who have written about animal rights activism, discuss this in terms of *ritualization*, which signifies the recurring everyday rituals

and socializing that contribute to creating the emotional bonds needed to keep up individuals' interest and involvement in a particular cause (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 62–63). It may be something as simple as having a cup of coffee after a meeting, or, as in my examples, organizing devotions at the end of each gathering, where everyone sits down to listen to Bible texts or reflections and to sing and pray together.

Other types of emotion work are present when individuals are striving to live up to what Arlie Hochschild calls the *feeling rules* of a particular context, relation or situation. There are, according to Hochschild, in most parts of our daily lives certain feelings or emotions that are encouraged or expected, while others are regarded as unfitting or inappropriate. That they are considered inappropriate may be connected to for instance the timing, but also how the emotion is expressed or that the intensity of it is regarded as exaggerated or as insufficient.⁸ Hochschild has shown what this may look like within a profession, in her classic study on flight attendants and how they are expected to always keep their emotions controlled and positive, regardless of what kind of behaviour they might encounter from the passengers (Hochschild 2003: 57–73).

In their study on animal rights groups, Jacobsson and Lindblom emphasize that the type of emotion work the individual needs to engage in, varies with the context and situation. They argue that activists within social movements need to engage in emotion work partly to sustain commitment, but also to cope with the emotional stress created by their transgression and questioning of established societal norms (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 56). Emotion work may, furthermore, be needed to uphold a particular, desired, emotional atmosphere or attitude within the group, whether it is one of compassion, joy or enagement at injustices, and members may need to manage their emotions in different ways to adjust to the existing feeling rules or emotional expectations (cf. Flam 2005; Goodwin & Pfaff 2001; King 2005; Wolkomir 2001; Yang 2005). In Jacobsson and Lindblom's example, this kind of emotion work includes suppressing anger and irritation even if met with

negative attitudes or aggression, in order not to add to a potential image of animal rights activists as violent and aggressive. They term this particular kind of emotion work *containing* (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 60–61).

To be Loving and Forgiving

Since feeling rules, as Hochschild argues, in many situations are unspoken and implicit, and often do not become visible until they are violated or challenged, one could imagine that such aspects would be difficult to get a hold of in an interview situation (Hochschild 2003: 57). In many of the interviews I made, the youths did, however, talk quite explicitly about what they had felt in a particular situation, or how they at times had experienced expectations of feeling certain things, or expressing their emotions in a specific way. Even when the emotional aspects or expectations were more implicitly expressed, which was also often the case, the reflections, stories and descriptions from the project participants indicated that the interaction within the church or youth groups was characterized by a particular emotional atmosphere or set of feeling rules, where some emotions were encouraged while others were seen as inappropriate.

One example of this was when we during the interviews talked about what they thought or felt was the most important thing the church wanted to communicate to them, and what they wanted to communicate to others, like the children they were volunteering as scout leaders for. In other words, how they would formulate some of the central values of the organization. Here, several of the interviewed youths emphasized the importance of caring for each other, or that one should be helpful, kind, forgiving and encouraging (e.g., Anton October 14, 2011; Oscar March 1, 2012; Britta May 16, 2012; Freddy February 7, 2014; Jens March 10, 2014; Mimmi April 11, 2014). At the same time as such values are connected to behaviour and how to act towards one another, they also suggest that the desired or encouraged emotional atmosphere within the groups was supposed to be founded in for instance love and compassion.

This was further exemplified in the interview with 15-year old Olivia. Her family was not active in the church, but she had participated in the activities of the local Equmenia organization since she was 8 years old, in music groups as well as scout and youth groups. When she was younger, she had thought of herself as a Christian, but at the time of the interview, she no longer defined herself as such. Olivia described the atmosphere in the local Equmenia group and the church it was connected to, as loving, encouraging and forgiving:

I really respect those who believe in God, cause they can find a kind of peace that I don't think people like for instance atheists can understand. Like, to always have this security that there is always someone there who loves you, no matter what you do. Even if you do something wrong, there is someone who always forgives you. I can understand that. But I can't believe in God, and so on, myself. But... and that's one thing which I think is quite nice with playing in a church [...] like sometimes I get asked if I can play with the choir and stuff like that. And there are a lot of, like, old men and women... They had this mass, where I played [in the orchestra]. Like – whatever you do... Even if it sounds wrong, they are grateful afterwards. And like: "Oohh! It's so nice, it's so nice! You are so good at this!" You just get happy. And then I noticed, well, yeah, they always forgive you and stuff like that. And I find that really nice. (Olivia March 20, 2012)

Olivia's experiences of how people within the church were compassionate and ready to forgive, was something she returned to on several occasions throughout the interview, for example when she talked about her friends in the youth organization. She explained that she was more likely to talk to her friends in Equmenia than to her school friends, about troubles she had gotten into or problems in her life, since she assumed that they would not get angry, and, also, would not judge her. This was, in her opinion, a general tendency within the youth organization, not just among her closest friends there, since, as she put

it: "People see you in a different way" (Olivia March 20, 2012).

Even if Olivia emphasized how much she appreciated the atmosphere within the church, it was noticeable how she generally talked about "them" as loving and forgiving, referring to older parishioners or friends within Equmenia. She thus did not include herself among those who represented the ideal of being loving and forgiving, and did not talk about her own role in creating or sustaining such an atmosphere. Partly, this could be seen as connected to her position within the church and youth organization. Olivia had not yet started to do any voluntary work as a youth leader and had no responsibilities within the youth group outside of being an ordinary member. In that sense, her role and position was different compared to those of the interviewees who had responsibilities of different kinds. One example of the latter was Jenny, who was 21 years old when I interviewed her and who had been active in Equmenia since she was 13. When she was younger, she mainly participated in the weekly gatherings for teenagers, but with time she became active also in other ways. At the time of our meeting, she, among other things, did voluntary work as a leader for teenage groups and scout groups, and was active in one of the "service groups" of the church, helping with cleaning the church and arranging the services a few times a year. Just as Olivia, Jenny talked about how the ideal of loving and forgiving one another was strong within the local church she belonged to:

Maria: What do you feel are the most important things the church wants to convey to the people who are active in the church?

Jenny: Well, yeah, I think about this thing with forgiveness. To always forgive, and always give love. That's the image I get, sort of. And the one we want to communicate to others. To always forgive. And to always help others, is another thing that is very, that comes up very often. To help each other. You should forgive each other, and things like that. That comes up very often I think. (Jenny February 10, 2011)

Jenny's description suggests that trying to encourage love and forgiveness was something that was done quite deliberately in the congregation she was a part of. Worth noting is that she used the pronoun "we", when describing the importance of communicating love and forgiveness, while Olivia as we saw talked about "they". Apparently, Jenny included herself among those who strived to spread these ideals and values, and she shared this approach with others among the interviewees who worked as scout leaders or youth leaders. Our continued discussion showed that encouraging love and closeness was a conscious aim to her and that she tried to accomplish it not only through acting and behaving in a particular way, but also through talking about it:

Maria: Is this something you try to convey to those you are a leader for as well?

Jenny: Yes, always! [Laughs]

Maria: Yeah? In what way do you do that then?

Jenny: Well, ... every Friday [at the weekly gathering for teenagers] we have devotions. And then one of the leaders holds a ... well talks a little, tells us about some things, during devotions. We sing a little and then we talk a little and then we pray a little, principally. And the occasions I am responsible for... are pretty much about either love or closeness or well... helping each other and so on. It's my way of trying to make them ... think a little. (Jenny February 10, 2011)

The kind of process Jenny describes here can thus be seen as an example of when the feeling rules within the groups were made quite visible. She was, so to speak, teaching the feeling rules to the youths she was responsible for, letting them know how and what they were supposed to feel, when so clearly communicating love and compassion as something important and valuable (cf. Hochschild 2003: 52–53). The ambition to create a loving and caring atmosphere and environment is, furthermore, clearly formulated on the web pages of Equmenia

as one of the official goals and ideals of the youth organization:

Jesus has said that God is love. Many of us have experienced that this is true. We want to create environments where people get the opportunity to practice seeing and receiving that love, but also passing it on to others. (Equumenia 2013, author's translation)

The encouraged or desired emotional atmosphere was, in other words, not only communicated in actions and behaviour or verbally, but also expressed in writing. In this aspect, the youth organization resembles companies or institutions like the ones Hochschild studied, where there were written guidelines for emotional behaviour and attitudes (cf. Hochschild 2003: 49, 89). A significant difference is, of course, that Equumenia, in contrast to Hochschild's main example, is not a commercial company, but a religious organization. Consequently, and quite naturally, the arguments for why one should create a loving environment are connected to religious aspects; it is God's love that should be received and passed on to others.

This emphasis on the religious foundation may, in its turn, have consequences for how the individuals within the organization related to such ideals. One could for instance understand Olivia's tendency to talk about "them" as loving, forgiving and encouraging, in relation to that she no longer defined herself as a Christian. Through attaching the ideal of love and forgiveness to those she would categorize as "Christians", she, in a sense, excluded herself from the emotional expectations that she had described. That she did not talk about contributing to upholding such an emotional atmosphere, could in other words be seen as related not only to her position as an "ordinary member" of the youth group, but also to her position as a "non-Christian".

Feeling Uncomfortable

Not all youths talked explicitly about love in their descriptions of the atmosphere within the groups they belonged to, but a majority emphasized how

much they appreciated the environment and ambience within the youth organization in the sense that it made them feel safe, accepted and included (e.g., Anton October 14, 2011; Moa November 13, 2012; Freddy February 7, 2014; Kajsa February 21, 2014; Jens March 10, 2014). Several of them also underlined that this was an important reason for why they wanted to be active in Equumenia, which can be related to the research done on why people become and choose to stay involved in a particular cause or organization (cf. Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001; Gould 2009; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013). In addition to the general atmosphere within the group, the emotional atmosphere at particular events or gatherings may be significant when it comes to inspiring people to take part (Collins 2001: 27–28; Flam & King 2005: 4; Gould 2009: 207; Yang 2005: 83). In my material, the youths could for instance describe different gatherings or events as fun, cosy or moving, and present that as reasons for why they wanted to participate. Or, quite the opposite, explain how they knew or assumed a meeting or event would be boring or not very engaging, and therefore had chosen not to take part (e.g., Lukas April 18, 2012; Lena October 3, 2011; Olivia March 20, 2012; Rasmus April 10, 2012).

But what is by some experienced as a particularly good emotional atmosphere, which makes the get-together fun and engaging, may by others be seen as too overwhelming or as forced and unnatural and even make the individual feel uncomfortable. Elise, who was 23 years old when I interviewed her, talked about this. She had been active in Christian children and youth groups all her life, since her parents had been members of free church congregations in the different towns where she had grown up. As a teenager she lived in a town where there was no Equumenia church,⁹ so for some years she was active in a local ecumenical church and took part in their youth meetings, but still participated regularly in youth weekends and camps arranged by Equumenia on a regional level. In the interview she described how she did not necessarily appreciate the kind of atmosphere the organizers tried to create at some of these meetings:

It was very “hyped” in the church where I was. A lot of, well, you know: Lively music. “Everyone must stand up!” Like that. And I never really understood, or felt comfortable with that. [...] I can become quite frustrated, also these days at the regional gatherings, when [...] you only get one alternative for a service or an evening [activity]. I mean, if something is arranged in the evening, then it’s like a large gathering and it’s mostly, like, organized in a particular way. Because some people want to use the fact that we are several hundred persons there. There is a chance to feel that it’s “cool” and “hip”, and that there are so many of us, sort of. But for those of us who have had a long day with... I don’t know, organizational issues. Those kinds of things. Maybe I just want to sit down for a while in the evening. Have a quiet moment. Maybe talk to someone. Maybe someone plays a little music. Like that. I really believe that quite a lot of people could have a need for that, but it’s not always offered. It mostly becomes this “cooler” or “more youthful” thing. (Elise November 23, 2012)

The kind of gathering which Elise described, with lots of people, lively music and singing, joint prayers and everyone standing up and joining in, is quite common within Eumenia, especially at camps and weekends where there are large numbers of youths gathered. This kind of lively and intense service could be interpreted as an example of Durkheim’s notion of *collective effervescence*, according to which a large gathering of people in a joint manifestation or meeting can be expected to arouse feelings of enthusiasm, solidarity and joy among the participants (cf. Collins 2001: 27–28; Durkheim [1912]1995; Fish 2005: 21; Gould 2009: 207). Jacobsson and Lindblom also point out that the awareness of experiencing something together, may be an important part of creating a sense of community and solidarity, especially if the ordinary everyday activities take place in a much smaller environment, or if you belong to a minority group (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 62–63).

Elise did seem to think that this was something

the organizers actively tried to accomplish when they planned the activities and meetings, or as she phrased it: “some people want to use the fact that we are several hundred persons there.” In addition, she pointed out a perceived ambition to keep the gathering “cool” or “more youthful”. Such an ambition could appear quite natural, considering that the participants at the youth camps and meetings generally are aged between 13 and 25. But even though Elise herself belonged to this age group, she apparently had other preferences and was frustrated that these were not catered for. This expressed frustration can be linked to the fact that she, in most cases, did not have the position or power to directly influence the kind of services and activities the organizers arranged. She simply had to adjust to what others saw as a good way of organizing the gatherings.

Elise did, however, talk not only about being frustrated and longing for a more peaceful setting, but also about not feeling comfortable at this kind of large and intense gatherings. This was an experience she shared with Anton. He was 18 years old at the time of the interview, and had taken part in activities organized by Eumenia since he was 13. Anton was active in the local youth group as a scout leader, and regularly participated in the Friday night gatherings for teenagers. He had also been a representative at the regional level on several occasions, and in that role he had taken part in different kinds of youth gatherings, and like Elise, he did not always appreciate how they were organized:

Now lately, it’s happened quite a lot at the youth weekends, that you’re supposed to raise your hand and step forward and then they pray for people. Who think they become Christian. It wasn’t like that when I started going to church. The first time I experienced that must have been last year. Or the year before. I think that’s quite uncomfortable. When people are like... When you have four hundred people and then: “Well now you should raise your hands and come up here and we’ll pray for you!” and so on. I find such things quite unpleasant. [...] The atmosphere becomes so “pushy”. [...] Loud music and rather... the atmosphere be-

comes quite frantic and intense. And you have to do it, sort of. You don't have a choice. I find that pretty distressing. (Anton October 14, 2011)

Anton thus emphasized partly different aspects than Elise in his explanation of why he felt uncomfortable at this kind of gatherings, namely how the intense and lively atmosphere might push people into stepping forward and publicly, through collective prayer, become or declare themselves to be Christians. To "meet Jesus" or "being saved" in this kind of public setting, has been common in the tradition and history of the Swedish free churches, as in many other charismatic or revivalist movements, and is thus not something new in itself. It can be seen as an important ritualization process, with great potential of making people feel connected and creating emotional energy and cohesion within the group (cf. Collins 2001: 28; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 66).

But to Anton this was something unusual, which he had come across quite recently. He explained, in other parts of the interview, how he felt that becoming a Christian was a complex and private process, which demanded thought and consideration from the individual, rather than something that should or could be expected to happen suddenly and publicly through the prayers of others. That was why he was opposed to this particular aspect of such gatherings. If collective manifestations and meetings may arouse feelings of enthusiasm, solidarity and joy, on the one hand, then the kind of situation and atmosphere Anton described, could be said to exemplify the other side of the coin, where group mechanisms might push people into doing things they might not have done in a calmer environment.

Collective prayer, which was one of the aspects Anton mentioned, is common in different types of gatherings and meetings within Eumenia, and can be done in various ways. Sometimes people take turns and each give a contribution to what together becomes a collective prayer, but it can also mean that everyone is saying the same prayer at the same time. In the latter case, the participants must know exactly what to say, and how to say it together with the others. Since it is a prayer, the participants also audibly

and explicitly show that they all share a particular understanding or message. It can, in other words, be seen as a kind of ritualized action that may contribute to creating a shared attention, a collective experience of being there and then (cf. Collins 2001: 28).

Jacobsson and Lindblom underline that everyday ritualization is a necessary kind of emotion work in activist groups, which creates the emotional energy needed to keep up the cohesion within the group (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 62–63). I would argue that the same goes for groups like the Eumenia youth groups, and various kinds of collective prayer could serve that kind of purpose. But it was also a practice that could make the participants uncomfortable, in different ways. Anton disliked how collective prayers were supposed to make people become Christians, whereas Olivia found meetings where the group prayed collectively in a way that resembled chanting quite uncomfortable and unsettling – it also made her aware of the fact that she did not share their faith (Olivia March 20, 2012). Instead of creating a sense of community and solidarity, a ritualized action like collective prayer may thus at times make the individuals aware of differences between them and others, and rather accentuate divisions within a group.

Getting Angry

So, even though the youths in the study in general valued the emotional atmosphere within the groups, they did not always appreciate all kinds of ritualized actions or the emotional atmosphere at particular events. Aspects that could be expected to encourage feelings of solidarity, community and enthusiasm, were instead, by some, experienced as something uncomfortable or distressing. Sometimes it was opinions, views or expressed values that made the youths feel uncomfortable, or even angry. Anton described how a number of people in his youth group angrily marched out from a service since they disagreed with what was being said about sin, Moa talked about how she strongly disagreed with the values surrounding sexual relations and homosexuality in one of the youth groups she was active in and Jenny talked about how she actively avoided dis-

cussing certain things with the older people in the congregation, since she feared she would just get into conflicts, and so on (Anton October 14, 2011; Moa November 13, 2012; Jenny February 10, 2011).

The religious foundation of the youth organization at large, and the expectations connected to this, could also cause discomfort or anger. One example was when Olivia explained how she had reacted during the period when she was grappling with whether or not she believed in God:

Maria: How come... cause you said you used to believe in God?

Olivia: Yeah, but when I started in the scout group it was like... you always said a prayer afterwards. And then like: (with a shrill voice) "Yes I am a Christian, I pray," sort of. And it was like... Well, I don't know. I didn't call myself a Christian, but I thought like: "I believe in God." I sat there thinking: "I believe in God." And that's as far as I thought. Then I reached a point where I was like: "No, aargh! I hate this! Aaarghh!" And I just got, like, scared. I didn't know quite what it was. [...] It was like, when we prayed in the scout group I just sat there silently. I was like... I don't know. I was angry! I didn't feel OK. But then after a while I realized that, sort of... this is what they do. [...] I don't have to think like this to be [included]... They respect me anyway. (Olivia March 20, 2012)

In a few sentences, Olivia summarizes a long and complex emotional process. First how she started to feel that she only repeated what was expected of her, without thinking very carefully about it. Secondly how she got scared as well as angry with the religious practices and expectations within the scout group, before finally reaching the conclusion that she did not have to share the religious conviction in order to be accepted in the group. Her account thus relates quite severe emotion work, taking her from feeling uncomfortable and fake through a phase of fear and anger and finally reaching acceptance and calm.

I would argue that one important aspect of what made this emotion work necessary, was that Olivia

was going against the stream and against the expectations within the group, in this case when it came to the religious foundation of the organization (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 56). Even though the official message of the youth organization is that you do not have to believe in God in order to participate in the activities, there is still a strong emphasis on the Christian faith as a foundation for the youth work, as is evident for instance on the web pages (e.g., Equmenia 2013, 2014). In my previous work, I have discussed how sharing the same faith may become a significant factor in how community is created within a Christian youth group. That it is a good and desired thing to believe in God, becomes a central part of the foundation for the group's existence, and when individuals explicitly do not share this fundamental value, it might have implications for the interaction within the group as well as for individual members (cf. Zackariasson 2012). Even if Olivia eventually came to the conclusion that she did not have to share the faith to be a respected member of the group, it is thus not surprising that it took a great deal of emotional work to go against this strong expectation.

Olivia did not mention anything about discussing her doubts, her emotions and her final resolution with anybody else within the group or within the church as a whole. She appeared to have dealt with these issues primarily on her own, quietly getting angry, but never actively arguing against what was being said at the meetings, or questioning any of the practices she did not feel comfortable with. Elise, on the other hand, had handled similar dilemmas quite differently. Unlike Olivia, Elise was quite clear on that she believed in God, and defined herself as a Christian. But when she was younger, she had disagreed with many of the values and views presented by the adult youth leaders in the ecumenical youth group where she was active. During the interview, she described how they used to discuss issues such as relations, marriage and homosexuality quite extensively in the youth group, and explained how she regularly and loudly disagreed with the grown-ups. The person she most often got into arguments with, was the youth pastor of the congregation:

I was rather strong-willed, so to speak... then. Or, now as well, but... Or I could be a bit... The guy who was our youth pastor, whom we had a lot of contact with and who arranged all of these things. I think both of us felt quite early on that we didn't get along ... or we often didn't agree. But I know a lot of people who thought he was really good. Several people liked him a lot. And then I started to feel like... That maybe it's just me who's in the wrong place here. I'm not saying that it was a bad congregation. But I do think, really, that a congregation should have a place for everyone, not just for a particular kind of person... (Elise November 23, 2012)

Elise's readiness to argue led to recurring conflicts with the adult youth leaders and she presented this as a contributing factor to why she with time stopped participating in the activities of the local youth group. One way to interpret this would be that the emotion work needed to go against the stream, of constantly defending divergent opinions, became too taxing to keep up in the long run (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 56). But that youths questioned what was being said by the adult leaders did not in itself have to be a problem or lead to conflicts. Several of the other interviewed youths talked about how the discussions in their youth groups could become quite heated. But where they generally described and appreciated an open discussion climate, Elise underlined how she felt there was no room for discussions, since the attitude from the youth leaders was that the Bible clearly stated how things were to be viewed. Hence, her eager questioning led to conflicts and resentment, rather than engaged discussions. Elise moreover explained how she had felt that not only the adults but also the other youths found her anger and protests to be quite unnecessary. She was usually the only one who questioned what was being said, and she did not feel any support in this from her friends (Elise November 23, 2012).

The negative reactions to Elise's questioning attitude could be understood in relation to the concept of feeling rules, in the sense that anger and indignation appeared not to be appreciated emotions in that

particular setting (cf. Hochschild 2003: 56–75). In Elise's case, the result of the situation was thus that she eventually chose to leave the group, and instead got involved in other arenas, where she found people with opinions more like her own. But another potential option could have been to actively work with her emotions, in order to adjust her behaviour to something which was seen as more acceptable according to the feeling rules of the group. Such active and conscious work with one's emotions, was something Jenny talked about:

It's difficult sometimes. Especially if you have a person that you really can't take. I find those situations very difficult. Cause I can get very irritated with some people. Not because they actually do anything wrong, just that they annoy me. I really try to get rid of that. [...] It's very much like... how should I get over that. [...] I work with that a lot. Even if I find the person very annoying, I still smile, I'm polite and kind. I try to get another picture [of that person]. Like that. (Jenny February 10, 2011)

The emotion work which Jenny describes can be understood in relation to how Jacobsson and Lindblom talk about *containing* among animal rights activists. In their study, this ability to resist reacting against other people's negative or hostile emotions, for instance through monitoring one's emotions when meeting the public during manifestations or information campaigns, is seen as vital in order not to give a negative impression (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 60–61). Jenny had similar reasons for her efforts to constrain her irritation against others. She had on different occasions met people who had certain ideas or prejudices about what Christians are like, and what belonging to a free church would entail. Instead of arguing violently with them, she wanted to give a good impression, and thus a more positive example of being a free church Christian. But, as is evident in the quote, she did at times find it quite demanding to contain her feelings. Even though her ideal was to give love to others, as we saw earlier, she could thus find it quite difficult to always keep it up in practice.

The concept *containing* could also be used to analyse Elise's account of how she would regularly get into conflicts with the youth pastor of the congregation (cf. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013: 60–61). From one perspective, her readiness to get into arguments and discussions could be seen as a sign of her not being capable of, or not interested in, containing her emotions. Instead of trying to be polite and understanding, and aiming to see the other side of the picture, as Jenny talked about above, Elise appeared to have had a rather confrontational attitude. When she talked about it several years afterwards, in the interview, she had a tendency to put a lot of responsibility for the situation on herself, through describing her teenage self as “strong-willed” and underlining that it was she personally who had a problem with the pastor, while others liked him. Her way of describing the situation could thus indicate that she in retrospect thought she could have handled things differently.

But from another perspective one could argue that it was the youth pastor of the congregation who apparently did not manage to contain his emotions, in the discussions with Elise. Instead of regarding it as a situation where Elise was a strong-willed and rebellious youth, questioning the adults, one could thus focus on how the pastor did not manage to handle such an attitude in a way that still made her feel welcome. Considering the power relations, where he was an employed, grown-up, male pastor, responsible for the youth group and the organized activities, and she was a teenage girl, it is clear that they had rather different positions. One could, consequently, argue that the youth pastor had both a better opportunity and a bigger responsibility to create an environment where everyone felt at home, regardless of faith, opinions or attitude.

Concluding Discussion

That the atmosphere within the local youth groups and congregations was described as characterized by love, forgiveness, compassion and encouragement, was, as demonstrated above, a recurring tendency throughout the interviews, and the atmosphere and sense of community were, furthermore, often pre-

sented as contributing reasons for why the youths wanted to stay involved in Equemenia. They also tended to portray themselves as actively involved in the process of creating and sustaining such an atmosphere, for instance when they talked about how they, in their voluntary work as scout leaders or teenage group leaders, in various ways tried to communicate the importance of taking care of one another, and of being loving, helpful, encouraging and forgiving. The implementation of such ideals was thus depicted as an active process, and could be seen as a form of collective emotion work. Such an active, and at times quite explicit, communication of emotional expectations becomes noteworthy considering that feeling rules often are implicit and unspoken, and noted mainly when they are violated (Hochschild 2003: 57). Still, not all of the youths automatically included themselves in these processes, and as the example of Olivia demonstrates, group dynamics and the individuals' position within the group, as well as the individual's relation to the religious foundation of the organization, could be factors in this.

Even though there was agreement on a general level on the importance of spreading love and understanding, not all of the youths had experienced that this was what characterized their particular youth group. Furthermore, as the examples of Anton and Elise illustrate, what is considered by some to be a particularly good emotional atmosphere, which is thought to create a sense of solidarity and community, might by others be experienced as fake or distressing. Here I want to highlight that it was particularly the collective aspects of certain types of emotion work that were presented as negative by the interviewed youths, whether it concerned participating in lively and intense gatherings with large numbers of people or more everyday ritualized actions, such as collective prayer. In other words, what seemed to be most problematic was when an individual felt that he or she could not live up to the emotional reactions that was expected of them as being part of a certain group or collective at a particular time. Although collective effervescence and ritualization in many cases may be important for creating emotional involvement and sustaining commitment, as has been

noted by various scholars, my results thus illustrate how they in other cases appear to have rather the opposite effect, and perhaps even decrease the motivation and commitment of some individuals, through making them feel uncomfortable (cf. Collins 2001; Gould 2009; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013).

Another aspect worth underlining, is how in settings where love, compassion and understanding are clearly encouraged and valued, other feelings, such as anger and resentment may become, or be regarded as, quite problematic. As my material shows, it was not uncommon among the youths to describe situations in an Equmenia context where they or others had become angry. Generally, this emotional reaction was connected to that they had encountered attitudes and values that they did not agree with or that they thought did not go well with the ideals of showing love and forgiveness. In their accounts they gave different examples of how they had handled this anger or irritation: by showing it explicitly through angrily walking out or actively disagreeing with what was being said, or like Jenny, by working hard to suppress such feelings. But both going against the stream through questioning central ideas and values and working actively with one's emotions in order to live up to the feeling rules of a particular group, requires a lot of emotion work (cf. Hochschild 2003; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013). If positive emotional experiences, such as the experience of being in a friendly, loving and compassionate environment, may encourage and sustain involvement in a particular group or organization, then feeling uncomfortable, being angry or scared, may do the opposite.

My analysis thus shows that there are interesting similarities between NGO:s or groups belonging to social movements, and a religious organization like Equmenia, when it comes to different kinds of emotion work and how these may encourage participation and commitment for instance through creating a particular atmosphere. But it also points to significant differences, one of the most important being that involvement in a free church youth organization always comprises some kind of relation to the Christian faith, regardless of whether you see yourself as a Christian or not. Even though belief in God is not a

prerequisite to take part in the organized activities, the different examples show that it is still something which permeates the youth work in the local groups, leading to more or less pronounced emotional expectations for the members of the organization, whether it is to spread the love of God or to participate in ritualized actions such as collective prayers.

Notes

- 1 4H is a youth organization that exists in 80 countries, and which focuses on citizenship and participation, learning through doing and the interaction between humans and nature (Sveriges 4H 2014).
- 2 Except for instance in Arlie Hochschild's concept "feeling rules" (Hochschild 2003: 57–73).
- 3 As has for instance been the case in certain studies on religious experiences and the emotions these experiences may evoke or include (Pyysiäinen 2003; Sinding-Jensen 2009).
- 4 Previously the National Board of Youth Affairs.
- 5 NGO:s = Non-governmental organizations.
- 6 In total 12 young men and 10 young women have participated in the project, 15 of these in individual interviews, which lasted 1–2 hours. A majority came from middle-class families (according to parents' educational level) and their parents were, with few exceptions, born in Sweden. Initially, some participant observations were made, but the interviews constitute the main empirical material. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and have been translated to English by the author. The names of all of the participants and congregations have been changed, as well as certain personal details, in order to ensure anonymity.
- 7 On the organization's website it is expressed like this: "The foundation for what we do is our Father, the belief in God. But to be a Christian is no prerequisite to take part" (Equmenia 2014, author's translation).
- 8 Another way of discussing such aspects, used by for instance John Corrigan, is through the term emotionology, Peter Stearns' concept for the rules for emotional expression and concealment which are present in the social codes for everyday life (Stearns according to Corrigan 2004: 18f.). Deborah Gould discusses similar processes through the concept *emotional habitus* (Gould 2009).
- 9 Or Mission Covenant Church as it would have been at the time.

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