Introduction

This paper will primarily deal with the concepts of ‘race’/ethnicity but also class in feminism from mainly Swedish (Nordic) perspectives. I will be concentrating on the issues of, and interrelatedness of, ‘race’/ethnicity, class and gender generally, and more specifically in the context of education which is my primary field of research. As it is I find it more or less impossible to consider ethnicity or gender in isolation, it is necessary to take other notions and categories into account. Focussing on only one of them results in a problematic and limited analysis (Mulinari 2002). Choosing to emphasise the notions of gender, ethnicity/race and class not only shows my feminist engagement, but also the way feminist and sociological theory (e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Bradley 1996, Mulinari 2002) has shown how gender, ethnicity, and class are valuable for understanding and illuminating the basic forms of social stratification, the structures of societies and their organisation, and individual lives and identities. An interrelated perspective, however, is a relatively new and largely neglected field of research in Sweden as well as in the other Nordic countries. There is a lack of research and theory that attempts to explain and understand how gender, ethnicity/race and class interrelate. It is therefore an important area to study in a country such as Sweden given that it is increasingly portrayed as ‘multicultural’ and has a reputation of being ‘gender equal’, and where gender issues and gender equality are also key areas of debate. There are also discussions on whether or not classes still exist, and at the same time the fact that poverty, marginalisation and segregation exist is increasingly discussed.

The research I am doing is about how gender, ethnicity/race and class are interrelated, created, reproduced, changing, and experienced in education2 and how individuals and structures may influence each other. I am interested in how ‘normality’ and ‘divergence’ are created and maintained and what different possibilities or obstacles there are in education for students of different genders, ethnicities and class backgrounds. I have conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation at Komvux with students from different backgrounds (in terms of gender, ethnicity and class), teachers and other staff. One point of departure is that research in the sociology of education, as well as feminist research, has shown that the education system and the school in many respects are institutions that above all reproduce the prevailing structures and inequalities of society (e.g. Armnan & Jönsson 1983, Arman & Jönsson et al 1993, Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Willis 1977). Historically, both girls and children from working class backgrounds were excluded, or given very limited access to, education and schooling, with education largely being provided for boys belonging to higher classes.

1 In this paper I write ‘race’ with inverted commas to stress that I don’t see race as an essential category. This should, however, perhaps also be applied to gender, ethnicity and class, but ‘race’ seem to run the far greater risk of being perceived as a biological or essential entity and this I want to avoid.
2 More specifically at the Swedish adult education institution, Komvux, at the high school level. I have done my field work at two Komvux in the south of Sweden.
Gender, ethnicity/’race’ and class – analytically separable categories but different contextual and interrelated realities...

Gender, ethnicity/’race’ and class are created in different social contexts and hence change over time. However, they do have a salience that may make them seem ‘natural’. There are a multitude of possible identities an individual may have, but it is generally supported by feminist research that gender, ethnicity and class are the main structural and symbolic principles in society (e.g. Acker 1999, Afshar & Maynard 1994, Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Harding 1986). Gender, ethnicity and class are principal features of amongst other things who we are and who we are allowed to be, what work we do, and how we experience education. They are never totally determining or crucial but they play a significant role for how individual lives and societies are constructed. They are notions through which we, as active subjects and influenced by our environments, understand, organise and structure our worlds. Contextuality – historical, structural and individual – is an inevitable and important part in the understanding of these notions and their consequences, and the heterogeneity of different groups is also important to stress.

I will not spend a lot of time here defining what I mean by gender, ethnicity and class but a few words might be necessary. Gender may be referred to as the social construction, representation and organisation of sexual difference and biology, but it cannot be reduced to this. Gender relations are also persistent and exist at all levels in society (e.g. Bradley 1996, Harding 1986). Gender can be seen as two analytically separate dimensions that at an individual level are constructed dichotomously (e.g. Thorne 1993, Connell 1995). Still, these gender categorisations are filled with complicated, changing and sometimes contradictory meanings. According to Thorne, power as well as age, class and ethnicity are central to the dynamics of gender. She claims that one should “...try to start with a sense of the whole rather than an assumption of gender as separation and difference.” (Thorne 1993:108). However, gender symbolises meaningful social and natural events and in most cultures and societies the things considered masculine are generally valued more highly than those considered feminine (e.g. Harding 1986).

Using a broad definition of class inspired by Marxism, class refers to networks of unequally lived relations originating from the social organisation of, amongst other things, production, distribution, exchange and consumption, and unequal distribution of surplus, division of labour, linked to the circulation of money, and different cultures being parts of this (Bradley 1996). Bourdieu’s notions of symbolic and economic capital are also central here for the understanding of class. However, the notion of class has been highly criticised by feminists who claim that it needs to be redefined and re-theorised (e.g. Acker 1999, Reay 1998, Skeggs 1997). Almost every definition of class claims to be gender neutral, and although many Marxist feminists have tried to modify the notion of class, it is still based upon implicit male points of departure and assumptions about the working lives of men. Besides this, classes are not only split by gender but also ‘gendered’ in the sense that gender is integrated in the processes that also shape class (e.g. Acker 1999). In similar ways ethnicity/’race’ contributes to formations of class (e.g. Bradley 1996).

Ethnicity in a broad sense may refer to belonging to a certain group, the sharing of the same conditions, and having similar cultural, linguistic, and territorial presumptions (e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Jenkins 1997). The notion of ‘race’ is often used in Anglo-Saxon countries as well as ethnicity. And even though ‘differences of race’ are only ‘skin deep’, they are important categories for how we understand and organise our world (Epstein 1993).
Jenkins states that:
“...the ‘physical differences’ with which we are concerned in matters of ‘race’ are only differences which make a difference because they are culturally or signified as such”. (Jenkins 1997:76). The notion of ‘race’ has not had the same practicability in Sweden as it has had in the UK and the US but it is difficult to disregard it. Racism and ethnic hierarchies do exist and people are divided according to their ethnic and/or cultural background or because of the colour of their skin. In this sense it is still useful to talk about ‘race’ in Sweden, for example as Osman has written about in his study of how ‘the others, the strangers’ among us are constructed in adult education (1999).

Ethnic and racial categories can be said to signify a sense of collectivity that is changing and being redefined and that has a historical and cultural origin – either identified within the group or from others outside it, or both. These categories do not necessarily have to do with exploitation or subordination, which is different from racist discourses that serve to establish subordinated representations based on ethnic or cultural differences (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992). I would however like to stress, like many other researchers of ethnicity, that ethnicity is not something only ‘they’ have but ‘we’ also have it. It is certainly not only something for the ‘exotic others’ and we are continuously shaping and changing it. (e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Ehn 1993, Jenkins 1997). It is important to note that I am not interested in specific ethnicities, their different traits or qualities, or different cultures as such, but in how these differences are conceptualised, constructed, reproduced and experienced.

According to Joan Acker, class, gender and ethnicity/‘race’ are interrelated in practice and relations of class are shaped in and through the processes that also shape relations of gender and ‘race’ (e.g. 1999). Other researchers also claim that ‘race’, class and gender cannot be separated as reasons or grounds for inequalities. They argue that they have common bonds but generate a variety of patterns of structural relations and individual lives. Men’s and women’s different experiences of their lives, of possibilities and impediments, being outsiders or insiders and so on, are constructed through structural relations and social processes, and the linking of ‘race’, class and gender shapes multiple systems of dominance and meanings that have interactive and reciprocal effects on these structural relations and social processes (e.g. Chow 1996). Simplified, one could say that ethnicity and ‘race’, as well as class, cut between societies and/or groups, while gender cuts through societies and/or groups (e.g. Tilly 1998).
Why gender cannot be understood in isolation, and why feminism needs to embrace other notions besides gender…

In Sweden as well as the other Nordic countries few feminist or gender researchers have combined gender with other notions or categories. It is still a relatively new and underdeveloped field not only in gender studies, but also in many other areas. However, voices are being raised to change this, and the combination is also hard to avoid, at least rhetorically. The Swedish researchers who have worked with the interrelated concepts of gender, ethnicity/‘race’ and class almost all have foreign backgrounds as well. In that way they also differ from a ‘white, western’ norm (e.g. Knocke 1996, 2000, Molina 1997, Muliniari 1996, 2002, de los Reyes 1998, Ålund 1997, 2000). Swedish gender researchers, however, have generally not made visible the power differences that exist between women when they have used the category of gender even though this tendency seems to have lessened somewhat (Muliniari 2002). In the US and the UK on the other hand there is a history of a long and ongoing critique of feminist theory addressing this dilemma. Among others, black feminists and women from ‘third world countries’ have strongly criticised the white, western feminism that overlooked and excluded most women in the world (e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Afshar & Maynard 1994, Bhavnani 1993, Hill-Collins 1991, hooks 1990, 2000, Mohanty 1991). They claim that the ‘mainstream’ feminism of the 1970s and ‘80s was western(ized), both created by and dealing only with white middle class women therefore shutting out women with working class backgrounds and in the main women of colour or from other parts of the world. The ‘white, middle class’ feminism(s) was not only blind to, but was also racist towards, ‘other’ women, their lives and positions. White femininity was normative for the category ‘women’ and other women where made visible only as different to this, and otherwise not at all. This construction of ‘otherness’ also shows the exercise of power (Muliniari 2002). Western feminism has also been criticised for being racist and sexist towards working class men and men in other parts of the world. The most obvious example may be the image of the extremely sexually active and violent black man (e.g. Mac an Ghaill 1996). New feminisms emerging from this have however contributed to an increased interest and awareness of other factors besides gender that must be considered in order to get a somewhat more ‘fair’ picture. The historical relationship between feminism and racism can also no longer be ignored (e.g. Muliniari 2002).

Swedish gender researchers Irene Molina, Paulina de los Reyes, and Diana Muliniari argue that a partial understanding of class, gender and ethnicity only leads to fragmented knowledge that does not take into consideration how different forms of power relate to each other. Reducing power to partial categories makes us blind to the interplay between different forms of superiority and subordination. It is thus a challenge to creating theories that question the mechanisms of power without preserving old and creating new essential categories, and/or normative knowledge, they claim. The notion of intersectionality is an important theoretical tool concerning analyses of knowledge. It implies a theoretical framework for analysing how power is constituted from socially constructed differences that are embedded in each other, and that change over time and space. This approach to combining different notions is a different approach to earlier ones, which led to a mechanistic understanding of the categories of gender, class, and ethnicity where the positions of the individuals were determined by the sum of the structures of superiority and subordination (2002).

To conceptualise gender in terms of social relations also makes a difference to the relatively static image of gender as dichotomous differences. This is already well established within studies of ethnicity and class, Barrie Thorne argues. To understand how flexible gender can be in social life we need to examine when gender seems to be symbolically and organisationally central. In social contexts interaction between gender and other social divisions and hierarchies (as e.g. age, ‘race’, ethnicity, class, and religion) are also sources of complexity and multitude. To pay attention to the dynamics of the social context helps us to situate gender in relation to other differences. The importance of gender is not one sided but multiple and also contradictory, Thorne argues. (1997). At the same time she stresses levels of analysis. Gender becomes more flexible and floating when moving from individual situations to the situations of groups. In interaction other traits of identity may become more salient and brought to the fore than gender, e.g. age and ethnicity, and these can become more relevant in certain situations while more multiple identities may compound each other (Thorne 1993).
All this research appears to have contributed to and influenced change in Sweden. There are however still ‘blind spots’. A lot of the so called ‘immigrant research’ has mostly focused on men, and gender research has mostly focused on Swedish women (Mulinari 2002). In both cases ‘non-Swedish’ women are ignored, marginalised and often portrayed stereotypically and as a homogenous group, often as the passive, victimised woman, wearing a veil (e.g. Ålund 1997, 2000). And, as mentioned above, feminist/gender research has to a large extent neglected taking other issues and notions into account.

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3 I would also like to emphasise my conviction that feminist/gender research also can deal with men and masculinities, but I do not intend to get into that discussion here and now.
Schools, education, gender, ethnicity and class

From a historical perspective, there are clear ethnical, cultural, gendered, and ‘classed’ aspects of education. Tesfahuney claims that it is possible to talk about Swedish and mono-cultural education, contrary to ‘multicultural’ education, as being historically constructed in the wake of the Enlightenment by and for western men from higher classes. Education, logic and rationality are notions that can be connected to a certain kind of middle class masculinity as well as to subjects of the natural sciences and technology. On the other hand the femininity of higher classes was connected to irrationality and emotionality which had little or nothing to do with education, and where we also find a connection with ‘softer’ subjects such as some of the arts. Education, logic and rationality are notions that can be connected to a certain kind of middle class masculinity as well as to subjects of the natural sciences and technology. On the other hand the femininity of higher classes was connected to irrationality and emotionality which had little or nothing to do with education, and where we also find a connection with ‘softer’ subjects such as some of the arts. (e.g. Harding 1986, 1998, Staberg 1992).

The views on these connections have changed somewhat but they still shine through. Subjects previously characterised as masculine or ‘boyish’, such as mathematics or physics, are still more highly esteemed, and theoretical high school programmes have a higher status than more practical programmes. Feminist research has shown that there is a certain ethos within education and schooling that holds up individualism, competition and differentiation, while at the same time this ethos is theorised as masculine (e.g. Wright et al 2000). In the Swedish high school system it also becomes clear concerning gender, ethnicity and class who studies what and where (e.g. Rubinstein-Reich & Tallberg-Broman 2000).

Today in schools and education a certain new group of students are often considered problematic by teachers and staff. These are students with ‘foreign backgrounds’, even if these students may be born and raised in Sweden (e.g. Lahdenperä 1997). Here aspects of gender, class and ethnicity/‘race’ again become very clear. Another important issue in relation to this, not only in Sweden today or the Swedish education system, is how class more and more has been ‘ethnified’ or ‘racialised’. The problems pupils and students face in, for example, education are considered to be as a result of their ethnic or cultural background when in fact they, to a large extent, have to do with differences in class and social exclusion where among other things segregation, discrimination based on ethnicity/‘race’ and overt or covert racism play important roles (e.g. Parszyk 1999, Ålund 1997, 2000).

As I said earlier, gender, ethnicity/‘race’ and class are structuring and organising principles at different levels, structurally, symbolically and individually, and at the same time they are important social relations in the construction of our identities and daily lives. I cannot see how they can be overlooked in a field of research such as education where much Swedish research has shown that they are important. The notions of gender, ethnicity and class have all been studied there but not as features that interrelate (e.g. Armn & Jönsson 1983, Osman 1999, Parszyk 1999, Rubinstein-Reich & Tallberg-Broman 2000, SOU1996:143, Öhrn 1990). Gender differences have been studied (the silent girls and the outspoken boys taking up more space), gender identity, differences concerning choices of subjects and grades have been studied but not combined with the study of ethnicity or class. Ethnicity or ‘immigrants’ in the Swedish education system have also been studied, for example how students from an immigrant background may feel themselves excluded or deviant, but factors such as class and gender have not been considered here. In the 1970s and ‘80s class was the major area of focus in the sociology of education, especially as a factor contributing to the reproduction of inequality in society. Boys and girls could be mentioned but gender was not a category of analysis. All of this of course has its origin in the contexts of society and research, but I still see it as a fundamental inadequacy when it comes to contributing to a broader understanding of education and schooling.

Recent statistics show that girls, mostly middle class girls, are out-performing boys in schools (e.g. Rubinsten-Reich & Tallberg-Broman 2000). But not all boys are doing badly. When it comes to grades boys with working class backgrounds and boys with ‘immigrant’ backgrounds are performing worse. This, for example, shows that gender alone is unsatisfactory in explaining different phenomena in education and that other factors must be considered as well. That some groups of students are performing poorer than others is nothing new or surprising, but the increased attention given in most

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4 Compare e.g. Harding 1986, who theorises how gender is constructed and constituted on these three levels in every society.
parts of the western world to boys’ lower attainment is something relatively new (e.g. Epstein et al 1998). That girls on the other hand are doing well in general is not discussed, nor is the issue of which boys are doing badly. On the contrary voices are being raised about how the education system has been ‘feminised’ and that it is an acute problem that needs immediate attention (e.g. Rubinstein-Reich & Tallberg-Broman 2000, Weiner 2001).5

Research in the UK, the US, and Australia has an earlier tradition of combining gender, ethnicity and class in issues about education. Studies of ‘black’ youth have been done that combine gender and class showing how black students have, or are seen, as problems in schools, while also being racialised and sexualised (e.g. Mac an Ghaill 1995, Wright et al 2000). Researchers have also studied how constructions of gender interrelate with ethnicity or class as well as how class and/or gender and/or ethnicity are constructed or reproduced (e.g. Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Thorne 1997, Walkerdine 1997, Willis 1977). However, focusing on ‘race’ in schooling and education has often focused on ‘black boys’, more often than not with working class backgrounds. Black boys are more often expelled from school than white boys. Their gender identity is often perceived as ‘machismo’, which is a racialised perception of it, and often they are pathologised for the way they respond to their experiences in school (e.g. Wright et al 2000). Since there is a lack of Swedish research within this field more knowledge is needed given that international (western) theories and findings may not be directly applicable to Swedish conditions.

A recent Swedish public investigation, however, shows how there are outspoken but also silent norms in the context of schooling and education concerning students with immigrant backgrounds. The immigrant students are often marked as different, not fitting the perceptions of normality. This, together with negative discrimination, risks creating and enforcing a negative sense of self. This is also related to perceptions of what these students are considered to lack. The report also stresses that the ‘group of immigrant students’6 is a heterogeneous one, and hence the notion needs to be further nuanced (Integrationsverket 2003).

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5 I would like to express my concern that by talking about girls and boys as fixed and totally separate categories without considering the interrelationship between gender, ethnicity and class one risks reproducing patterns and discourses of gender that only confirms stereotypes, and which may also treat girls in general unfairly and groups of boys of subordinated masculinities as well (e.g. Connell 1987, 1995, Mac and Ghaill 1995, Wright et al. 2000, compare also Willis 1977).

6 The notion of ‘immigrant’ in Sweden covers everyone who is born in a foreign country or born in Sweden by at least one parent born in a foreign country, hence it is quite a problematic notion embracing a wide variety that does not become visible by the often careless use of the notion of immigrants.
Racialisation, difference and otherness…

Robert Miles argues that the notion of ‘race’ should be left aside completely because in sociology there is no scientific establishment for it, as ‘race’ does not ‘exist’. ‘Race’ according to Miles is an ideological construction used for giving respectability to discredited racist ideas (Miles 1993). ‘Race’ cannot be a part of the analytical language of sociology as it rests upon mistaken scientific grounds, but evidently there is racism. Other researchers claim that all social categories are constructions, and as such they inform how people think and act in relation to others, and besides this the effects of ‘race’ are very real (e.g., Anthias & Yuval Davies 1992). We act as if the notion were real and it also has real effects on people’s lives, hence it should remain as an important notion, Bradley amongst others, argues (1996). The idea of ‘race’ is also tied to the wider category of ethnicity, she claims.

Aleksandra Ålund argues that social inequality more and more often is understood in terms of cultural differences where the cultural aspects are connected to ethnicity or ‘race’. There is an ethnic hierarchisation in society, she claims, that leads to social and cultural fragmentisation with ethnicity being the most salient trait in the societal differentiation. This means that we risk ignoring discrimination and segregation in favour of cultural explanations – which she calls processes of culturalisation. At the same time she argues that the cultural dimensions cannot be left totally aside. A certain knowledge and insight into a culture other than one’s own can provide understanding of certain events, but the important aspect is that the complex interplay between cultural and societal structures is considered. Ålund claims that categorisations of immigrants (via stereotypes and orientalisation) are often occurring.

Culturalisation is probably created as a need to orient oneself towards one’s own distinctive character, towards the unique and against ‘the other’, which is different and ‘strange’. We also live in a time of insecure identities, Ålund writes, where there are tendencies of dissolving national identities, and European processes of integration paralleling economic crises, which may also influence the construction of people as ‘the Others’ with culturalised descriptions of them (Ålund 1997).

Processes of racialisation thus mean that people, and cultures, are defined as different, as others, subordinated, and also hierarchised in terms of assigned racial characteristics, especially colour of the skin or other signifiers that make us ‘different’. The processes of culturalisation are similar to this, where culture in general is seen as the major difference.

The notion of ‘race’ is usually separated from the notions of ethnicity and culture and more connected to physical appearances and differences, Jenkins claims. ‘Race’ also seems to be assigned to others by the majority, stressing more the colour of the skin and appearance. Ethnicity can be said to be more ‘self assigned’, created by the group itself, and being a system of classification of culture, religion, language and origin based on experiences (Jenkins 1997).

Anthias claims that ‘race’ is one way to construct an ethnic ‘border’ (1992). Jenkins claims that ‘race’ is more of a social category than a group identity (but with several exceptions). Ethnical relations are also not necessarily hierarchical, conflict ridden or involving exploitation, while ‘race’ relations certainly often seem to be so (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992, Jenkins 1997).

Only a few Swedish gender researchers have shown interest in issues of ‘race’, but two of them are Irene Molina and Paulina de los Reyes who claim that it is the ‘rasification’ of society – explicit and/or unspoken categorisations, models of thought and associations – that makes the ranking order of people a ‘natural’ part of social relations as well as of power structures. This is associated with an essential view of humans which legitimises a social ranking order based on people’s (perceived) essentially different and unchangeable qualities. They therefore claim that the perspective of ethnicity is not enough to describe those relations that give rise to differentiated ethnic identities in a society (Molina & de los Reyes 2002).
Ethnic discrimination and racism are more and more often described as two different and independent problems of society, both in time and space, Molina and de los Reyes claim. Ethnic discrimination rests upon (explicit or implicit) presumptions of essentially different and relevant ‘ethnic’ differences between people. Differences that are perceived as more or less ‘natural’. At the same time racism is often described as an isolated phenomenon, a singular event that is rarely related to the everyday life discrimination, exercised by ‘normal people’, their perceptions, values and actions, in contrast to right wing extremist groups (Ibid.).

‘Races’ are, however, nothing more than instrumental social constructs, they claim, but both the notions of ‘race’ and racism call to mind strong feelings. As notions they are often perceived as too strong, too final, and are considered to contribute to the revival of old racism. Molina and de los Reyes claim that it is also quite unthinkable that these perceptions of ‘race’ could exist as more than a few exceptions in the Swedish ‘people’s home’ (Folkhemmet) which is characterised by equality and humanism. But racism is an ideological structure that gained scientific legitimacy at the end of the 18th century, and that has characterised the western view of the world for centuries. Historically ‘race’ is and has been a central category of how relations of power are structured in the world, locally as well as globally, and ‘race’ is a most evident phenomenon even if the existence of ‘races’ is questioned. Thus the notions of ‘race’ and racism paradoxically are necessary tools in the fight against a racially organised structure of power, Molina and de los Reyes claim. An euphemistic use of the notion of ethnicity and lack of problematisation of the ideology of racism only prevents people becoming conscious that in Swedish society there are racist perceptions that are deeply rooted and taken for granted (Ibid.)

Due to this I too argue that the notion of ‘race’ is useful, as well as the notion of ethnicity. ‘Race’ has obvious meanings to many of us, as does racism. At the same time, however, there is also the risk of reclaiming a notion and using it as if there really were ‘races’ out there, which is one of the last things I wish to happen. By using ‘race’ together with the notions of gender and class we enhance and enrich our possibilities of understanding and interpreting the world we live in.
In an Educational Context…

How gender, ethnicity/race and class may interrelate is exemplified through Christina, a young adopted female student. Christina is one of the best students in all of her subjects and having lived in Sweden since the age of 4 she speaks perfect Swedish. Her looks though, with her dark hair and eyes, give a first impression of ‘non-Swedishness’. Her parents are academics and she herself is on her way to university after her Komvux studies. Despite her female gender and middle class background, signalling a student who may potentially perform very well (e.g. Walkerdine 1997), Christina herself thinks she has to fight harder to prove that. She must make it clear that she is not foreign or an ‘immigrant’, and she must assert her class background. She often experiences herself being perceived as an immigrant (student) and therefore is sometimes considered by teachers as a student with low status or as one with difficulties who is likely to perform less well than the Swedish students. Christina says:-

"Well, most people think I’m an immigrant…. a foreigner… Not that I’m adopted or Swedish or so. And it feels like I always have to prove myself that I’m not, that I don’t have any problems in school, problems with the language or so. /…/ When they know me it’s not like that, but at first it often happens…” (my translation).

Christina (analytical and quite often using an ‘academic language’) sees herself as having a marginal position that is hard to define. People that do not know her, teachers as well as students, often assume she is foreign, and she is often characterised as an ‘immigrant’ in the education system. Often she is asked where she comes from, and replying “Swedish” is often followed by remarks such as “but you don’t look like….”. This may very well be harmless, but it shows how racialisation can take place, and how ethnicity and ‘race’ can be defined from the ‘outside’ by the dominant group and its assumptions of (non-) ‘Swedishness’. Christina claims that she has never experienced racism at Komvux or elsewhere but that she finds it very disturbing that she cannot define herself as Swedish, or as any other ethnic identity in a way that is unproblematic, and that it should be necessary to define or label herself at all. She is frightened and disturbed by prejudices, values, categorisations and ethnical classifications. She claims that the teachers at Komvux are influenced by the ethnicity or any other background the students have. The worst thing, she says, is when ethnic classification influences the grades. Christina, however, is by far not an exception and shares her experiences with many others.

When it comes to the situation of adopted people in education and schooling it seems to become even clearer how above all ethnicity/race is being constructed and negotiated without the cooperation of the people involved, and assigned to them (especially when they previously are not known by, amongst others, teachers and other students), and that Swedishness is the norm. A ‘divergence’ of the colour of the skin signals things that are not in accordance with what we consider to be Swedish, and also influences the images and prejudices we have about how one should be or behave depending on one’s gender and class background. To be seen as ‘one of them’, as an ‘immigrant’ or ‘foreigner’, or to run the risk of being seen as such, also shows what the norm is and what one compares (oneself) to.

It is not important, at least not of vital importance, which of the notions gender, ethnicity/race and class weighs most heavily, since their effects are impossible to separate in real social settings (Bradley 1996). The notions can be studied as analytically separate with their own inner logic, but real life functions differently and gender, ethnicity and class cannot easily be separated. They refer to different aspects of people’s everyday life but function together in the construction and persistence of an integrated structure of inequality (Ibid.). I wonder, for example, what is going on when students with foreign backgrounds so often are called by the wrong name, or their names are twisted or spoken hesitantly. Or when their ‘strange names’ are made fun of, when we, on the other hand, expect everyone to speak an almost perfect Swedish free of accents. Is that how normality and divergence is being marked out and transmitted, however unintentionally? Is that how different ethnicities/categories of ‘race’ and culture are being pointed out? The young woman with the ‘odd name’ may represent ‘otherness’ and divergence, while at the same time categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are constructed and
reproduced. Connected to ethnicity and gender there are also often assumptions and images of, in this case, the young, female victim of patriarchal structures (e.g. Ålund 1997, 2000).

Gender, ethnicity and class are conceptualised as visible, but ethnicity and class in particular cannot always be seen. What we see, we see through categorisations and exercises of power. What creates gender and ethnicity/’race’ as categories are assumptions about the existence of these differences and their relevance (Mulinari 2002). What we notice is that which differs from what we recognise and define as Swedish in relation to ethnicity/’race’, and is still only what we think we see or want to see, which Christina is an example of.

Therefore it would probably be more accurate to actually talk about ‘race’ than ethnicity in this context of education. The visible differences of what is perceived as a ‘different ethnicity’ or ‘race’ such as the colour of the skin or ‘cultural differences’ such as the veil – the attribution of immigrant status and/or difference – seem to play a more important role, in the construction of Swedishness and categories of ‘us’/’them’, than actual ethnic identities.

Class cannot always been seen either but even here there are conceptions and stereotypes about different ‘others’. “Well, one notices… One can see how some people think they are better off than others, or well, different. That they dress differently or talk in a certain way. They know how to put it…” as one Swedish girl with a working class background says about students with middle class backgrounds.7 Christina also talks about class as having to do with the choice of clothing and, above all, values and attitudes and “what is important for people in the future, how they plan their lives…”.

Differences in gender on the other hand are often taken for granted to the extent that most of us are almost blind to them, or do not see them because they are perceived as ‘natural’. At the same time gender difference is apparent. The male student more often speaks for the others while the female students remain silent, although this pattern is by no means unambiguous. According to some female students I have spoken to many of the male students take up more space in the class rooms while some male students claim that there are not any differences between the genders. In some classes I have visited teachers and above all many of the students express commonly held beliefs and sometimes stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, and about immigrants as a group. These remarks concern issues ranging from day care centres, ‘bodily ideals’, cooking, sports, alcohol and snuff. What is obvious is that the pronoun ‘he’ is most often used by teachers and students to exemplify something.

Female students often ask for permission to express themselves, and phrases such as “may I ask…?”, “could I just…?”, “I don’t have very much to say…” are not too rarely heard. They seem to give the impression of certain insecurity while at the same time they evidently seem to be very well prepared and knowledgeable which in turn contradicts the insecurity. The ‘insecurity’, however, appears far more widespread among working class women and students with both working class and ‘immigrant’ backgrounds. Middle class students on the other hand all express a certain confidence.

Female students, mostly the younger ones, seem to prefer the company of other female students and male students seem to prefer the company of other male students, though the patterns are not as clear for younger students in the obligatory school system. Similarly Swedes tend to stick together with other Swedes of the same gender. On the other hand, students with foreign backgrounds tend to stick together with other students with other foreign backgrounds and across the gender lines. This shows how groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and Swedishness can be reproduced and constructed and how students that differ from this find themselves outside. Being outsiders, in the shape of many shared experiences of stigmatisation and segregation, may also contribute to the formation of new communities across ethnic boundaries (Ålund 1997). This shows how classifications and categorisations based on, for

7 Class background is here defined from the educational levels of the students’ parents. However, when it comes to ‘immigrant’ students, this becomes harder as many immigrants have lost their ‘original’ class based status when migrating.
example, gender or ethnicity, are continuously constructed and reproduced, and that the borders between different groups are not static or rigid.

Another interesting example from my material is Nico, born and raised in Sweden by one Greek and one Finnish parent, both migrating here in the early 1970’s to work in an industry which was then in need of foreign workers. Nico is tall and blonde, and I would never have guessed he was anything but Swedish had I not known his full name. He exemplifies how gender, ethnicity/race and class again may interact, as can be seen from the following quote from the interview which shows how he can ‘take advantage’ of his looks and ‘pass’ as Swedish (white). The quite crude language also suggests a less ‘politically correct’ way to express oneself (concerning ‘immigrants’/foreigners in this case) that normally is more associated with the working class (men?) as opposed to the middle class, although, I’m not suggesting that the working class(es) are in any way more racist than the middle class(es), or vice versa. Nico says:-

“Maybe I have an advantage here...having both Greek and Finnish background. I can tell somebody with foreign background to ‘well, now you have to shut up’ [when they are noisy in class]! And I can even tell him ‘bloody foreigner [“jävla svartskalle” in Swedish], shut it now will you!’ ‘What, are you a racist [they ask back]!? ’ ‘No, I’m sort of Greek myself!’ So I can say that because of that... and they will maybe listen more to me since I’m not Swedish either... and they can’t counter attack so to speak...” (my translation).

Another thing it is also important to note and consider is how class may change. When we in Sweden talk about doing a ‘class journey’ (e.g. Trondman 1994) we mostly mean upward mobility mostly through education, but it is important to consider gender, ethnicity and class in relation to this. There is no reason why class mobility cannot also be downward, especially when it comes to immigrants who for different reasons have lost the status they occupied in their home countries due to, for example, their educational qualifications not being considered valid in Sweden. This is, however, not a result of ethnicity, gender or cultural backgrounds but to processes of culturalisation, segregation and discrimination (Ålund 1997, 2000). Immigrant men in general also seem to lose more of their status in the new country while immigrant women may experience a drastic increase of power and resources after immigration (Darvishpour 2001).
Involvement and reflections – methodological and epistemological issues…

Finally I will shortly discuss some methodological and epistemological issues that fascinate and intrigue me, personally as well as sociologically. From my point of view it is important to see how the individual and personal lives and experiences of students at Komvux can be brought up to a structural level, and how individuals and structures construct, influence, change and reproduce each other. I have found the interview method helpful here, especially in combination with participant observation. What is being said and what is being done is not always the same thing but they may tell a lot about each other. When it comes to methodology feminist ideas have strongly influenced me. Feminist methodology and theory is however a wide and contested area, but one thing often emphasised is the researcher’s own involvement and inclusion in the research process, all the way through it (e.g. Rheinharz 1992). Who I am influences my research interests and aims and the point of departure I choose. It can also certainly be argued that there is no such thing as A feminist method. What could be said to be feminist about methods are the methodological and epistemological points of departure, that is how one positions oneself as researcher with the respondents, and how one sees the knowledge created during the research as being created in a process together with the respondents.

There are several general methodological problems (as well as theoretical) concerning the kind of research I am doing. What is ethnicity/‘race’, gender and class, when and how are they constructed and expressed? What do I see, and how do I interpret my findings? And am I not participating in a process of re-essentialising these notions by studying and analysing them? – something I do not want to be involved with. During the research process I have been struck several times by how I personally may contribute to a process of racialisation by having prejudiced opinions and ideas about, for example, how a darker colour of the skin automatically signifies a different ethnic identity other than Swedish. Or, similarly, how blonde hair, fair skin and blue eyes signals and symbolises ‘Swedishness’, or that a certain behaviour symbolises or represents femininity or masculinity or a certain class background, when it all comes down to prejudices and stereotypes that I carry with me. I am in every sense involved here, both through my presence in the classroom and during the interview and through my, perhaps not conscious, ideas and prejudices.

I also ask myself if it is at all possible for me as a Swede, however vague that notion may be, to talk about other people’s lives and experiences of, for example, ethnicity or being outsiders when I am part of the ‘majority’ and ‘they’ are not? And can I do that without further imposing ideas on ‘them’, which ‘black feminism’ so distinctly criticised white, western, middle class feminism for doing?

I am meeting many students who on a routine basis are constructed and categorised as ‘others’, trying to ask them about their ‘otherness’, expecting them to be ‘experts’ and share their (expected) experiences with me concerning difficult and sensitive issues of, for example, racism and discrimination. Some did openly, some did not at all. Some of the students with ‘immigrant backgrounds’ were very careful about letting me know how good everything was in Sweden, in Komvux, and how well their teachers treated them. I do not have any real reason to doubt their stories, but knowing that society does not always look that ‘rosy’, I at least think about why they told me what they did. I also consider what it is I ‘represent’ to them. Being female, white and Swedish, coming from the university, obviously being friendly with the teachers who allow me to visit their classes… maybe it is not at all strange that they were eager to share only the ‘good stories’ with me?!

What I have tried to do in this paper is to show the problems and challenges of, and at the same time show the necessity to work with, the interrelated notions of gender, ethnicity/‘race’ and class. Understanding the intersection of gender, ethnicity/‘race’ and class involves looking at them in both their specific and multiple contexts. Although it is possible to discuss these notions analytically and generally, they take specific and contextual forms in ‘reality’, and although bound and constructed structurally (as well as individually), the context also needs to be highlighted for a greater understanding of them. To continue writing about and studying notions as gender, ethnicity/‘race’ and

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8 Other methods of course also claim this, but here I focus on feminism.
class may increase the risk that we at the same time continue to reproduce and strengthen the differences and inequalities that exist. But at the same time, and if we want there to be changes in the area of education, attention must be focused on these issues unless systems of education want to continue to ‘fail’ students of the ‘wrong’ ethnicity/race, gender and class. Unless the structures and norms that are reproduced by education concerning structures of gender, ethnicity/race and class are challenged, this will probably continue. The connection of gender, ethnicity/race and class to notions such as power, power relations and the construction and persistence of normality and divergence, and hence also ‘Swedishness’, must continually be problematised in light of this. Bringing ‘race’ back into the discussion and into feminism(s) is also important, as Irene Molina and Paulina de los Reyes so vividly describe in one of their titles, ‘call the darkness night’ (kalla mörkret natt) – meaning that we should call ‘race’ by its correct name in order to challenge it (2002).
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