Master thesis in Sociology, 30 higher education credits

Institutional difference-making and negotiations of belonging: experiences of 'Swedish as second language'

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Spring 2020

The focus of this paper is on the ambiguous selection-principles that constitute the foundation of *Swedish as second language* and how this ambiguity may lead to reproduction and consolidation of racist discourses and structures through institutional practice. Specifically the *lived experiences* of former students with Swedish as their main language are studied, focusing on how belonging is experienced and negotiated and how they contextualize this in relation to social structures and their lives at large. The study is framed with a phenomenological postcolonial approach, mainly through Sara Ahmed's concept of '*orientations*' where the *Swedish language* and *Swedishness* in this context are understood as objects whose reachability is conditioned by the orientation of different bodies. The Swedish language is understood as a symbolic arena for difference-making, and Swedish as second language as a space that embodies this through its ambiguity. Through the interplay between othering discourses and *institutional whiteness*, Swedishness is contested in the space of Swedish as second language. It becomes a practice that obstructs access to Swedishness by moving the 'real' Swedish language out of reach for the students who participate in the subject. The participants' constant negotiation of their Swedishness in their everyday lives is evident in their testimonies, and particularly prominent in relation to Swedish as second language, which shows the power of institutional othering.

My father said: Since no one who belongs to you is buried in this earth

this earth does not belong to you

My mother said: Only when you bury me in this earth

will this earth belong to you

Athena Farrokhzad: In White Blight
Recited by Yara

Introduction

The Swedish language has grown to play a multidimensional role in contemporary Sweden. As the population has come to be increasingly heterogeneous, the Swedish language has become an ambiguous symbol for both equality and segregation. This is reflected in the discussions on *second language* and multilingualism, which both praises diversity, as well as marginalizes immigrants through ideas of preserving the integrity and value of the Swedish language (Stroud 2004.). Discourses on language and *mother-tongue* can further be seen as tools that construct immigrant outgroups within societies where explicit racist discourses are not officially acceptable (Stroud & Wingstedt 1989; Woolard 1989; Stroud 2004). Understanding *Swedish* as part of a language-ideological construct which mirrors the social values on immigration and Swedishness, helps us understand how language also relates to (in)accessibility to societal resources (Stroud 2004).

During the recent decade, a discussion on the utilization of '*Swedish as second language'* (SSL) as an alternative school subject to 'Swedish as first language' (SFL) has erupted. As much as 40% of the students participating in SSL are born in Sweden (Sveriges Radio 2020). Previous research has shown how the unclear guidelines that constitute the foundation of SSL generate irregularity and uncertainty regarding the assessment of students' need of SSL (e.g. Sahlée 2017). The general debate about the selection process of SSL is foremost related to students born in Sweden that participate in the subject. For these students, who have Swedish as their main language, the assessment is arbitrary while it is easy to acknowledge the need of SSL for those who have never before (or to a limited extent) faced the Swedish language. In the School ordinance (SFS 2011:185, 5 kap, §14) it is declared that "if there is a need", SSL should be provided to students who: a) have another mother tongue than Swedish; b) have Swedish as their mother tongue but have attended schools abroad; or c) are immigrant students who have Swedish as their main communicative language with one caregiver. A definition of what this need may derive from, or who is to be considered an "immigrant student" is however absent (Sahlée 2017; Skolverket 2019), making the assessment open for interpretation. It is further the school principal who has the main responsibility to decide which students should participate in SSL, with the help of teachers' assessment. Thereby, the school subject *Swedish as second language* (SSL) may be understood as a conflicting practice in itself, both being equality driven and at the same time reproducing and maintaining ideas of Swedishness, where this tension is reflected in the arbitrary guidelines for the recruitment of students.

This study takes the ambiguous principles of SSL as its point of departure, problematizing how this *arbitrariness* may pave way for racist structures and discourses to be reproduced and maintained through institutional practices such as SSL.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this article is to investigate how 'Swedish as second language' as an institutional practice is experienced by former students with Swedish as their main language, and how they negotiate these experiences in relation to their sense of belonging and Swedishness. Guided by a phenomenological approach, I will engage in their meaning-making processes regarding SSL practices and what social structures that are reflected through these experiences (see Marshall & Rossman 2016:17). It is further the conflict between having Swedish as one's main language but being positioned as having it as one's second language that makes these experiences interesting to study. By being ascribed not only an imagined 'first language' that is not Swedish, but also having one's Swedish knowledges unacknowledged, constructs a tension that is of importance to examine.

The following questions will be guiding the study:

- How is Swedishness and belonging experienced and negotiated among the participants in the context of Swedish as second language?

- How are these experiences contextualized through the participants' life stories and in relation to social structures?

Through this study I seek to highlight how the institutional practice of SSL is experienced by those facing it, how it relates to discourses of racialization[1] and imaginaries of Swedishness. Thereby I seek to broaden the field of research on Swedish as second language that has primarily focused on linguistics, educational and pedagogical dimensions, and make visible the sociological aspects of it in relation to the presented framework.

Background

Drawing on a postcolonial perspective, the experiences of the participants in this study should be contextualized in relation to the colonial history that lingers in our contemporary societies. This legacy is embedded within the social structures, practices and discourses that belonging and Swedishness are negotiated through. Previous research has scrutinized how discussions on, and ideas of, *language* have become a symbolic arena where racism can be articulated without being explicitly acknowledged (see Woolard 1989; Stroud 2004;). This is especially relevant in a Swedish context, where race is not explicitly acknowledged and where the national self-image is one of being a race-less country (Pred 2000; Habel 2012).

SSL was implemented in 1995 as an effort to acknowledge diversity in the Swedish school system by challenging the unilingual and monocultural hegemony that for such long time had disadvantaged multilingual students (Lindberg & Hyltenstam 2012). However, the

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[1] Racialization points to the process where race is socially constructed based on e.g. physical attributes and other characteristics. It stresses how race is continuously done; hence it is an action rather than an essentialized position (see Mattsson 2010).

implementation of SSL did not have the aimed effects but rather kept segregating multilingual students. The marginalization of minority students was reduced to a school matter when implementing SSL, rather than linking it to segregating structures in the majority society (ibid.). It relates to discourses in society at large where differences in relation to the majority are viewed as deficiencies, and the role of the school becomes 'helping' minority students adapt to the 'normal' (ibid.). The boundaries of 'Swedishness' and what it may include is thus regulated in the majority society, which is reflected in the organization of SSL and the educational actions directed at minority students.

Understanding SSL as formed to foster equality in the context of a Swedish equality climate should be understood in the light of an imagined Swedish exceptionalism. This exceptionalism is built on a historical national self-image of colonial innocence, gender equality and moral superiority, which has been maintained through Sweden's contemporary political focus (Schough 2008; Hübinette & Lundström 2011; Habel 2012). This is also linked to a particular white status, where Swedishness becomes equated with whiteness (see Schough 2008). Swedish exceptionalism has constructed Sweden as a country "without races", where equality is equated to sameness, and the unwillingness to talk about race is embedded in distress of creating inequality (Schough 2008; Habel 2012). Such an approach allows racializing practices and discrimination to go unacknowledged through an acclaimed colorblindness which neglects white privilege.

The idea of Swedishness as whiteness is perhaps most prominent in how non-white minorities are reduced to racialized positions such as non-Europeans and immigrants, and rarely can attain the position of Swedishness (Habel 2012). The interplay between non-white bodies and the category of 'immigrant' is of importance for the framework of this study, where 'immigrant' should be understood as a racialized position that those who do not pass as white and Swedish are assigned to, i.e. they become constructed as a 'racial Other' (Hübinette & Tigervall 2008; Habel 2012). The Swedish language is further related to these racialized positions, where non-white people are more prone to be perceived as deficient in the Swedish language (ibid.; see also Bayati 2014).

Such a national self-image constitutes a particular context where it is of interest to study issues of racism in Sweden, and even more so within the context of SSL. Viewing SSL merely as a practice that endorses equality, neglects how *language* constitutes a symbolic arena where Swedishness is contested and in which racism may be articulated.

Previous research

Swedish as second language and Othering

There is extensive research on institutions' central role in reproducing and maintaining racist structures in society at large (see van Dijk 2005; Kamali 2005; Ahmed 2012) as well as research on racism within the educational environment as part of the everyday life of non-white students (see Hällgren 2005; Bjereld et al 2014; Jonsson 2015). While the role of language as a difference-making practice has been studied, this research is limited (Stroud 2004). There is also a lack of sociological research regarding SSL as a practice, particularly from a perspective that links language, institutional practice and (national) identity. This research seeks to examine SSL as a space of contestation, where Swedishness is experienced, negotiated and defied.

Research on SSL has primarily focused on linguistic, pedagogical and educational aspects of the subject (e.g. Economou 2015; Sahlée 2016; Lindholm 2019). The overrepresentation of linguistic and educational research within the field stands in contrast to the general debate where other aspects such as the exclusion of SSL-students is discussed (see Läraren 2012; Sveriges Radio 2013, 2020). Some studies have however focused on the social and discursive aspects of SSL. Sahlée (2017) takes her point of departure in the poor outcomes of SSL and addresses students' linguistic knowledges and the discourses related to the concept of SSL. She shows that the differences between the SSL and SFL group are too small to legitimize the existence of SSL (see also Fridlund 2011; Francia 2013).

Swedish as first language: an unattainable position for racialized youth?

Another study of interest is Gruber's (2007) ethnography, focusing on how teachers at a compulsory school construct students as 'Swedes' or 'immigrants' and how these categorizations become central in the social organization of the school. Gruber discusses how this construction of 'immigrant' students may entail targeting different pedagogical actions towards them, such as SSL, actions that reproduce and maintain the distinction between Swedes and immigrants (ibid.:145). She exemplifies this by pointing to how students who performed better in school were less prone to be positioned as immigrants. While Gruber's study is not about SSL, it highlights the processes of racialization in the educational context which, as she briefly exemplifies, can be linked to the practices of SSL. In a similar vein, Bayati (2014, 2017) discusses the role of the Swedish language in 'othering' practices, asking whether it has come to replace the difference-making mechanism of *race* referring to the hierarchy of language in Sweden, resonating with Stroud's conclusions (2004). Discussing the educational system and the work of Skutnabb-Kangas (1986), Bayati argues that there is a tendency to perceive minority children as deficient instead of valuing their multilingualism as assets.

Previous research on SSL has primarily focused on the quality and legitimacy of the education as to whether it fulfils its pedagogical and educational purposes, and mainly from the perspective of the educators, institutions and policymakers. Research targeting the social aspects linked to the difference-making practices of SSL and the students' experiences of this

has been sidelined. This study sets out to extend the focus of the field by filling this research gap through the perspective of former students. The little research that has focused on the lived experiences of SSL has mainly targeted adults and newly arrived migrants (see Nilsson & Axelsson 2013; Zachrison 2014; Skolinspektionen 2019). This study thus intends to contribute empirically to the field through a sociological perspective, by turning the attention to the experiences of those with Swedish as their main language as receivers of the education.

Theoretical framework and concepts

The participants in this study draw on their experiences of SSL as an example of a constant negotiation of their belonging and identity. Despite all of them being Swedish citizens, born and raised in Sweden, presenting and identifying themselves as Swedish is a contested act, particularly in the context of SSL. This section sets out to frame these matters through theories and concepts about belonging, othering, mobility and institutional whiteness.

Belonging

The concept of 'belonging' is a multifaceted one with several dimensions. There are social aspects which relate to feelings of belonging depending on the social bonds one has, the negotiation of belonging related to the identities of people, the formal aspects concerning citizenship, and our social positionalities such as race, gender, age, ability, sexuality etc. (Yuval-Davis et.al 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006).

A *politics of belonging* is embedded in the differentiation through national boundaries, it is the politics which divides the world into an 'us' and 'them' and constructs 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983; Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging should not be reduced to only identification and labelling but be seen as an ongoing iterative process constructed in social interactions. It is collectively "negotiated, tested, confirmed, rejected or qualified again and again…" (Kraus 2006:109). Belonging becomes a matter of concern only when it is threatened or not acknowledged (Anthias 2006) and there is an important difference between identification (subjective) and belonging (inter-subjective). While one can identify with a collective, one might simultaneously lack the feeling of belonging by not being accepted as a full member of that collective. Or one can be accepted as a full member and belong to a certain collective, but not identify with it. This standpoint is interesting in relation to this study and the on-going negotiations of Swedishness that the participants express.

Yuval-Davis (2006) describes the complex character of belonging. She argues how 'social locations' i.e. for example race, gender and class are categories that construct various positionalities within the social power dynamics. Further, these positions intersect, meaning that the conjunction of social locations constitute particular positionalities which conditions one's experiences. These locations are not equal to identification but should be viewed as categories that have a part in the social interactions when negotiating belonging. She further argues how 'identifications and emotional attachments' constitute subjective aspects of identification with collectives and the social and emotional bonds concerning them. Social locations and collective attachments are utilized to label people based on the perception of what

discourses they are linked to i.e. racialization. Below these aspects will be evolved through the framework and concepts of Sara Ahmed, Frantz Fanon and W.E.B DuBois to capture the complexities that are emphasized by the participants.

Orientation and (im)mobility

Through Ahmed's (2007) concept of *orientation*, the interplay between the structures and discourse that condition the participants' positionalities and interactions will be in focus. Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology, Ahmed (2007) sketches out a politics of mobility by pointing to its fundamental assumptions and limitations. Husserl (1969, 1989) defines phenomenology as the study of the phenomena that emerge out of our experiences of *being in the world* and how the outside world is perceived through those experiences. He defines orientation as the body's point of departure, composing the point from where the world unfolds. These orientations further determine which directions the body is turned to and move towards. What the body faces and comes in contact with is shaped by this orientation, making the *reachability* of different *objects* dependent on the orientation of the body. This can thus be seen as a circulatory process where the reachability of things is affected by the body's orientation, and the objects that are reachable shape what the body can do i.e. the orientation of bodies should be understood in relation to the habituation of them and not as a result of coincidence. Traditional phenomenology understands the direction of bodies as a direction towards action, aiming to bring objects within reach (Husserl 1968, 1989; Merleau-Ponty 2002). The habituation of bodies make them 'trail behind' actions, understanding the performing body as disappearing *behind* the action rather than impeding action (Merleau-Ponty 2002). This approach of phenomenology has however been critiqued by Fanon as shallow (1986), focusing on the superficial conditions that shape our orientations, neglecting the racial constructions grounded in history that lies beneath this shallow understanding. The ability of a body and its readiness for action, depends on the availability of the world as a space for action, an availability that is not fixed. Thereby, a traditional understanding of phenomenology stands insufficient for understanding the black man's reality, where the former focuses on the mobility, ability and action, while the latter on a phenomenology of interruption, where race disrupts and impedes the bodily scheme, where the body precedes action. Fanon's postcolonial approach connects to 'social locations' where race composes the ground for racialization and stereotyping, relating to dimensions of power and affecting the interactions where negotiations of belonging take place.

The phenomenology of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty indicates a universality ascribed to lived experience that tends to neglect subjective experience and differences that lie therein. Drawing on Fanon's critique, Ahmed (2007) discusses a 'phenomenology of whiteness' emphasizing how different racialized positionalities affect perceptions of experience. With a Marxist frame of reference, she incorporates the role that history plays in the understanding of orientations through the *inheritance* of the reachability of objects. By seeing how the legacy of history and colonialization lives on through its hereditary character attaching to structures, discourses and bodies, she acknowledges the patterns that lie within orientations already at their

arrival into the world. In this study, the *Swedish language* and *Swedishness* are understood as such objects where their reachability is conditioned by the participants' orientations.

The non-white body's movement is due to implicit knowledge, rather than habit. What does it do to one's perception and experiences of the world and self when the starting point of the body is one of negation rather than one of default and universality? By using Ahmed's understanding of phenomenology and orientations as a framework for this analysis, the obstructions the participants face in their orientations due to ideas of the Swedish language and constructions of Swedishness are highlighted through their experiences.

Affective identifications and constructions of belonging

Emotional investments and desire for attachments are central to the subjective aspects of identification with collectives, constructions of belonging and the social and emotional bonds concerning them (Yuval-Davis 2006). The changing character of emotions over time makes the importance of belonging vary, explaining variations both between and within people. By differentiating this aspect of belonging, Yuval-Davis draws on Fanon's (1986) argument that a politics of resistance should not only be targeted at social constructions of race, but also on the internalized constructions of self. The hyper-consciousness of the participants in this study, relating to their bodies and self in relation to their non-whiteness will be analyzed through this framework.

Fanon (1986) describes the effects of being racialized as a black man through its relating discourses, speaking of a third person consciousness. Being exposed to the white gaze, erased of all individuality and reduced to the stereotypical image of the black man, he becomes an involuntary representative of a constructed collective. This awakens a consciousness of the self, making him internalize what he is perceived as and before himself become that person. Viewing one's body as inferior can also provoke frustration and anger linked to being imposed a positionality, thereby igniting strategies of resistance (Yuval-Davis 2006). Similarly, DuBois's (1989) notion of 'double consciousness' describes a sentiment of pain and embarrassment when internalizing the perception of the white gaze characterized by a distaste and degrading compassion at the same time, disguising the question: "How does it feel to be the problem?". He describes the twoness one feels in the expectation of needing to both 'have the skills' to navigate in a white world that one does not have full access to and at the same time embodying the preconceived collectivity of the black body.

Through this framework the participants' narratives about SSL can be understood in relation to their desires to be perceived as Swedish, the confusion, frustration and embarrassment of being deprived of their position of having Swedish as their main language and thereby being constructed as a disruption in the social order, thus explaining strategies of finding alternative belongings when rejected as Swedish.

Orientation of space and institutional whiteness

The participants' experiences of being hindered in their bodily scheme and strategies of suppressing themselves out of fear to be enhanced as 'non-Swedish' is related to how they are racialized and how it conditions their existence. Discriminatory structures, in which ideas of language form part, may be explained through Ahmed's (2007) understanding of bodies and spaces as closely linked, which for her is a fundamental aspect of understanding orientations. It is not only bodies that are orientated, but also spaces and rooms such as SFL and SSL. They take shape by being orientated towards certain bodies, enabling these certain bodies to extend their surfaces through the room and at the same time hindering certain other bodies to do so. Drawing from this, it is possible to talk about the 'whiteness of space' and how institutions can be understood as 'orientation devices' by taking the shape of the bodies that reside them. '*Institutional whiteness*' is seen as a collective or public space that is characterized through the familiarity of white bodies. It is not only shaped in the present but affected by the historicity of it, thereby striving towards the familiar orientation through strategies that fuel its status quo (ibid.). It is this orientation towards whiteness that make non-white bodies - the deviant and irregular - noticeable and it is this noticeability that indicates what shape the space has. While white bodies merge into the walls of a room, Ahmed argues how non-white bodies are either *invisible* or *hyper-visible*, often aiming to reach invisibility since the state of visibility for these bodies is related to viewing them as different and abnormal, therefore disrupting the flow of space by not reflecting its image. This evokes feelings of discomfort in the deviating non-white bodies, making them strive for invisibility through strategies of conformity and *passing*.

Bodies that are not racialized as white have to find ways to inhabit whiteness or become invisible to get access to the spaces. The invisibility is from time to time uncovered and reveals the body: "The moment when the body appears 'out of place' are moments of political and personal trouble" (Ahmed 2007:159). Institutions as orientation devices further keep track of the placements of things and how they fit in, reflected through the feelings of discomfort mentioned above. This is captured through 'the politics of mobility': "who gets to move with ease across the lines that divide spaces, can be re-described as the politics of who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces, as spaces that are inhabitable for some bodies and not others, insofar as they extend the surfaces of some bodies and not others" (Ahmed 2007:162).

This framework relates to constructions of Swedishness by reflecting and indicating the normative societal positionalities through the character of institutional spaces. The orientation of rooms such as SSL and SFL tells us something about the ideas of the Swedish language and how the ambiguous principles of SSL make room for such ideas to be reproduced and maintained.

Method and methodological considerations

Research design and material

With the phenomenological interest of this study, a narrative approach without a beforehand constructed framework was assessed fruitful when conducting the interviews. Through this approach, the participants were given freedom to emphasize and elaborate on the aspects they deemed had been most prominent in their experiences of SSL, thereby giving space to subjective differences and commonalities to come forward. Narrations further opened up the freedom of contextualizing one's experiences and chronologically compose them to recreate the affective dimensions related to them at the time being (see Rosenthal 2018: ch5). Although this form of interviewing seemed to have the participants come off with a slower start, it was not long before they were involved in their stories and talked more casually about it. The slow start was perhaps due to hesitation regarding the free format and about what was of relevance to tell in relation to my research. However, when this first fumbling threshold was passed, the participants talked freely and openly about their experiences, making up for a rich base for the study.

Other plausible approaches for the study would be to complement with focus group interviews to explore how the participants socially construct their experiences in a group where others share a similar experience, how the dynamic takes form and how they may react and position themselves in relation to other participants' experiences and statements. Further, structured interviewing could be useful to explore specific aspects of the topic with the aim of a comparative approach. Since my interest resided specifically in investigating how various experiences of SSL were understood in a larger context by the participants and their different reactions to it, a narrative approach came to be most fruitful.

Sampling

The participants were recruited through a combination of snowballing and convenience-sampling as a method of selection. I found a first selection of participants by reaching out to my extended social network, where I asked to come in contact with those who had participated in SSL and who had Swedish as their main language. After two of the interviews, the participants could refer me to others they knew had participated in SSL, which I ended up interviewing. Through snowballing I was able to access additional participants relevant for the study who were a sampling-group difficult to access and locate (see Bryman 2008). This difficulty was due to wanting to come in contact with adults who had studied SSL earlier in their lives and thereby could put that experience in the context of their lives in general. This makes them a heterogeneous group where it was not possible to turn to specific collectives in order to find them.

In total, six people participated in the study, with different backgrounds, occupations and an even coverage of women and men between the ages of 23 to 31. Although the participants were a seemingly heterogeneous group, considering the method of selection it is not possible to view

the selection as representative as it might suffer from selection bias since it relies on people's social networks (see Marshall & Rossman 2016). Heterogeneity may in some views be considered increased through the use of various and different-type networks, but my focus has not been to find representatives of certain positionalities, but to find people with experiences of SSL. Nevertheless, this method of selection was assessed to be the most effective and fruitful since the main concern of the study was to make visible social structures through different experiences and reactions, where representativity was not of importance and where the participants will not be reduced to being representatives of certain categories (see Mohanty 2003). The issues raised in this study should not be reduced to the context of SSL. It is reasonable to assume that the discourses related to SSL are part of the same discourses that relate to non-white bodies and immigrants in general. Freire (2005 [1968]) argues that: "the real danger lies in the risk of shifting the focus of the investigation from meaningful themes to the people themselves, thereby treating the people as objects of the investigation" (ibid.:107). The focus of this study thereby lies in exposing social structures through the participants' lived experiences by focusing on practices and discourses that condition their experiences.

The interviews were conducted during the winter/ spring of 2020, ranged between 40 to 70 minutes and were held in Swedish. The participants were informed on the purpose of the study, decided the length of the interviews and had the option to withdraw their participation at any time. The interviews were all recorded after approval from the participants for the purpose of transcription. All the material was anonymized in line with the confidentiality assured to the participants. The participants were allowed to decide on the location of the interview to offer a higher level of comfort. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the other three through video calls. Since the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the quotes in this paper are my translations. A considerable amount of time was spent making the translations justice, considering the contextual character of language and risk of losing contextual meaning-making (Marshall & Rossman 2016). Certain words that were difficult to translate have thus been written in Swedish within brackets.

The interviews

The form of the interviews was inspired by Rosenthal's (2018) narrative interviewing, divided into three stages. The purpose of this division was to give the participants unrestricted space for a coherent narrative to be told and allowing elaboration of important aspects. During a first stage, the participants were given as long, or as short time as they wanted to tell their stories after being asked the initial question: "*can you tell me about your experience of participating in Swedish as second language?*". I here clarified that they did not have to restrict themselves to the timeframe of the event but could reflect on their experiences in relation to their lives at large. This was in order for them not to get stuck in a process of trying to remember an 'objective truth', but to reflect more upon their subjective experiences. Rosenthal (ibid.) speaks of biographical interviews and narratives and the issue of reconstructing cases. In line with the phenomenological approach of this study, she argues that the aim of these studies is not to put forth objective images of events, but to explore the subjective meaning of them. Thereby, how events were remembered and narrated was of great importance in order to understand the impact they have had on the participants and how they make sense of and understand their experiences

by contextualizing them. When the participants finished their initial narrative, the second stage was to ask follow-up questions on matters that they had highlighted throughout their narration. This was done by following the order of their original narrative to replicate the build-up. It also gave space for new narrations to take place, following the same principles of the different stages. Lastly, I asked questions that had not been touched upon yet in the interview but could be of interest for the research. This part was rather limited, and these questions had a more formal character, such as how long they studied SSL and during what age. The interviews were finished off by letting the participants know that they may contact me if there are any questions later on and that the article will be sent to them when finished.

My position as a researcher

From a social constructivist approach, I view myself as co-creator of the narratives being told, where the stories took shape in constant interaction between me and the participant (see Haraway 1988; Alvesson & Sköldberg 2018:ch2). My epistemological orientation was also reflected in the meeting with the participants. Along the process of this study, the issue of my position as a non-white researcher doing a study of this type has been a matter of reflection. Going into the interviews I experienced having an automatic, a priori reliance and that I was perceived as an ally. The assumption that my body possesses the same familiarities as theirs and that I therefore instinctively would understand their experiences enabled freedom in the storytelling. These assumptions were reflected e.g. in how I got questions on my own experiences of SSL and how I sometimes would be included in stories as part of an "us". In this formation, I believe that openness and freedom of space to talk about issues considering the non-whiteness of one's body is created where a power dynamic regarding racial aspects is reduced, and the risk of being denied one's experience decreases. This was both reflected in how the participants explicitly expressed their unwillingness to talk about these topics to white people, and from my own experiences of what contexts I feel comfortable talking openly about issues of belonging and racism. I believe this matter has enabled many dimensions to come forth in the material that otherwise might have been limited and have contributed to a richer study.

There have however also been possible limitations because of my particular positionality. Sometimes I would interpret the stories being told to me as if I already understood the phenomenon the participants described, and that it needed not to be articulated any further for me to understand, which limited the participants to develop some parts of their stories. While they were not articulated explicitly in the frame of the narrative where they were first presented, I was able to follow them up in the second stage of the interview when I asked them to elaborate. Moreover, it is necessary to reflect upon whether these parts can be related to more emotionally sensitive segments and therefore are more demanding to talk about and can easier be avoided in the assumption that I, the listener, understand it without it being elaborated. However, the same aspects have enabled the process of building trust and encouraged the participants to share experiences to the extent that otherwise might not have been as accessible.

Analyzing the data

During and following the process of transcribing the interviews, I turned to an approach of thematic content analysis (see Bryman 2008) to get an overview of the material. The themes generated from the material derived from how the experiences were narrated. Drawing on what the participant's emphasized in the interviews, what issues they came back to, what was depicted as more important events and how they contextualized the experiences made up the foundation of the themes. For example, "shame" was a recurring matter that was discussed in the interviews, in relation to being othered and associated with certain stereotypes and being denied the position of Swedishness. This made up for the first section that processes the aspects of *being othered*. Further, articulations of strategies to pass were emphasized and made up the theme of *negotiating Swedishness and belonging*. Lastly, the anger and frustration that was expressed through acts of resistance and finding alternative belongings made up for the last theme of *strategies of defiance*. The themes were created during an iterative process of processing the material, turning to theories and going back to the material, both constituting the process where a theoretical framework was constructed, but also the process of assembling relevant themes in relation to the purpose of the study. Having a narrative approach in the analysis meant understanding events in relation to the context they were being told (Rosenthal 2018) and being given the chance to notice implicit emotions due to this contextualization and build-up of the stories (Kleres 2010). The narrative approach is also reflected in the design of the result-section where it follows the process of the narratives in general.

Results and analysis

The stories in this study differ on how the participants have been affected by their experiences of SSL, what they emphasize and how they have dealt with their experiences throughout their lives. This is depicted in what types of belongings they have ended up striving for, their emotional reactions to their experiences and their approach to Swedishness. These differences will be noticeable where different participants are emphasized in different sections. Some distinct shared characteristics ignited these different routes of actions and emotional states and were prominent in all stories: The issue of exclusion and the (non)reachability of Swedishness and Swedish, alongside the internalized image of the negative self. The next section will be structured around these matters, following the general unfolding of the narratives of first becoming the other, followed by negotiating belonging, and lastly acts of defiance.

Becoming 'the Other'

The participants in this study make clear that being othered and denied belonging has followed them through their whole lives, both before and after the event of SSL. However, SSL has played an explicit institutional role in exacerbating this, particularly during their school years. SSL was seen as impeding them to access Swedishness and constructing them as 'the Other'. Within this context, the Swedish language is understood as an *object* out of reach for the participants' *orientations*, and 'Swedish as first language' (SFL) becomes earmarked for those who can pass as white and thereby as Swedes (see Hübinette & Tigervall 2008) constructing those who cannot access it, as non-Swedish.

> I've been thinking about how [SSL] segregated me from the others and how it made me feel different […] in that age everything is about finding a fellowship (…) when you all of a sudden find yourself in a situation where you are differentiated from the others, you react on it. It is a feeling that stays in the back of your mind (…) you became different per definition just by participating in *that* class. - David

As stated by David, participating in SSL was equivalent to being different. It is not SSL as an objective space that makes David feel different, but that the participation itself signals deviation. The deviation can be assumed to have the same value as other special-subjects that special-need students are assigned to, but in the context of SSL this deviation is closely linked to ideas of the Swedish language and by being constructed as an immigrant also being perceived as deficient. The quote is further a reflection of not only being 'viewed' as different, but also 'becoming' different, showing that this understanding is not only one that remains other's perceptions of oneself, but becomes an internalized perception (Fanon 1986; Dubois 1989). David further finds his participation in SSL based on insufficient measures:

> The only thing I could see as a common feature for us was that all of us had immigrant background. That this became the ground for selection (…) Why was I forced to study it when my Swedish was as good as it was? (…) Why would I, based on the results I already had, need to study [Swedish] as a *second language*? – David

This quote shows the process of trying to make sense of the situation, both from David's own position and the group as a collective, seeking for a reason where the level of Swedish skills was not something that David could identify as a common feature among the SSL students, but being racialized non-white students was. Throughout the interview, David puts great emphasis on being differentiated due to his appearance and thereby gaining the feeling of deviating negatively. SSL is described as an event that started evoking this disturbing feeling. He was not only being considered "not Swedish", but this state was also linked to an abnormality. In a similar vein another participant, Raad, described SSL as a space of downgrade. He equates participating in SSL as "playing in the second team", a group considered less competent, qualified and valuable, thereby becoming secondary compared to "the first team". Yara shares this view, but more explicitly links the degradation to her non-whiteness and SSL as a space that embodies this. The experience of SSL is in her narrative deeply linked to her experiences of school and life at large. She described herself as a minority at a white school and neighborhood where she through her appearance and traits of determinacy and resistance became reduced to a stereotype, which 'qualified' her for SSL. The grounds for assessing the need of SSL was an issue that all participants problematize and put in contrast to their knowledge and results in SFL. Almost all of them mentioned their high results in SFL that confused them in relation to being assigned to SSL. They also problematized how potential deficiencies in Swedish when being a non-white person would never be reflected upon as a general learning-difficulty, but automatically would be related to their non-whiteness.

Imposed positionalities

As mentioned above, being constructed as 'the Other' and thus being deprived of one's Swedishness and the position of knowing Swedish confused the participants as they could not identify with this position, as seen Petra's statement:

> When I was doing better in school… I'm born in Sweden, I'm as Swedish as any white kid, so it didn't feel right [to be assigned to SSL]. You had an identity crisis because you are forced into not calling yourself Swedish. (…) I have never felt anything other than Swedish. And I have never, ever known any language better, I've never felt any attachment to any other culture, anything other at all (…) So it felt wrong because they told me I was something that I did not feel like I was. – Petra

Petra emphasized the persistent fight she fought during her upbringing on calling herself Swedish and how this was repeatedly questioned. Her participation in SSL was one of her first encounters with this, especially coming at her from an authoritarian level of power where she was perplexed that "the adults took the bullies side", indicating the power of institutional labelling. SSL thus became synonymous with having her Swedishness 'taken away' from her, making Swedishness a non-reachable position, depriving her of the acknowledgement of having Swedish as her main language. During the interview, Petra frequently came back to how she was physically detached from a larger group of students, calling it a "walk of shame" when being called by the teacher to go to her SSL class. An act that made her hyper-visible, confirming the whiteness of the room. Further, the way multilingualism was spoken about in

school was never in terms of positivity, rather it was constructed as an (imagined) language deficiency due to being part of a non-white family.

> It wasn't depicted as something positive to come from another country and know another language. It was depicted as something weird and odd. Therefore, it wasn't something I was proud of, but that's what they shouted to my whole class and school that I was. And then I couldn't be myself. Because I felt that the only thing everyone knew and saw about me was that I was odd and "not Swedish", which I was so damn afraid to be. – Petra

Petra described how SSL deprived her the freedom of acting as herself as SSL excluded Swedishness in its orientation and labelled her accordingly. This can be understood as the struggle between her identity and belonging, where her identity as Swedish was disturbed when her belonging as Swedish was threatened. It is also possible to see in the interviews how the participants' orientations many times became an obstruction in social interactions where their actions were reduced to their racialization rather than deduced to them as subjects:

> If I was part of a loud group I would be blamed and had to change seats or be separated from the group. For me it is obvious that it's because it's easy to point out the immigrant kid. Because it could be a whole group doing the same thing, but everyone else had another ethnicity (…) We are ethnically different, and we are treated differently based on that. It started to become more and more obvious. […] I think [SSL] has created the basic thought that I am different. It has been a great contributing aspect to it. - David

For David, it was obvious that his non-white appearance put him under suspicion more often than others and that his less appreciated behaviors more often were deduced to that same non-whiteness, making him feel like a problem that needed to be 'fixed' when being perceived as such (see DuBois 1989). He states that SSL created the basic thought that he is different, making it clear how his identity has been affected by the internalization of others perception of him. Moreover, it shows how his non-white orientation is hindering him in his bodily scheme by letting him know that he is out of place when he is reaching too far away from his given direction.

Yara depicts how racialized discourses intersect with gendered ones, where the attributes of a non-white girl are associated with certain characteristics such as being ignorant and difficult. This fear is also expressed by Sam and David, on how non-white men run the risk of being perceived as aggressive and primitive immigrant males. They depict this as a constant awareness that they have to live with, both in how they perceive themselves but also in how they present themselves to others. Yara discusses this further in the context of her school years and SSL:

> It becomes this whole thing that the 'wog monkey' ('blatteapan') is behaving like an animal *laughter*. (…) it doesn't matter what you do, when you raise your voice, when you become aggressive, everything becomes this expectation that people have of you and then you can't break free of that perception. - Yara

Yara's reflections reiterate Ahmed's (2014) understanding of how certain sentiments are predominantly associated to certain bodies, where perceived negative traits are attributed to her

imagined 'immigrantness', reducing her to a representative of a collective category. This can be compared to white bodies where negative characteristics are never deduced to their whiteness, but explained in terms of individuality, making the white body a subject free of exploring its capacity, and the non-white body an object restrained due to the risk of being stopped. Resonating with Ahmed (2007), this can be understood as an example of how the non-white bodies of these students precede their actions, rather than trailing behind them, as the participants view themselves more prone to be assigned to SSL by being constructed as deviating from the normative perception of Swedishness and someone who has Swedish as their main language.

Negotiating the shame of becoming the other

Many of the participants described a restraint or even refusal to speak openly about their participation in SSL. This was because of the fear of having their Swedishness even more conditioned if revealed as 'one of those' (see Simmel 1908; Ahmed 2000). Being 'revealed' will invoke feelings of shame due to its inferior and negative associations. This can be understood as a result of being rejected as Swedish, where this rejection evokes feelings of shame (see Scheff 1988). Shame is here understood as the opposite of pride, which arises in social interactions where one is rejected (shame) or accepted (pride). This is brought up by Maria in the following way:

> I remember that I was embarrassed sometimes. One time I was hanging out with a Swedish friend, (…) she was talking about another friend that also had studied SSL, and this friend didn't know I'd studied it too. And she was all like "she studied SSL" *making a judgmental face*. And I just felt like omg I can't tell her that I studied it too because maybe she will get that image of me that I'm stupid and don't know Swedish. - Maria

Although Maria speaks Swedish and communicates with her friend, she is still concerned that a revelation of her participation in SSL will deprive her the position of knowing Swedish, which exemplifies the level of contestation that lies within ideas of the Swedish language and SSL. Maria's embarrassment is related to the association between SSL and how it equated with being stupid. It is also important to understand the shame as context-dependent, which is reflected when Raad describes how he had not reflected much on his participation in SSL earlier when his surroundings were mostly non-white people. However, when entering work life he came to avoid the topic when it was brought up due to the shock people expressed when being informed about his participation, which made him uncomfortable since he interpreted it as becoming 'downgraded'. However, one may also question whether the shock this information triggered among his peers can reflect the contradictory role of SSL for those with Swedish as their main language.

The risk of being rejected as Swedish should also be understood as context-dependent, seen in the example of not wanting to be associated with other non-white people. Yara described this through her experience of being one of only three non-white students at a white school. She explained how she had been avoiding any interaction with the other two non-white students due to the risk of becoming hyper-visible through their bodily accumulation. It can be related to the

same mechanisms that she means constructs the degradation of SSL i.e. becoming hyper-visible as abnormal due to one's non-whiteness. She articulates a hate towards herself during her school years that was so strong, that becoming friends with someone who looked like herself was deemed impossible. This reiterates Fanon's concept of internalizing the negative self and DuBois's double consciousness, where other's perception of herself became a deep reality to the extent that she felt disgusted towards others that embodied what she embodied.

Negotiating Swedishness: SLL as a space of contestation

The participants of this study continuously described how 'Swedishness' becomes a non-reachable position and the process of being deprived of their Swedishness. As children, the participant tended to view themselves as Swedish, but this identity was increasingly contested when growing up. SSL as an authoritarian body was given a central role in this contestation, awakening the realization that they are not viewed as Swedish.

> To realize that "shit, I needed to change my school to become a happy kid" that's a pretty big thing. I couldn't move myself out of the box I was put in and the personality that came with [SSL] without replacing the people around me – Petra

Petra had to go to the extent of changing her physical surrounding in order to be able to shake off what she had been labelled as through the orientation of SSL. This did not equate to automatically having Swedishness within her reach, but rather gave her the freedom of negotiating her Swedishness since the previous label of being an SSL-student hindered even the attempts of passing as such. The participants expressed a recurring confusion and negotiation about their Swedishness and belonging, which was enhanced when being assigned to SSL:

> You feel Swedish but you look like a [non-European] and sometimes it's the opposite. You have both in you. You feel like you don't really have an identity (…) I've started to think "well I'm from mother earth" I'm from the soil. But I'm probably the only one thinking that so that doesn't make a difference *laughter* - Sam

This feeling of in-betweenness was expressed by several of the participants and can be understood as a form of inner negotiation of one's belonging and identity in the conjunction of the internalized gaze, the institutional label from SSL and the feeling of belonging. This conjunction takes the form of outer negotiations as well:

> I would present my whole family and their occupations and how they weren't unemployed, social security parasites and everything that they were perceived as. Things just find new shapes in this country… - Yara

This exemplifies a negotiation by trying to shake off the preconceived ideas that are associated to Yara's non-white person and positionality in her meeting with others, trying to prove them wrong and thereby gaining access to Swedishness. She does this by presenting herself in ways that align with the idea of a Swedish person as one with morals, echoing the moral stance of Swedish exceptionalism (Schough 2008). Yara describes that the same phenomenon that she

experienced in school is the same she experiences now, but in another shape, understanding it as a larger societal issue. In the interviews, the participants always came back to the ways they felt hindered in their bodily scheme and how they felt the need of suppressing themselves out of fear that these movements or characteristics would enhance the perception of them as being 'non-Swedish', thereby avoiding to fuel the label they have been marked with in SSL. They further emphasized how this suppressing increase in certain contexts, which I understood as contexts where they felt their Swedishness to be particularly conditioned.

> They have a preconceived image of how they think I will talk or be as a person (…) Until they get to know me, then they know that this guy, he is good, he is approved, he is Swedish. At least as Swedish as I can be. It is absolutely irritating sometimes. (…) You don't feel like you're being part of the society on the same terms as everyone else. That's why I always feel that I need to perform better than everyone else (…) That's how it's been since I was a child. The Swedish needs to be better, the math needs to be better, the English needs to be better, at work you need to perform better. – Sam

The quote above depicts the continuum of Swedishness that Sam experiences in his non-white body. When reaching the 'highest' level of Swedishness that his body is capable of, the 'full' and unconditioned Swedishness still lies beyond the reach of his orientation. The fear of being 'revealed' as 'not Swedish' as many of the participants express is interesting. During the interviews, all participants kept coming back to the different strategies they utilized to 'pass' and not becoming marked as 'others' in their everyday lives. For example by always being 'attentive to how they speak', especially to white people (Maria), to not move their bodies 'too aggressively' (Sam) or 'not talking to loud' (David), what characteristics of their personalities they accentuate or repress, and that they need to perform better than what is generally expected (see Gruber 2007), since what is generally expected does not have the same value when attached to their bodies. If they do anything 'wrong' it will directly be linked to their non-whiteness and non-Swedishness which further is linked to a discourse of potential danger, negativity and discomfort (see Ahmed 2004, 2008).

Another interesting aspect during the interviews was the *internalized image of rationality*. When the participants were trying to explicitly rationalize SSL it was not through their own experiences, since they considered them too emotional (see Essed 1991). It was by taking a step away from themselves looking at it from the perspective of the majority. This was noticeable e.g. by shifting the perspective of the narration (Sam), or explicitly expressing that they understand the act. Petra sees it as understandable (but perhaps not reasonable) to be questioned in her Swedishness, relating it to larger social discourses saying "because you're human, you can't make sense of things you haven't experienced" and that she therefore cannot blame anyone for her experiences. Maria implies a different approach where she initiates with the same tendency but concludes in some sort of defiance towards the majority:

> Aida: So you can't understand why you had to participate?
>
> Maria: in some sense I guess I can. It had to be because my Swedish wasn't… I mean I don't know… it feels like I'm contradicting myself so much. But now I'm only talking from my own… Other teachers maybe experienced that I wasn't that good… at Swedish (…) like maybe I

> pronounced something weird just because I emphasized it in [language] (…) and still today I do that, but I don't care *laugh* I'm gonna continue to say it like that.

Up until this question Maria expressed her confusion as to why she had to participate in SSL and most of her narrative revolved around trying to find a reason for her participation. This can be interpreted in the difficulty of acknowledging that one has faced racism and the constant uncertainty and openness towards other logical explanations to what one has experienced rooted in the society's unwillingness to acknowledge everyday racism (see Essed 1991). It may also be linked to Maria's confusion about other non-white friends of hers who were not assigned to SSL. However, she indicated that through her older sibling's disorderly reputation she became visible by being related to them, and her orientation more prone to move SFL beyond her reach. Reiterating Ahmed (2007), Maria's testimony can be understood as that her orientation is inherited through her sibling's reputation, becoming more prone to be constructed as an 'immigrant' and thereby her body, even more so, precedes her actions. This quote also shows how the rationality of the majority is not absolute, but co-exists with other tendencies. When Maria states that she will continue to pronounce words in ways that have been labelled faulty through the lens of the majority, it represents an act of resistance where she defies the dominant discourse.

Resisting Othering: Strategies of defiance

The internalized image of the negative self was many times brought up as an inner fight. Not only regarding the self-perception but also for the sudden discovery that by rejecting these negative associations attached to their bodies in order to pass, the participants found themselves in a situation of reproducing the racism that they themselves experienced.

In the quote below the continuous act of defending oneself from an imposed positionality becomes an act of reproducing the negative sentiments associated with Muslims and immigrants. In doing so, they are trying to 'pass' as Swedish and when they have passed, they have done it because they have been able to prove themselves different from 'other immigrants'. The passing is not successful due to acceptance of the non-white body, it is due to the success of dodging what is ascribed to that body at first glance. Thereby, it is not merely an inner fight of adapting to whiteness, it also becomes an inner fight of *to what extent* and *on the expense of what* is it reasonable to defend oneself and negotiate Swedishness. The issue was discussed in the context of SSL:

> … I realized quite early on that "oh people think I'm a Muslim" and that's fine. I'm trying to balance not to get angry at people perceiving me as a Muslim because then I'm also Islamophobic […] All the time you're trying to defend yourself, explain yourself like "no I'm not a Muslim at all", "no I don't pray", "no I really don't", all your life it's been like that (…) it's later on that I've understood that I've also fed some kind of islamophobia which is really unpleasant, but you don't realize it at that point – Yara

This matter is interesting regarding the sentiments of shame that comes from being rejected as Swedish, where that shame also occurs when catching oneself using the same measurements

one is trying to escape. For Yara this becomes an important aspect to challenge and overcome. For Petra, whose reflections are similar, it is rather a battle against an imposed positionality which is necessary in order for her to be perceived as what she identifies as. Even though she seems to be disturbed by embracing such an approach, she explains it as a result of "being a product of your society".

When negotiating Swedishness, there were recurring expressions of resistance and defiance from the participants. Defying the question "where do you come from?", that has the function of declaring dis-belonging (Molina 2010), is recurring in the interviews. The participants express the freedom to choose responses as an act of taking control of one's belonging in social interactions (Sam, Yara, Petra), or by defying the power hierarchy by persistently presenting oneself as Swedish despite the provocation it evokes (Petra). They resist being positioned as non-Swedish in their responses by for example responding what city they are born in, or what district they come from, hence challenging the question's intention. Other prominent strategies were to reach a high level of skill in the Swedish language as a 'revenge' (Maria), or finding 'alternative' belongings with other non-white people and thereby gaining full access to *another* membership (Yara). For Yara, a contempt towards whiteness was initiated when hearing about the racist experiences within her new collectives, awakening defiance of whiteness as a desirable position, orienting her towards other values:

> One evening I get a call from my dad that he's at the police station. He tells me that he's been beaten up by a white dude who was provoked by him crossing the street. And I just felt like: I will never be Swedish (…) Why would I even want to be Swedish? My nationality is Swedish because I have a passport. But that's really the only thing. – Yara

Yara's statement can be understood in relation to her narrative where she emphasizes defiance of dominant discourses both in how she discusses her experiences as a result of deficiencies in society rather than deficiencies in herself, and in how she views and responds to white people with suspicion[2]. Similarly, David offers a dialogue where he defies the linguistic hierarchy and established discourses on which languages are appraised and which are not:

> I remember that I wished that I had studied my mother tongue earlier (…) because I can't see any issues being multilingual. Thereby I think SSL is weird because they should encourage people to study several languages at the same time to develop their linguistic skills (…) I could've spent those hours I spent on SSL on it and would've been fluent in speech and writing in both languages today. - David

This can be understood in the light of being offered to choose between other European languages as a mandatory language subject in the Swedish compulsory school, while non-European languages are viewed as hindering the Swedish language. David defies this conception by expressing a revaluation of his mother tongue. Lastly, David emphasizes the process where the shame he felt earlier has decreased as he understood that there are structural

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[2] see Patricia Hill Collins (1998) & bell hooks (1989) on resistance and defiance of oppression through strategies of 'talking back' and 'self-reflexive speech'.

reasons to why he had to participate in SSL and that it was not because of the quality of his Swedish.

> Now I know that my Swedish was good, so it wasn't my fault. It wasn't my responsibility that I studied [SSL], rather it was something decided because of authoritative reasons. So I think the shame has died because of that. – David

David's shame has not decreased because SSL is no longer charged negatively, rather because of the realization that the authorities were deficient, thereby being relieved of the shame and transferring the embarrassment on to the structures and authorities.

Conclusion

This article has examined how 'Swedish as second language' (SSL) is experienced by former students with Swedish as their main language, and how these experiences are negotiated in relation to their sense of belonging and Swedishness. Focus has further been on what social structures that are reflected through these experiences and how the participants make sense of their experiences in relation to their life at large. By combining a perspective of discursive *othering*, ideas of the Swedish language, and spaces as inhabiting *orientations*, the study shows that SSL has a particular and significant role in constructing the students as 'the Other' where participation in SSL and being Swedish become two incompatibles. The negative connotations of SSL are further understood as part of larger stigmatizing discourses about non-white people and immigrants. The interplay between the *Swedish language* and the position of *Swedishness* is also evident, where these become unreachable *objects* when being ascribed to SSL. This should be understood in relation to SSL as an institutional practice, where the label as 'the Other' acquires an authoritative legitimacy that for the students is experienced as paralyzing in their attempts to pass as Swedes.

Numerous reactions towards the experience of SSL are depicted in the study, where some of the participants ascribe great significance to SSL specifically for their general feeling of becoming 'the Other' in society, while others understand SSL as part of a general experience of social exclusion. The common ground for all these different reactions was the feeling that Swedishness was as out of reach for the participants' orientations, alongside the internalization of the negative perception of themselves. For some this has resulted in an urge to persistently negotiate Swedishness and present themselves as Swedes, while for others it has resulted in an urge to find alternative belongings where their membership is not consistently conditioned and contested. Furthermore, the negotiations the participants expressed were characterized both by attempts to 'act' more in line with the image of 'the Swede', and by attempts to repress their bodily appearance in order to become invisible and thereby avoid being recognized as 'out of place'. The conjunction between the internalized gaze, the institutional label from SSL and one's feeling of belonging, ignited both inner and outer struggles where all of the participants as adults have ended up in some way defying these narrow ideas of Swedishness and belonging in their negotiations.

Viewing the results in relation to the participants' life stories, it is prominent that the contestation of their Swedishness has amplified during the course of their lifetime as their social interactions extended. While as children viewing themselves as Swedes, this view was increasingly contested by their surroundings when growing up, where their school years and SSL was a noticeable starting point for this. Further, as they grew older, they expressed an increased consciousness of their environment and the prevailing structures in society, where they linked their experiences during their upbringing, such as SSL, to this and thereby came to understand them as part of larger racist structures and othering discourses that still affect them today. This has led them to increasingly distance themselves from these experiences and recognizing them as deficiencies in the society. This realization has made them consciously defy the structures and discourses which contest their Swedishness, something they did not do as much and as intentionally as children where they were more focused on the subjective exclusion they felt.

Through the participants' testimonies and the ambiguous principles of SSL it is clear that the definition of Swedishness in the contemporary Swedish society is inadequate in order to include all Swedes, and that this is closely related to ideas of language. The unwillingness to recognize that Swedes may have several main languages simultaneously is clear in the persistent attempts to divide their linguistic recourses into a "first" and "second" language, neglecting the fact that several languages can be attained alongside each other equally. The incapability to do so is what contributes to SSL's inadequate principles and stigmatizing practice. This negligence is further related to the narrow idea of what a Swede is, constructing a dichotomy that does not reflect the reality, where you cannot be both Swedish and something else simultaneously. The feeling of *in-betweenness* is a concept that in a clear way depicts this, where this position does not indicate a discursively accepted belonging, but rather indicates a feeling of general dis-belonging. Challenging the idea of Swedishness and acknowledging this in-betweenness as a belonging, also acknowledges the reality of many Swedes and gives room to understand the reality of a large portion of the population, thereby widening the conception of Swedishness.

In conclusion, the findings in this study resonate with Sahlée's, Gruber's and Francia's previous findings that SSL has a stigmatizing and segregating function when used inconsistently. However, this study has contributed to the field of SSL by showing the importance of a sociological perspective through institutional othering, issues of belonging and students' identity formation. In further research, other forms of institutional othering would be of interest to study to identify larger social structures and recognize what is recurring in other contexts and what specifically is linked to schools as institutions.

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