

Ethnicity and transitional space: a conversation between Stockholm and Canterbury

Students' ethnic identity in Higher Education, does it matter?

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Introduction

In Europe, the access to higher education has increased in the last decades (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and continues to expand. Within the Swedish context women are overrepresented and students with a working-class background have been doubled the last decade. Students with other ethnical background than Swedish are also well represented in higher education, even if there are differences between ethnical groups. Amongst the Iranian population, over 60 percent is entering higher education, whilst only 16 percent of the Somalis. Working class students are still underrepresented in relation to the population as a whole and especially in longer elite programmes (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2009).

This paper is based on results from a European research project called Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher education¹. The project is concerned with identifying the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students. The experiences of non-traditional learners as well as how they form a learning identity during their studies is of high importance in the European countries involved in the project. When talking about non-traditional student's identity forming, issues of class, gender, age and ethnicity are of central importance as well.

Identity forming in adult life has been studied as a part of research on adult learning (English, 2005) and work (Collin, 2008). More specifically, shaping and developing identities have been examined within different institutions and life spheres where adults are acting and

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interacting with each other, such as higher or vocational education (Hyland & Merrill, 2003), professions (Thunborg, 1999; Bron & Jarvis, 2007) or workplaces (Collin, 2008), civil society (Bron, 2006; 2007) and family (Smelser & Erikson, 1980). In biographical research, the shaping of identities has been related to previous life experiences where gender, ethnicity, class and age are important issues (Merrill 1999; Bron, 2000). In this paper, we have a specific interest to look at the struggles that actors experience in their identity forming when entering higher education. We have earlier defined three identity types formed in higher education: multiple integrated, floating and adopted identities (Bron, et al, 2010; Thunborg, et al, 2010). A multiple integrated identity is a presentation of oneself as a person with different experiences that exists parallel to each other and are at the same time integrated. In the integration there is a sense of a multiple self even if there is an awareness of struggles. The floating identity is an identity where persons are presenting themselves as struggling with who they are in relation to different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations. They are more insecure and commute from one identity to another. Finally, the adopted identity is found in stories where different backgrounds and experiences are hidden behind a coherent presentation of one single identity at a time related to each new situation.

The aim of this paper is to understand experiences of the struggles students with other ethnical background than Swedish face when they approach higher education and how these struggles are part of the forming of identity.

Theoretical background and main concepts

The forming of an identity in higher education when having another ethnical background than Swedish is discussed by looking at Meads (1934) concept of self as a relation between I and me. Furthermore, identity forming is related to a concept of biographicity, the concept coined by Alheit (1995). Although, for understanding the struggles and how struggles are part of students' forming and changing identity we discuss the idea of floating in transitional space.

To be more specific, identity here is seen as a social identity constructed and reconstructed in interaction with others (Mead, 1934). Moreover, identities are formed in the relation between agency and structure, assuming an individual to be an acting agent. How individuals define his/her identity depends on the context (Mead, 1934; Giddens, 1991; West et al. 2007). Biographical research helps to look at identity formation in adult life both in the context of

learning as well as work and family. When trying to understand what is going on in the identity formation, when students narrate their lives, we include the concepts of floating and transitional space. Changes in learning identities are conditioned by learning crises. Bron (2000) uses the concept of “floating” to understand identity crises. To be “floating” relates to an experience of being fragmented, without a feeling of a passed and of being unable to create a future. Floating is experienced when people are confronted with a new culture as a consequence of changing life settings such as moving from one country to another or from countryside to cities, changing education or occupation. In forming and changing learning identities, people experience struggles in relation to who they are in a specific situation or context. Transitional space, firstly defined by Winnicott (1971), is a concept for understanding the exploration process of self-negotiating that learners are involved in when trying to form and change an identity in relation to others. This concept is used in biographical research (Merrill & West, 2009), where there is a time for reflection and self-negotiation and struggles can be discovered and understood. We experience transitional space through our lives, also in higher education and learning. During the story telling the self is in a process of continuing negotiation of his/her position with others. This happens in the interview situation, when there is a time for reflection, but also in the mind of the self-negotiating own position, as Mead (1964) would say, being engaged in conversation with the generalized other. The quality of authorship and agency will shift because of telling the story, being listened to and understood (Merrill & West 2009). Struggles are typical in transitional spaces, and these struggles are what we want to uncover in students’ narratives.

Method

Within the Swedish part of this project (www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/) three universities, Stockholm University, Karolinska Institutet and the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) were selected. Thirty-two first-year students were interviewed, once in their first year of the education and a second time the following year. Thirty students in their last year as well as thirty seven lecturers were interviewed. All interviews with students had an in-depth and biographical character.

Bron & West (2000) point out that the use of biographical methods gives an experience-rich material that can give insights into the intersection between structure and agency, culture and psyche and being ‘storied’ and ‘storying’ a life. The stories reflect and constitute culture that

is manifest in the experiences, competing truths within the society and also include processes of learning. The interplay of agency and structure can also be found in the stories (ibid). Individuals by narrating construct their reality and reflect upon their lives. While analysing biographical data similarities and differences as well as certain patterns can be found and theorised. Alheit (1994) emphasizes that when someone actually is remembering an experience this means that it must have been an event having an impact on the individual's life and biography in terms of changes in the person's 'self'. In this paper three adult students with other ethnical background than Swedish have been chosen. We here present them as Ida, Ibrahim and Inga. Ida and Inga were interviewed once in their last year, while Ibrahim was interviewed three times during his studies.

Vignettes of three non-traditional students

In this section we are presenting three students in higher education; Ida, Ibrahim and Inga.

Ida

Ida is twenty eight years old, born and grown up in Malmoe, the third largest city in Sweden. She moved to Stockholm while starting her studies in Biomedicine three years ago. Her parents moved to Sweden from former Yugoslavia during the 1960th as labour immigrants. She has never had any contact with her father. Her mother has been working all her life in the warehouse of a bakery, but is now retired. She has never learnt Swedish. Ida sees herself as very different from her mother:

Thus she is rather...passive nowadays. While my life has always been much to different from hers..Ah..I think that her...I think her goal in life is that I not will end up working in the industry.. But after that it is like...nothing matters. And...I've not...thus..I've never..She can't speak Swedish or just a little bit like..And it's not like we've had any...communication about school or...subjects like that, like. But it has...I've got it from books rather from her...or from my sister. ...But it might have been cosy, I think, having a parent who had studied something and also like...but, well that is how it is...

Ida looks upon herself as intellectual. All her friends are intellectual although they are not all academic, she told us. She has always been good at school even though her nine-year compulsory school was a 'misery-school'. She has been ambivalent about what to study. In upper secondary school she had a dream being a writer so she started literature studies at the university. Through the years she mixed different university courses with different unqualified jobs while thinking of what/whom to become. She attended an education in massage and found an interest in the human body. Her interest in the human body gave her the idea to

apply to the Medical school in Stockholm to become a physician. She was not accepted, so as her second choice she started studying Biomedicine.

Ida struggles with the academic world. She has always managed to adapt herself to former studies in a way that fits her. In Biomedicine, for the first time, she has to adapt to the different form of education. She is critical, not to the programme but to the academic context. The language being used, she argues, is a way to exclude people. She has problems with being judged and to promote herself in the academy. It is not a problem of not being intelligent enough; she is as good as anyone. But she struggles with her self-confidence:

In one way it is very curious that I've landed where I've landed because I don't think I like when someone else is judging me or judges my level of knowledge but presumably I will become a researcher where I definitely will be judged and judging my level of knowledge...For me it's in a way...Yes, it is kind of in that level. Thus, I become...I'm attracted to it in an intellectual way but...ah...But personally it's kind of...it is horrible...

Another struggle is her interest to find out and create new knowledge, not to get prestige. Despite all, she wants to become a candidate for the doctoral program. Now she struggles with how to get access to a PhD course. She can feel a little bit envy of students with other backgrounds who know exactly how to act within the academy and making a career. Such knowledge she has never had. Thus, her background makes her struggle really hard to adopt an identity that fit into the academic world.

Ibrahim

Ibrahim is nineteen years old at the first interview and 21 at the last. He is studying to become a teacher. He comes from a Christian Iraqi family that escaped from Iraq the year 2000, when he was ten years old. Both his parents are university's graduates from Iraq. Since they came to Sweden they have not been able to work in their former professions. His father, a former national economist, is now working with storing at a mechanical industry and his mother, who was an economist, is working in elderly care. He is the eldest brother out of three.

Ibrahim struggle about who he is, what he is expected to be and what he would like to be. He feels that he is obligated to study as a consequence of being the eldest brother for being a role-model for his younger brothers. At the same time he dreams of being a "free spirit" far from the demands from his family. His parents had expectations that he would start studying the law, one out of three high status jobs in Iraq (medicine and engineering is the others) but

Ibrahim has a dream, he wants to become a writer. Teacher was then a compromise that his parents could accept and a profession that he himself thinks is rather relaxed. His grandfather was a famous author that died in a car accident 1975. Ibrahim has never met him but claims that he captures his own ideas of what he would like to be.

Ibrahim struggles with the cultural traditions in his family. He is questioning religion generally, but has difficulties with standing up for his opinion in his Catholic family. He has a different political view than his father, but tries to balance his arguments for not challenge him. He claims that his family is more bounded by tradition than by religion and that this way of balancing is part of keeping to the tradition. He also claims that studying in higher education for his family as an ethnical minority in Iraq, is being successful and a way to protect oneself and the family, and that the demands on him to do well is related to that. Furthermore, he struggles with the Swedish society. In one respect he thinks that the Swedish society is protecting its citizens, on the other hand he thinks that the idea of protection in the Swedish society in Sweden might be a false one. Out of this he is, on the one hand, accepting that he is not reaching the demands he has on himself. On the other hand, he is trying to do his very best and suffers that he is not good enough in his studies. He also struggles with his ethnical identity, what he is and how he thinks that others see him:

I have never seen myself as an Iraqi or as a Swede. I have always seen it as open. I can chose, I have both, I am both Iraqi and Swedish, so everything is open for me... I don't want to categorise myself as one or the other, I hate both, I have seen things about Iraq that I hate, and of Sweden that I hate, I don't want to be anything. I don't care about it. It feels like if I walk in the city and someone is passing, they don't have to look at me or anything but I get the feeling that I'm not judged as I am, I'm judged from what they think I am. I'm a foreigner, they think that a dropped out of school, working at a shitty place... I always see the prejudice.

Ibrahim has experiences of being categorized as a Muslim and sometimes even as a potential terrorist. He always gets caught in security when travelling. This has happened since he was fourteen years old and he is bothered about it. He also feels strange in relation to the Iraqi minority in Sweden, where he sees himself as much more liberal than others. During the last interview Ibrahim looks at his ethnic identity once more and claims that he is comfortable with whom he is:

I'm definitely not multi-ethnic; I feel I am what I am... When I meet people with my own ethnical background, I am very very Swedish, but when I'm with Swedes I don't feel completely Swedish, it feels different, I have other things, but I feel comfortable with it anyway.

Ibrahim sees higher education as a free zone from a lot of his struggles. In higher education he has not met any prejudice from other students or lecturers. He feels that he has a higher status when being a student and also that his parents are giving him more freedom because he is a student. He lives at home and feels comfortable with that. He also sees his studies as relaxed and his student friends as the free spirits he would like to be, even if he thinks it is hard to be as spontaneous as they are. He claims that he wants to study longer than he thought before. He, finally, struggles with his future identity as a teacher. He hopes he will become a good and interesting teacher, but fears that he would be seen as the migrant teacher from Iraq.

Inga

Inga is a thirty five years old, divorced single-mother with a five year old son. This is her last term at the Bachelor programme in Social work in Stockholm. Inga was born and grown up in a village outside Stockholm together with her mother and two sisters. Inga's mother came to Sweden together with her sister from Austria to work as maids in different 'wealthy families'. After having children Inga's mother worked hard with delivering newspapers until she was injured. She is now retired, 'all torn'. Inga has never lived with her father. He came to Sweden from Greece and has been working in restaurants and in warehouses. He was hurt in his job and is retired, now living together with Inga's mother. Inga was an easy learner at school and managed her studies but she thought of herself being a cheater while she learned without having to study hard. Her struggles in school were about being banged up in class and having fights with some of the teachers. Inga has always had difficulties to get new friends. When she was fifteen years old her mother left her and her younger sister. Their mother paid the rent and visited them now and then but could not be reached on the phone. The two sisters lived alone in the flat and got some help from the family of Inga's best friend. This was quite a traumatic time.

To get an occupation with a good salary as quick as possible, she learned to be a construction worker at upper secondary school:

And I knew that you could earn quite a lot of money...and that was also....thus we've always had worries with economy when I was a kid, so it was also important for me to be able to support myself. To manage to pay the bills and not have to work until you drop and don't have any money anyway.

She got a job as a carpenter, building houses, being an activist in the trade union. During the recession in the 1990th she got unemployed. She completed her grades from upper secondary school at a folk high school and studying politics. Then she got a job in a small construction firm. She got sexually harassed by her boss, got no support from the trade union and left her job as well as engagement in the trade union and in politics. Inga started studying in another folk high school, this time with an international alignment. The pupils lived together at the school and a journey to Cameron was one part of the studies. Studying here was fantastic and she got a lot of new friends. She returned to Cameron, working in a project with chimpanzees. She met a man who moved with her back to Sweden where they got married and had a son. Inga started working as a host in the local train company. After her divorce, a couple of years later, she finally decided to start higher education, supported by her cousin, who is a teacher and her cousins sister-in-law, who works in social welfare. Inga thinks that her ethnical background is important. She has been sewing Austrian costumes to her female relatives. She and her son love to travel both in Sweden and abroad and they are visiting their relatives as often as possible.

We visited them (*relatives in Austria*) last year. This time I managed to get the rest of my family to go with me. I forced them to go (laughter). But I think it's really important. We've been in Cameron too so that my son can be able to meet his relatives down there. In Greece I've no..I've no contact with them unfortunately, but we're travelling to Greece just because of...

Being a single mother and studying is no problem. Her son spends time with his father every other weekend and then she works extra at the trains. She also has some friends helping her if needed. The holidays have been a problem while she has to work to make a living. But her mother helps her and has become a significant person for her son, and Inga has forgiven her mother, although they never talk about her childhood. Inga struggles with her bad self-confidence, thinking of herself as stupid and as a fake, cheating when she does not have to work hard to manage her studies. She also thinks she is a bad writer and has a hard time working with her thesis for the bachelor degree.

But I've not really dared. Thought that I'm too stupid. I'm, .uncultivated and such. But then I..thought that I've got to try anyway. Still think I'm...I still think that I'm stupid sometimes...but it has become a little bit better .. But sometimes I think that 'no, they must have missed noticing how silly I am'...or how stupid I am..I don't know when I started believing that I'm nuts...I don't like writing. I think I've a very bad...thus language. And..I think it sounds childish. I think it sounds...thus I don't like it. And still I won a competition when I was in the fifth grade. (...) I've always been hiding myself behind somebody else. That..I've been sitting, being verbal instead and the others have been writing, when we've had group work and such. Everybody have thus been working of course...No, I will stop hiding myself. I will write this all by myself. I will prove to myself that I can manage. It progresses so-so...but it will soon be over.

Sometimes she thinks about quitting, but if she does, she is confident she will never start studying in higher education again. At the same time, she has learned a lot about herself and now sees herself as a very social person.

Comparisons between students

In this paper we have focused on three non-traditional students with another ethnical background than Swedish for analysing the struggles they feel in their lives and in connection to their studies. All of the students are struggling with self-confidence in relation to their studies. For Ida the struggles are connected to the academic context, and a feeling of being excluded from the academic world, because a lack of understanding of the system, besides the studies in themselves. For Inga the self-confidence is related to the studies in themselves and her view of herself as being a fake and a bad in writing. For Ibrahim the struggles are connected to his own and his families high demands and his view of himself as “lazy with a high potential”.

Ida is moving away from her own cultural and social background and is forming an identity as an intellectual. She is struggling with her self-confidence related to the academy, and this is her important struggle; to fit, to adjust. Ibrahim does not really know who he is or what he wants to be, link to who he thinks he is, but also in contrast to the expectations and views of others. During the last interview however, he seems to change his identity. In one sense it could be argued that he is defining himself more like a Swede but in another sense he still is concerned with his own view of how others see him, it is hard for him to identify with being only that. He is, thereby, still struggling with who he is. Inga is struggling with her self-confidence seeing herself as a fake in the academy. She is working class and just wants to have a job where she does not risk to get all torn. She has managed her studies, but has never felt comfortable with the academic context and has no intention to return. She has no plans to fit into the academy.

In their discussions of struggles with identity all of them are referring to being outsiders. For Ida and Inga this seems to be related to class, for Ibrahim it seems to be related to others seeing him as a foreigner, something he is unable to escape from, because of his way of looking. Ethnicity is, thereby, a more important aspect for him than for the others. However, even class seems to be important in Ibrahim's story. He comes from a well-educated family,

but nevertheless they have lost their position and status due to their new lives in a new country. Ibrahim is, thereby, demanded to gain a new position for the family by going into higher education. To sum up, Inga and Ida seems to struggle more with class than with ethnicity, despite their different ethnical background, while Ibrahim seems to be struggling more with ethnicity even, if class also is part of his story, to re-gain status in the new society.

What is then higher education connected to in the stories of the students and in their forming of an identity as non-traditional students? In the stories of the students higher education is regarded as both a “battle field” and a “free zone”. For Inga it is more characterized as a “battle field” whereas her bad self-confidence is created. Inga will fight to get this specific profession but she will never return. For Ida HE is both a “battle field” and a “free zone”, where the battle is about the academic prestige and competition, and the “free-zone” makes it possible for her to be intellectual and searching for knowledge. For Ibrahim it is more characterized as a “free zone”, from all the demands required by parents due to ethnical traditions and prejudice against him as a “Muslim” or ”potential terrorist” in society. Higher education then becomes an arena for building his new ethnical identity.

Discussion

In this paper we have focused on the struggles students with another ethnical background than Swedish face when they approach higher education and how these struggles are part of their forming of identity. While students are forming identities they are in a process of becoming members in the academic community, which cause either discomfort or acceptance. In accordance with Winnicott’s (1971) concept, higher education could be seen as transitional space. In line with our results, the academic community could be seen as a strange place full of cultural and social codes difficult to understand and uncover, and make meaning of them. Transitional space is created between the culture of the institutions and the students forming of an identity in relation to that culture. Paraphrasing Winnicott’s (1971) concept enables us to understand the process of self-negotiation that students are involved in when trying to form and change an identity in relation to others. This is also what happens during students’ time in higher education.

Acceptance can be experienced when a newcomer feels well and the academic culture does not feel strange for him/her. In this paper, students are referring to the academic culture as a

“free zone” or a “battle field”. To view HE as purely a “free zone” is to be able to negotiate oneself away from other categorizations in society, to become something new, a “free spirit” or a good student instead of a foreigner, a Muslim, or a terrorist. To view HE purely as a “battle field” creates struggles with studying in HE as a whole and a feeling of being an outsider that just tries to avoid being a “failure”. Finally, to see higher education in both ways seems to create struggles with identifying oneself with academy as a whole, but also a feeling of wanting to belong as well.

In our view, the forming and changing of identities is, to a high degree, related to transitional space on the one hand and to the social and cultural backgrounds of the students on the other. In this paper, we have identified how three students are floating between what they are and want to be in relation to society and the academic world and how these factors are interwoven. What identities are then formed and how do they float? We have earlier identified three types of identities related to non-traditional students in higher education: a multiple integrated identity, an adopted identity and a floating identity (Bron et al. 2010; Thunborg et al, 2010). Inga, that has a multiple integrated identity, is the one that claims the academy as a “battle field”. She wants to learn and hopes to get along, but is not committed to it. We understand this as a multiple integrated identity while she seems to form an identity with a sense of a multiple self. For Ibrahim, with a floating identity, the academic world is a “free zone”. Ibrahim struggles in who he is, in relation to different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations, and he commutes from one identity to another, but in HE he feels accepted as he is. Finally, Ida has an adopted identity where different backgrounds and experiences are hidden behind a coherent presentation of one single identity at a time related to each new situation. She struggles with what HE is like; “free zone” or “battlefield”. Maybe, the only way for her to cope with the struggles she faces in HE is to adopt an identity appropriate with it, to be able to see it as a “free zone”.

Our conclusion is that being a non-traditional student in higher education involves a complex relationship relating to significant others in academy and society (Mead, 1934). To meet the academic culture when having a working class background seems, on the one hand to be harder than having another ethnical background. On the other hand, having another ethnical background, that is visible, seems to be of higher importance in forming an identity in society as a whole.

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