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## **Social identity processes among young immigrant women in Sweden**

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### **Abstract**

*Sweden is a multicultural country with diverse ethnic groups, well known for its democratic values and often referred to as one of the leading countries in gender equality. However, equal opportunities across the ethnic barriers are more complicated to evaluate, since the discourse of ethnic identity is so diverse. Segregating mechanisms can be found in various places within the public arena, and finding a way to eliminate factors that contribute to a widespread ‘us’ and ‘them’ repertoire is a constant challenge. The question is why these patterns of fragmental groupings emerge and how this affects the most exposed social groups in society.*

### **Introduction**

Sweden today is a multicultural country in the sense that the population consists of diverse ethnic groups. Swedish society is well known for its democratic values and is often referred to as one of the leading countries when it comes to gender equality. However, equal opportunities across the ethnic barriers are more complicated to evaluate, since the discourse of ethnic identity is so diverse. Segregating mechanisms can be found in various places within the public arena, and finding a way to eliminate factors that contribute to a widespread ‘us’ and ‘them’ repertoire is a constant challenge. The question is why these patterns of fragmental groupings emerge and how this affects the most exposed social groups in society.

In recent years, a call for equal rights for young women of immigrant background has come to the surface in Swedish media. This is mostly a result of the huge attention on cases of young immigrant women from the Middle East region being murdered by their fathers or other male family members in the name of honour (see e.g. Eldén 2003). The awareness of this particular problem is slightly increasing across the nation. Simultaneously, another related problem is expanding, which is the fact that prejudices against young immigrant women in general is taking form. The preconceived conception about these women’s life situation regards a narrowed view of oppressive patriarchal immigrant families that are dominated by the male family members who restrict their young daughters’ freedom. The voices of these women with roots in collectivistic, traditional communities from mostly around the Middle East are seldom done justice in Swedish society. Due to the lack of knowledge within this field, the institutionalised view on young women as victims of oppression remains a solid stereotype. Confronting this specific problem is still a sensitive matter, but nevertheless, my impression of the current situation is that many people wish to achieve a better understanding of the often talked about situation of being a young immigrant woman in Sweden today.

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The present paper is a design for a research project concerning young immigrant women in Sweden. The point of departure for my dissertation is the discourse of victimising these young women. With a social psychological theoretical base, I will focus on social identity processes among young immigrant women in the light of how the general public's stereotypical view affects their self-perception. Research on immigrant women's identity is rare in Sweden, but more recently this subject has captured the attention of a few researchers (see e.g. Eldén 2003; Andersson 2003). With my thesis, I want to fill this research gap by exploring the specific social issues that young immigrant women deal with in their everyday lives.

### **Research aims**

The general aim of my thesis is to study how young women with foreign-born parents construct their social identity, by taking the above described victimisation process in consideration. The focus will be on how the self-images of the young women interplay with others' ascription of their identity. Within this study, ethnic identifications become relevant to bring forward. The study aims to give new light on how the young women with one foot in their parents' homeland culture and the other foot in the Swedish society, construct their identity in a context where the stereotype of oppressed adolescent girls from around the Middle East dominate the view on immigrant women in general.

Since the school is the physical place where adolescents in general spend most of their time outside of their home, I find it most suitable to begin my empirical study in the school environment. More specifically, I have chosen to study girls in peer group situations. The peer group is very interesting to study empirically through a social psychological perspective, and I aim to investigate how peer groups consisting of immigrant teenage girls contribute to the formation of the group members' social identity.

### **The immigrant conception**

The term immigrant in Sweden refers to a large heterogeneous group of people that share the common experience of not being born in Sweden. However, this broad definition is misguiding since many young people that are born in Sweden with at least one foreign-born parent, are still perceived as immigrants in the public eye. In this paper I refer to young immigrant women as those who have at least one foreign-born parent, and focus more specifically on those from collectivistic cultures from the Middle East or other Asian countries.

One way to illustrate what is often referred to as immigrants in Sweden is to consider the perceived cultural distance regarding norms and values between Swedes and other ethnic groups. Sociologist Orlando Mella (2007) has done a quantitative study on attitudes to ethnic variation in Sweden. In the analysis, two main categories emerged based on how the informants experienced cultural distance to different ethnic groups. The largest category consisted of ethnic groups such as Arabs, Kurds, Iranians, Serbs and Greeks, and they were identified as culturally deviant in a national, economical and political aspect. The second component in the pattern matrix included Swedes along with the Nordic countries, Englishmen, Americans and Germans, all of which share a relatively

similar economic status and modern values. This second category that is perceived as culturally close to Sweden is not included when referring to immigrants in Sweden today (Mella 2007).

These two analytical categories of culturally distant and near ethnic groups can in general terms also be interpreted as collectivistic and individualistic cultures respectively. In this specific discourse, the Swedish society may at a first glance represent individualistic norms and values, while countries from for instance the Middle East represent collectivistic values (Sjögren 2003). Some interesting questions emerge concerning this perspective: How do the informants internalise values from both of these norm-systems? How are potentially conflicting values handled in everyday life? What are the girls' experiences of having certain expectations from the collectivistic community in contrast to the individualistic value system at school?

### **Method**

For this research project, a qualitative approach is most suitable mainly because the aim of the thesis requires the researcher to obtain close contact with the informants in order to get an adequate picture of their everyday life situation. This approach also has the advantage of bringing forward the special meanings that are put into the life experiences. A possible methodological framework for the analysis is phenomenology (Kvale 1997) which corresponds to my intention of seeking the informants' own perspectives. A quantitative method of collecting empirical data is not an alternative, because research on subjective conceptions of a socially constructed reality is not quantifiable or statistically measurable. It is important for me at this stage to be open to various qualitative research methods. However, I have considered using three main techniques in my fieldwork.

First, there is the qualitative individual interview that is a well-used method and can give a lot of valuable insights to the informant's thoughts about her life experiences and her identity in a relatively controlled setting. Within this context the interviewee gets a chance to express herself without being interrupted by other people, which is the assumed case with the second method, namely group interviews. The latter can be valuable in getting information about how the peer group as one entity thinks about different themes, such as attitudes towards being ascribed as a victim. Also, questions about what unites and splits the groups are interesting aspects to analyse in peer group interviews. The third method in consideration is participant observation, through which I strive to study group behaviour in its 'natural' setting, and also to recognise the individual's adaptation or resistance to peer group norms.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

In this section, I will present some social psychological theories that are applicable in my empirical study on how young immigrant women construct their identity.

### Becoming a social self

Through a symbolic interactionist view, the identity is something that must be studied as an ongoing social process. George Herbert Mead (1934), the front figure in symbolic interactionism, stresses the importance of everyday social interaction between people as the foundation of our social selves. It is through social interaction with one's significant others that the individual creates her conception of the world and learns how to use meaningful symbols for communication. The essential face-to-face interaction becomes central in my empirical study when talking about how stereotypes of immigrant women can contribute to segregated peer group formations. Furthermore, Mead (1934) argues that the process of language is fundamental for the development of the self. Taking this into consideration, the question of how my informants' identity is constructed becomes obviously connected to their language skills and their relations to Swedish cultural symbols; what relation do the informants have to Swedish values, and also, how frequently do they interact with ethnic Swedes?

Becoming a functioning member of society requires the internalisation of the generalised other, according to Mead (1934). Taking the attitude of the generalised other, in this case internalising the victimising stereotypes, would mean that the young woman's behaviour becomes a product of the general view on immigrant women in Sweden. This will be a burning question in my thesis.

The very first period in one's life, during primary socialisation, involves the internalisation of a particular worldview that the significant others communicate to the child (Berger & Luckmann 1966). As the immigrant girl enters secondary socialisation she is introduced to alternative reality conceptions that might conflict with the internalised (collectivistic) norms from primary socialisation. In addition, coming into contact with new institutional worlds (e.g. school) and different roles (e.g. teachers and friends) in secondary socialisation won't necessarily influence the individual's identity since these contacts often lack the emotional bonds that one shares with significant others from primary socialisation. Potential discrepancies between primary and secondary socialisation, and coping with collectivistic and individualistic values in everyday life, are the main problems that will be focused on in my dissertation.

### The social identity as a (categorization) process

Sociologist Richard Jenkins (2000) talks about categorisation and classification of things as a prerequisite for all human knowledge. Jenkins further argues that social identification is a process of classifying yourself or your in-group in relation to others, and that others' categorisation in return is as important to your identity formation as your own definition. Thus, social identification is an ongoing dialectical process between internal and external definitions. Jenkins states that 'social identity is never unilateral' (Jenkins 2000:8), and through this perspective one has to understand social identity as a product of the interplay between self-image and public images of the individual. In the case of my informants, it is interesting to study how their social identity becomes a product of the dialectical process between internal and external factors, especially when the media so convincingly create a victimised stereotype of young immigrant women.

'Social psychology is especially interested in the effect which the social group has in the determination of the experience and conduct of the individual member.' (Mead 1934:1) Therefore, the study of social identity formation is naturally tied to group affiliations. As stated above, social categorisation is an essential social mechanism that enables people to identify themselves in relation to others. Henry Tajfel (1981), another famous social psychologist, describes social categorisation in this respect by distinguishing the in-group that forms 'us', from the out-group, 'them'. A group can be defined as 'being perceived as having common characteristics or a common fate mainly because other groups are present in the environment' (Tajfel 1981:258). This means that a necessary condition for the conceptualisation of an in-group is the existence of an out-group, since 'us' can only be defined in contrast to 'them' through social comparison (Tajfel 1981). In addition, Jenkins explains that group categorisation depends on conceptions of differences between groups as well as similarities within those categories: 'Difference does not make sense without similarity' (Jenkins 2000:22). In the case of immigrant teenage girls in school, it is relevant to study how they perceive themselves in comparison to their family background, their ethnic origin, their peer group and Swedish people in general.

### Conceptualising ethnicity

In my research design I have already constructed a category of people that I want to study, namely young immigrant women in a Swedish context. With this categorisation, I have made a distinction in ethnic terms, in the sense that young women with Swedish-born parents are excluded. This calls for an investigation on ethnic relations and a definition of ethnicity in a Swedish context.

The concept of ethnicity has been a frequently discussed matter in different fields of study. Due to the much given attention to the concept of ethnicity, any given definition is revisable. Like anthropologist George A. DeVos (1996), I interpret ethnicity as a 'common cause' that is the basic condition for a certain group to feel united as one entity and to establish a sense of group belonging. The concept of ethnicity often includes a shared language, religion, place of origin and aesthetic cultural patterns. These categories can also be referred to as ethnic markers, which I intend to identify in my analysis of the informants' description of their ethnic belongings. Important to bear in mind is that the notion of a 'common cause' is a *relative* phenomenon that can change content and meaning according to the social context that the individual is currently interacting in. Since ethnic identity is perceived as 'a continually evolving social process' (DeVos 1996:17), the question of where you belong and how to define your in-group, or where to draw the line between 'us' and 'them', is a constantly pressing issue.

DeVos (1996) presents three possible dimensions of how an individual can conceptualise its sense of belonging to an ethnic group. The first is a present-oriented group membership; the second is future-oriented, while the third is past-oriented. The latter is seemingly the most significant part of one's ethnic identity, as the social history of one's in-group is a powerful influence in the ethnic identity formation. Furthermore, since the past-oriented group affiliation is non-chosen by the individual, it is difficult to disregard the recognition of one's ancestors and the traditions tied to the ethnic group that one is born into (DeVos 1996). This discussion will be elaborated in my thesis when analysing

the informants' feelings of belonging in ethnic terms. The question is whether the informants identify themselves with their ethnic origin which they have internalised as part of their social identity during primary socialisation, or if being a member of the Swedish society dominates their feelings of belonging. In other words, how does the present-oriented identification (in a Swedish context) interplay with the past-oriented, and also, how do the informants envision their future sense of belonging?

Social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) emphasises ascription in a dualistic form when describing ethnic groups; the self-ascription and the categorical ascription by others (cf. Jenkins 2000). Barth states that '[i]f a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion' (Barth 1969:15). In the case of my informants, it is crucial to analyse how their past-oriented ethnic identification, or the cultural value system internalised through primary socialisation, is handled when coming into contact with other values in secondary socialisation. The study of how boundaries of ethnic identifications are compromised redefined or maintained in a context of multiple and intertwined worldviews present, and the consequences of this fluctuant process for the identity formation, will be dealt with in my thesis.

### Concluding remarks

My goal is to bring forward the voices and experiences of young immigrant women in Sweden. The central themes of the study are feelings of belonging to different social groups, how to handle the combination of several settings of value systems, and what the consequences are of being a part of a collectivistic minority and a citizen of an individualistic society. In short, to study the interplay between different social identifications as a result of being positioned as a young immigrant woman in Sweden.

The use of the term *young immigrant women* is a sensitive issue and needs to be elaborated in a much wider discussion than was possible in this paper. As I approach the empirical field, I want to avoid labelling the informants as *immigrants* in order to remain open to alternative definitions given by the informants themselves, since the purpose of the study is to examine the informants' *own* perspectives on self- and public images of their identity.

As I move forward with my research project, new questions constantly arise and may be added to the initial research plan. An interesting topic that I have reflected upon is how self-esteem among immigrant teenage girls is affected by their position of having foreign-born parents, another mother tongue than Swedish and a different cultural background compared to ethnic Swedes.

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