

## Struggles in students' identity – the poetics of life

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### *Introduction*

In Sweden, there is a proverb saying: *Reality exceeds Poetry*. This matches very well an ongoing discussion in the Life history and biography network about how biographical interviews can be analysed as poems. In biographical interviews, poetry can be found in the stories and used as a way of understanding the forming of identity in adult life. 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 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, shaping of identities has been related to previous life experiences where gender, ethnicity, class and age became important issues (Merrill 1999; Bron, 2000). In this paper, we have a specific interest in the struggles that actors experience in their identity forming. Narratives of struggles can be seen as aspects of ethnicity, age, class and gender and studied as a complex combination of each other or independently. Here they are also discussed in terms of poetry, as a relation between reality and fiction. By poetics we mean the use of a fictive way of describing one's life when storytelling, but also a way of using metaphors and creativity in the narration (Ricoeur, 1984). What is more, looking for poetry in the narratives could also be a matter of connecting fantasy/imagination with reality as perceived by adult students.

This paper is based on results from a European research project called Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher education<sup>1</sup>. 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 develop a learning identity is of high importance in the European countries involved in the project. When talking about non-

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traditional students as well as identity forming issues of class, gender, age and ethnicity is of central importance.

In Europe, the access to higher education has increased in the last decades (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). Within the Swedish context women are for example overrepresented, students from a working-class background have been doubled the last decade and students with other ethnical background than Swedish are also well represented in higher education. However, working class students are still underrepresented in relation to the population as a whole and especially in long elite educational programmes. There are also differences between different ethnical groups in the Swedish higher educational system (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2009).

The aim of our paper is to deepen our understanding about struggles in forming identities in adults' life. More specifically we want to examine:

1. How do adult learners present struggles in their forming of identities?
2. How do these struggles relate to issues of ethnicity, age, class and gender?
3. How can we see these struggles in a poetic way?

## **Method**

In this paper we use biographical interviews. 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 are reflecting and constituting culture that is manifest in the experiences, competing truths within the society and are also including processes of learning. The interplay of agency and structure can also be found (ibid). In the stories individuals are constructing their reality and reflect about 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 individuals life and biography in terms of changes in the persons' 'self'.

Within the Swedish part of this project ([www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/](http://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 are interviewed, once in their first year of the education and a second time the following year. Thirty students in their last year and forty-five lecturers are interviewed. All interviews with students are biographical.

In this paper five adult students with other ethnical background than Swedish have been chosen. We here present them as Anja, Anna, Anthony, Adam and Amanda.

### *Theoretical background and main concepts*

Our points of departure in this paper are both young and mature adults in higher education, and we focus on their learning and forming identities. A theoretical framework is most of all based on Mead's theory of self, but we combine other perspectives as well. First, we want to unpack identity concept and look at it from different perspectives. Identity is here seen as social identity constructed and reconstructed in interaction with others. Moreover, identities are formed in the relation between agency and structure assuming the individual to be an acting agent. How the individual are defining his/her identity is depending on the context (Mead, 1934; Giddens, 1991; West et al. 2007). Biographical research helps to look at identity forming in adult life both in the context of learning as well as work and family. We want to include here the concept of transitional space, which is helpful in understanding what is going on in the identity formation when students narrate their lives. The term was coined by Donald Winnicott (1971), used in biographical research (Merrill & West 2009), and means an exploration process of self-negotiation when people are involved with each other. This includes also biographical interviews. We experience transitional space through our lives, also in higher education and learning. The self during the story telling is in a process of continuing negotiation of its 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 discover in students' narratives.

Is identity stable during the life course, or is it changing? Former research and theory building concerning life course perspective can be helpful here (Smelser & Erikson 1980). According to Levinson (1980), the concept 'life course' includes the idea of sequence and temporality, of stability and of change over time. Life course is made of a stuff which can be collected through interviews, including biographical, and is the raw material that a theory can explain. He introduces his own theory, the evolution of the individual life structure, which is much more useful and flexible than earlier theories. However, in comparison with the other theories, Levinson's (ibid.) theory does not perceive personality as stable during adulthood. His theory connects the social and the psychic such as psychodynamic and phenomenological approaches do: "Adult development is the story of the evolving process of mutual interpretation of self and world" (ibid. 278).

When forming identities, adults are involved in the process of interaction with others and social world. Ricoeur's (1984) conviction that the unity of humankind is nothing more than unity of communication can be helpful. Similarly to Mead he cannot imagine a person in isolation from the others. To Mead (1934) the intersubjectivity is a key issue in his theory of self and becoming. Thus, it was impossible to see a person grow or learn before he/she became a social. First she/he is social, then individual and

unique and able to learn. According to Ricoeur (1984), even if we have an individual identity, our identities show that we are depending of each other and deeply connected with each other. We are bound to each other because we need quest for esteem and recognition. This quest is about a true mutuality that gives us both our common humanity and our individual uniqueness. That connects us back to transitional space. Moreover, the concept of time is necessary to address when unpacking the concept of identity. For Ricoeur (*ibid.*), time is relevant because the discourse, i.e. telling the story, occurs in a certain time, it is not timeless like a system of language is.

Time as a category is crucial when looking at our students – both young and mature adults. These two perspectives, i.e. interaction and time, influence the identity project which each of the persons are involved in and which are shown in the stories told. Time gives us opportunity to look at identity from the perspective of integration, multiple identity, double identity etc. Students' struggle with identity forming during their lives includes maturation, experiences and learning. In understanding the process of struggle, the concept of biographicity (Alheit, 1995) and floating (Bron, 2000) can be useful. Struggles are like clashes and occur in transitional spaces in life courses that are neither linear nor in progressive stages. Identity forming does not necessarily means progress, but a change from what has been before. Some of the identities are learned identities, some become more intuitive.

Important opportunities and/or constrains for forming identities and struggling with them are included in social characteristics of adults, such as class, gender and ethnicity. Class is the issue that is much forgotten in research and theory, but plays in Merrill's (2007) research a crucial role in understanding mature students in higher learning. Class brings us to the issue of society or structure. Students are not isolated persons. Their subjectivity is related to their class and ethnicity, formed by them. Both class and ethnicity can be useful in explaining students' identities and understanding their struggles. Many times their struggles are just connected to class issues, which are often related to ethnicity. In other words, adults cannot escape from class or ethnicity that form them already when they are children. However, both characteristics can feel like a burden one wants to take off/escape or keep it no matter what. It is here helpful to take into consideration the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that exactly points out the constrains and possibilities of struggles in students' identity.

Identities and struggles in transitional spaces are visible through language and narration (discourse). Ricoeur (1984) makes an interesting distinction between these two, i.e. language and discourse. It is discourse/narration that we analyse in the biographical interviews. Looking to the language can be helpful in understanding the poetics of life through the storytelling. According to Ricoeur (*ibid.*), language is used creatively because it contains two resources: 1) ability to coined metaphors, and 2) creation of narratives. Through storytelling, adults create new plots and characters, thus producing new meaning.

## *Vignettes of five adult students*

In this section, we are presenting five students in higher education; Anja, Anna, Anthony, Adam and Amanda. Moreover, we want to look specifically at the issue how they present their struggles, if any.

### *Anja*

Anja is nineteen years old studying her first semester in Biology. She was born in Sweden and raised by her mother from Finland. She speaks Finnish as well as Swedish. She feels in Sweden like a Fin but when going to Finland seen as the Swede. Her mother has been working as a cleaning lady but is now retired because of work related injuries. Anja's mother has not been able to help her with her school-work since she was about fourteen. Anja's father dropped out of school and has been working as a taxi driver and a security guard. She meets her father rarely, he is macho and she has a feeling that they really don't know each other at all. She has a younger brother on her father's side, and an older sister on her mother's side, living in Finland. She has a nerdish interest in Biology and has been watching nature programmes on TV as well as experimenting with flowers and studying birds since she was a child. Her role model related to biology is her uncle in Finland. Anja thought that she would meet nerdish people like herself when starting to study in Higher Education, but she is disappointed in meeting people studying without a real interest. She thinks it is hard to learn all the social codes in student life, both because of her background and because she always felt it hard with social codes in general. Her boyfriend that himself has Aspergers syndrome is speculating about her having the same. Anja is also suffering from different allergies. When she was a child, she was often sick and home from school. Most Anja's friends are men. In Biology, there are mostly young, blond uninteresting women, in her view. Besides her interest in Biology, she is interested in art and music. She has been singing in the church quire when she was a child. Anja is struggling with who she is and how she fits in the higher educational system. She is also trying to integrate the struggles in relation to whom she is. In her narrative, there is a poetic way of describing the struggles between science and mythology, nature and culture.

### *Anna*

Anna is twenty eight years old, born and grown up in Malmoe. She moved to Stockholm while starting her studies in Biomedicine three years ago. Her parents moved to Sweden from former Yugoslavia during the 60<sup>th</sup> as labour immigrants. She has never had any contact with her father. Her mother has been working in the warehouse of a bakery all her life but is now retired. She has never learnt Swedish. Anna looks upon herself as intellectual. All her friends are intellectual although they are not all academic. Anna sees herself as very different from her mother. Anna 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 mixes 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.

Anna struggles with the academic world. She has always managed to adapt her former studies in a way that fits her. In Biomedicine, for the first time, she has to adapt/adjust to the form of education. She is critical, not to the education 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 market herself in the academy. It is not a problem of not being intelligent enough; she is as good as anyone. But she struggles with a self confidence. 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 making a career. This knowledge she has never had. Thus, her background makes her struggle really hard to adopt an identity in the academic world.

### ***Anthony***

Anthony is thirty-seven years old, born in Australia, grown up in UK from an age of two, and immigrated to Sweden ten years ago. His parents are mixed, mother is English and father Scottish. We met Anthony at his first year at the Programme for Bachelor of Social work at Stockholm University as a non-traditional/mature student. He is the first to study in his extended family; his previous education from England did not give him eligibility to start higher education. Moreover he was not a top student, just the contrary. As an adult, he attended courses for adults at Swedish municipal adult education and was able to get grades which were high enough to give him access to higher education. In Sweden Anthony got a new start for accessing education. He cannot picture himself in England as being a student mostly because of friends and family. However, his mother was very happy that Anthony started to learn again. He came to Sweden because of his girlfriend and he stayed. He did not know the language but after two days he was able to open a business of his own – a record shop. He worked in a music business selling records, and later on became a partner in the export-import business in the same branch. He earned a good living. His struggles in life are mostly connected with changing the life course, from working to study, to be able to change a career. He supports himself by a study loan and savings. He feels “*divided in a pure cultural way*”, being from Australia, England and now Sweden. What is more, he is struggling from being married and divorce, to have a partner and to be a lone father again. Part of his family (children) is in England. “*If one only make a trial this can be a life change at once*” is his motto for life. He is a role model for his seven years old son and his children, as he wants to show them that study is possible. “*I want my children to be proud of me*”. His studies, including learning Swedish, are important to him, and he does not want to lose any time. He does not socialise with younger students after university work. He is here “*to learn not to drink*”. He

went already through such a period, while in music business, now it is time for serious learning. Thus learning gives him pleasure, but it is also a struggle as he started in a quite mature age without any habitus from home being working class and changing places (moving). University is a new field of life for him, a transitional space where he is learning to study.

### ***Adam***

Adam is a nineteen-year-old student, studying to become a teacher. Right now, he is studying Political Sciences. He comes from a Christian Iraqi family that escaped from Iraq the year 2000, when he was ten years old. Both his parents have studied in Higher Education in 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. His mother who was before an economist is working in elderly care. Adam has two younger brothers. Adam had difficulties with finding friends in Iraq. As he came from an upper class family and had a different religion than most of his classmates, he was treated badly. He also describes the family economy as getting worse and worse before they escaped. When coming to Sweden they stayed at a camp for refugees, but his parents got work quick enough and moved to an acceptable area in a suburb. Adam is grateful for that. He also went to a school where he describes himself as the first immigrant. Adam is also relating to his experiences of home economics. He refuses to ask his parents for anything that is not necessary, he does not take any loans while studying and he is incapable of letting anyone buy him a drink for example. He has an experience of how a society is collapsing financially, and could therefore not feel safe. At the same time, he is envying his younger brothers that do not have that experience. They have been allowed to play instruments and have their own interest, things that he himself never has asked for.

Adam describes himself as both trying to cope with, but also eager to question, teachers that he doesn't like. He also expresses himself as doing brave things at the same time as he is questioning the truth in his own story. He is struggling when talking about who he is, what he is expected to be and what he would like to be. He is on the one hand expected to study hard, to be a good son and brother and a role model for his family. On the other hand, he wants to be a "free spirit", far from the obligations formed by his role as the eldest brother. In seeing himself from his parents point of view, he has potentials but is lazy. He does not dare to discuss his struggles with his parents but is trying to balance different aspects of himself. This concerns religion, tradition in general as well as his plans for the future. The choice to become a teacher instead of a lawyer as his parents wanted him to be is an example of this balancing.

### ***Amanda***

Amanda 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. Amanda was born and grown up in a village

outside Stockholm together with her mother and two sisters. Amanda's mother came to Sweden together with her sister from Austria to work as maids in different families. After having children Amanda's mother worked hard with delivering newspapers until she was injured. She is now retired, 'all torn'. Amanda 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 Amanda's mother. Amanda was an easy learner at school and managed her studies. Her struggles in school were about being banged up in class and having fights with some of the teachers. Amanda 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 Amanda'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. She got a job as a carpenter, building houses, being an activist in the trade union. During the recession in the 1990<sup>th</sup> 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. Amanda 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. She returned to Cameron, working in a project with chimpanzees. She met a man who moves with her back to Sweden where they got married and had a son. Amanda 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. 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. Amanda struggles with her bad self confidence, thinking of herself as stupid and as a fake, cheating when she doesn't 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. Sometimes she thinks about quitting, but if she does she is confident she never will 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.

### ***Discussion on evolving concepts in relation to ethnicity, class, age and gender***

Going into depth in analyzing the data, the concepts of ethnicity, gender, age and class were useful when looking at the struggle the students are going through.

Ethnicity seems to be of importance in most of the stories. Both Anthony and Amanda refer to four different ethnic cultures when relating to themselves and their lives, Anja and Adam to two. Anna, also having a multiple background, is seeing herself basically as Swedish. Both Anja and Adam are however struggling in their ethnic identity. All except Adam refer to a working class background in their stories. Anja, Anna and Amanda are all referring to parents that have work related injuries. They also see studying in higher education as a way of fleeing from this situation. They also refer to lack of support from parents in their studies as they were not able to give them. Anthony refers to his moving from England as a way of moving from his background, and making it possible to start studying eventually. For Adam, the class issue is complicated and related to ethnicity. His parents have gone from being upper class in Iraq to become working class in Sweden. He is therefore expected to re-establish the family position in the Swedish society. In three of the stories, the gender aspect is clearly present. In Adams story, gender, class and ethnicity is integrated. Being the eldest brother in his family, he is expected to be brave as well as good in school and to study in higher education. However, when talking about becoming a teacher he is reflecting on that his role models of good teachers are all women. Anja distinguishes herself from a traditional model of women in general. Most her friends are men, most of the young women in Biology are "boring blonds with ponytails". She is also critical about her father giving her fancy clothes instead of things that are useful to her. In Amanda's story the choice to work in the constructing business was related to financial issues. In her story there is however experiences of being the only woman in the firm and of being sexually harassed. Despite this, at present this doesn't seem to be important. Age appears to be central in the stories. The younger students, Anja and Adam, seem to present more struggles in relating to who they are and what they want to be. The more mature students, Anthony and Amanda seem to be using their past experiences in a more integrated way when presenting who they are. There also are differences concerning the forming of a student identity. For the younger students this seems to be an important question, how to understand and socialize with other students. For the more mature students, like Anthony, they just want to study, not drinking and socializing.

While analysing the data we were looking for theoretical understandings and/or explanations in learning of non-traditional students when struggling and coping with their identities. We found three explanatory types of identity forming while struggling with self and identity in a transitional space of learning in higher education. These are:

- Integrated multiple identity
- Floating identity
- Adopted identity

An integrated multiple identity is a presentation of oneself as a multiple person where different experiences from different backgrounds exist 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 in who they are related 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. Briefly, we find that Anthony and Amanda are describing themselves as having multiple integrated identities. They describe multiple backgrounds and experiences, times of struggling that they have passed and they now seem to cope with in relation to their ethnical, working class and gender backgrounds. This type seems to be based on maturity. Older students (in their thirties) have a more integrated identity, as if they connect former identities, and commute between them safely.

The floating identity is mostly presented in Anja's and Adam's stories. They seem to be questioning their backgrounds, both concerning ethnicity, class, religion and gender. Maybe younger students are still in floating, looking for new opportunities, not quite sure of who they are and are going to be, more open for new opportunities and others expectations, but still having dreams that they want to fulfill. The role of learning in forming these identities is crucial, but they are also formed by the families they grew up with.

The adopted identity is mostly present in Anna's story. She is presenting herself as very Swedish, even if her parents are not. She has a working class background but talks about herself as purely intellectual. She is basically trying to adapt to the academic system which she is not comfortable with. Maybe her adopted identity could be understood as part of the working immigrants and their way of coping with their new situation in Sweden, to simply adopt an identity that is appropriate? This type of immigration is however also present in Anja's story, and she is really struggling with it.

The three types of identities could be seen as temporary in relation to different situations in life. There also seems to be some struggles within all the different types that concern some aspects that do not fit into the temporary presentation and integration.

### ***Struggles while coping with identity - in a poetic way***

In the stories, by in-depth analysis, we could find that students had a poetic or imaginary way of narrating about their struggles while coping with identities. We have chosen the students who had other ethnicity than the dominating, one i.e. Swedish, and who differ by age and gender. All of them

are, however, struggling with their class background. We are almost sure that in our material we can find poetics in each story. First of all we in the stories, while coping with identity struggling, discovered sensitizing concepts such as reality vs. fantasy, ugliness vs. beauty, intellectual vs. academic, freedom vs. constrain and stupidity vs. cleverness.

As we look at the first couple of concepts - *reality vs. fantasy* – we can see how Anja, a biology student expresses herself:

*I really like scientific models, to experiment, look for evidence and gather information. However, I also like these mysterious things like mythology and stuff like that...I have become religious, Aesir religious. I was raised in an almost Christian family, and sang in the quire of the church when I was a kid... Since then, I have been an atheist, agnostic and now Aesir. I think it is because it is close to nature. When I look at the nature or on humans or animals, I cannot believe that it is a God that created it; it feels more like a structured chaos. I do not see humans higher than nature in general, my spiritual ways of thinking or my philosophy fits with my other part, the scientific part of me. ..*

*It feels like in these places that there are social codes in everything. I have difficulties with that, I do not know why, but I have always had difficulties with interpreting these things, it is more unfamiliar here, how to meet in a student party, it is new things that I have to learn. The studying is nothing compared to that...My boyfriend argues that I have Asperger syndrome. He says that I have difficulties in interpreting social signals. Maybe that is true. However, there are people that are therianthropes, a small sub-culture, when people feel like animals, mentally or emotionally, not physically. I feel like a wolf. Maybe it is because I have Asperger syndrome or maybe it is a special neurological thing that you do not see yourself as a human being, I do not know.*

We can find poetics of life in the way Anja is relating her own person to struggles of being a human being, by contrasting science with mystery, functional disabilities with feelings of being an animal and social aspects of not belonging.

As far as the second pair of concepts is concerned, *ugliness vs. beauty*, Anthony is giving us a following story:

In his life, Anthony sees beautiful and ugly things in relation to the places where he lives. This is quite poetic when he talks about the town in England where he grew up. The town is here called Alesbridge, which he describes as what they have done to it in the 1960, with a mass of futurological, exiting things. A beautiful old marketplace is in the middle of the town surrounded by

*the world's most ugly concrete, typically futurological of the 1960s buildings. Oh, how ugly it was as one could not see anything beautiful there from a very beginning.*

He does not want to go back, and he says that he loves Stockholm. He has been travelling a lot in the world, Japan, Europe, USA, Australia, but he fell in love with Stockholm from the very beginning. Stockholm is still his favourite town, maybe only Tokyo can take its place. Ugliness vs. beauty symbolizes feelings more than just in relation to architecture. In Anthony's narration it symbolizes

also, or most of all, a place of belonging. Stockholm gives him freedom and opportunity that his English belonging didn't give him. Here he feels good; he is accepted as an Englishman – gets a higher status, but he has also more opportunities to learn and especially in higher education. Being in Stockholm Anthony makes a class journey.

We can find poetics of life in places where people live, places that keep them stay and make them happy, places they do not want to go to. The beautiful places can play a role of opportunities in life in all its dimensions; the ugly places can be seen as stagnating, a status quo. What role do they play in life struggles is a good question. Can we call this as poetry of floating?

The third pair of concepts – *intellectual vs. academic* - illustrated by Anna's story when she tells about how she appreciates to be an intellectual in contrast to her mother, but still scary in the world of an unknown academic terrain.

*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 book 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...*

*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...*

The poetic in Anna's story is about her love and hate towards the academic world that is one of the struggles in Anna's identity.

As far as the fourth pair of concepts is concerned, i.e. *freedom vs. constrain*, we can look at Adam's story about being a student of Political Sciences. Even if Adam is studying to cope with his parents' expectations, he also finds a space for freedom in his studies. He meets new, more urban people, and free spirits like himself. He also creates a space for writing something that he really wants to do. Finally, Adam struggles with his own life, is it an imagination? This becomes poetic in his story:

*I have a plan for my life that is always changing. My parents wanted me to become a lawyer and said that I had potentials for that, but I am becoming a teacher, and that was acceptable to them. My grandfather was a teacher before he became a writer. I have always had teacher as a favourite profession because I have seen it as a laid back profession. I have always dreamt of professions like that. At one point I wanted to be an actor, but I realized that you need a lot of luck for that, so I gave up. Then I wanted to become a writer, and that is still what I want to be. I*

*realize, however that you have to be quite good to be a writer and at the same time have something to write to get published. Teacher was the third choice and it is possible to become a writer when being a teacher. ... my grandfather has been a role model for me, even if I never met him. He died in a car accident before I was born. He has been more of an idea than a real person. I build most of my ambitions on my grandfather as an idea rather than as a person. I have never got any ideas about the future from any living person, just from my grandfather as an idea, not a person. Everything is an imagination.*

Imagination is Adam's poetics of life. He escapes to his dreams from reality and finds there support in his struggle.

The last pair of concepts in looking for poetics is *stupidity vs. cleverness* and is illustrated by Amanda's story.

*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.*

Poetics of life in Amanda's story is not to be discovered as stupid and no longer to hide behind others to prove to herself that she is clever.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have tried to capture the poetics of life within the narratives of five students with multi ethnical backgrounds studying in higher education. In the biographical interviews we have found poetic ways of narrating struggles as for example reality vs. fantasy, ugliness vs. beauty, science vs. mythology, academic vs. intellectual, stupidity vs. cleverness and freedom vs. constrain. These poetics of life is metaphorical but also gives new meaning to our understanding of struggles in the forming of identities (Ricoeur, 1984).

The struggles are both formed and situated in transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) where identities related to social background and previous experiences are negotiated. In the narratives of the five students, ethnicity, class, gender and age seem to have different impacts for different persons in different situations. Relating to becoming students in higher education, struggles related to class seems to be of importance (Merrill, 2007). The lack of support from parents as well as not knowing the social codes seem to develop a lack of self-confidence. The reason for studying is also to escape the conditions of life as working class.

In forming an active student identity, age appears to be of importance. In the narratives the young students are struggling in forming a student identity while the older students seem to struggle in forming a studying identity, that is: 'I am here to study not to be a student and my struggles are related to how to cope with studies parallel with my other life'.

We have identified three different identities in the students narratives, the integrated multiple identity, the floating identity and the adopted identity. The process of maturing seems to be of importance for developing an integrated multiple identity, where actors handle the multiplicity of themselves parallel and in an integrated manner (Levinson, 1980). The floating identity seems to be questioning every possible multiple layer of the identity and a feeling of not being able to handle them together (Bron, 2000). This identity is present for the younger students in higher education. Finally the adopted identity seems to be a way of reducing the multiplicity of identity. They feel secure in adaptation – as the difficult question of identity struggle is postponed.

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