Summary

Knowing one's place- Agency and Educational Opportunity

This is a dissertation about young people's experiences of their journeys from a socially marginalized suburb to higher education. As revealed in the thesis *introduction*, marginalized suburbs in Sweden are often associated with the great housing project of the 1960s called the Million Homes Programme, 'miljon-programmet'. As early as 1975, more than a million homes were produced in Sweden, of which the vast majority were in the form of rented tenancy in a block of flats. The objective of producing good housing for all is telling for a vision of social inclusion. However, these neighbourhoods were early on associated with relative poverty and territorial stigmatization. Today, the city of Gothenburg strives to be a city of knowledge characterized by social inclusion, and the university is aiming for broader recruitment from disadvantaged groups and to achieve widening participation. But Gothenburg remains fragmented in terms of socio-spatial divisions, a feature common to the segregating urban development of many European cities. This kind of development puts a school system striving for social inclusion in a new situation, where the significance of place becomes of growing importance. There is, if you will, a geography of opportunity.

School results in these socially marginalized areas are generally well below average, resulting in a social imbalance in recruitment to higher education. A growing number of children are starting their geographically short but socially long journey towards eventual citizenship in the 'knowledge city' from areas characterized by ethnic diversity and relative poverty. The vast majority of students from these areas do not continue to higher education, but some do; what makes these young people's experiences valuable is not just that they can cast some light on the discrepancy between the idea of a school for everyone at policy level and area based lack of equity in merits. These informants can also tell about their experiences of how this educational barrier can be overcome.

There is little empirical knowledge about what makes the journey from a marginalized suburb to higher education possible. The purpose of this study is to understand the path to higher education with a focus on the difficulties and oppor-tunities encountered by young people who grew up with that suburban experience. This is to capture the meaning these young people ascribe to their social background in relation to their educational journey. It is also an important aim to analyze what significance the structuring conditions associated with place has for the journey to

higher education in a segregated city. In doing this, the study aims to explain how factors prevent or provide opportunities for these young people to advance to studies at university level. By focusing on agency I hope to reach a deeper understanding of the identity work that frees capacity to transcend limitations. In these ways, I would like to make a contribution to the larger sociological discussion of the relationship between structure and agency. In short, *the aim* of the study is to address the question of how agency is possible and how the hindering structuring conditions associated with place can be understood and overcome.

Four *questions* direct the study:
 - What is the meaning of place and what role can be given to structural dimensions such as class, gender and ethnicity in influencing suburban youth's choices to get higher education?
 - What facilitates and constrains the agency of these young people?
 - How have these young people experienced their schooling in the suburb and the encounter with higher education?
 - What mechanisms have made possible or hampered the transition from suburban school to higher education?

Method

An interview study with nineteen informants was conducted between April 2008 and July 2009. These informants had a variety of family and ethnic backgrounds. Criteria for the selection were that they had upbringing and schooling in a marginalized suburb and that they had sufficient qualifications to enter higher educational studies. As it turned out they were in most cases about to successfully complete their studies at university level.

Theory

The theoretical basis of the study stems mainly from Margaret S. Archer's approach to *critical realism* that emphasizes analytical dualism and the importance of subjectivity in social science. The main theoretical starting point is that structure and agency cannot analytically be reduced to each other. Margaret Archer stresses the importance of internal conversation and emotions for what we care about, our *concerns*. This notion has also taken the analysis somewhat in the direction of the sociology of emotions, as represented by theorists such as Thomas J. Scheff and Jack Barbalet. By the concepts of *forms of capital* and *field*, the theoretical work of Pierre

Bourdieu has been of great value in understanding cultural aspects of class and the barrier that young people from the suburb face.

What meaning ethnicity should be given has principally been an empirical question. Identity and ethnicity have been treated as social and relational concepts. The concepts have been of help to problematize informants' talk of 'immigrant' and 'Swede'. By this approach, attention has also been directed to identity work and to othering processes. Social positions given by class and migratory background have been approached intersectionally through the concepts of place and territorial stigmatization.

To attend to the socio-spatial question, human geography theories in the tradition of Edward Relph and John A. Agnew have been used, with concepts such as *place* and *sense of place*. This theoretical foundation has provided the study with tools to understand and explain what has made the journey difficult, but of great importance to the aim of this study is that the theories have enabled me to address the question of how agency is possible. In the words of Margaret Archer, upward social mobility can hardly be explained without reference to the doings of *active agents*.

Results
Place
The first empirical section of the thesis deals with the importance of place. The expression 'to know one's place' can be given several meanings. It could refer to a subordinated place in a social hierarchy, but it could also be given the meaning of knowing where you belong or where you want to go when you create your own future. Due to territorial stigmatization, there is a spatial significance of social class and otherization as place becomes part of what defines identity.

In chapter 4 the *material* foundation of place is approached. This dimension is articulated by informants as they talk about an involuntary place and by their references to place as characterized by family situations influenced by relative poverty.

In chapter 5 analysis of how informants perceive their habitat emphasizes the neighbourhood as a place best described as a *home district*, 'hembygd'. It is evident that place and identity are linked by identification. Identification is strengthened by positive experiences of the polycultural quality of this particular place. It is somewhat weakened by feelings of the area as being an insecure place. It is also weakened by a sense of the place being incongruent and 'mish-mash'.

This brings us to chapter 6 where the negative impact of others' perception of the underprivileged suburb is exposed. *Ambivalent emotions* are common among the informants due to the incongruity between, on the one hand, positive sense of place, associated with their childhood home area and, on the other hand, the way it is looked upon by others. Made apparent in the study are structures of *social class and otherization* of *all* people associated with a place coupled with immigrant background and lower class status. In summary, the two categories of class and ethnicity get empirically intertwined and geographically placed. The concept of place has therefore been helpful to an intersectional understanding of the underprivileged suburb. Thus, the study has contributed to a deeper understanding of hindering structuring conditions associated with place, an important prerequisite to the question of how barriers are overcome. Agency has been supported by positive *sense of place* founded in a community among young people in the neighbourhood. A *polycultural experience* was also seen by the informants as a strengthening specific form of cultural capital, although not always accepted by society at large as symbolic capital.

Agency

The second empirical section of the dissertation deals more specifically with agency and what supported individuals' properties and powers that made it possible for them to create a future that included university studies.

In chapter 8 the foundation for this section is laid by searching for important conditions from the *life story* of one of the informants. These aspects are developed in the following chapters (what is done in critical realistic terminology is 'retroducing' underlying explanations, i.e. trying to identify the mechanisms capable of producing these aspects).

CHAPTER 9 focuses on the relationship between *groups* and agency. It is, of course, negative to identity formation when migratory background becomes grounds for otherization. On the other hand, results indicate that ethnic background by identification can be a factor that helps the capacity for agency to be realized. The multicultural background also generates a specific form of cultural capital, which could well be a future resource in an increasingly globalized labour market. Informants had been active in generating groups positive to education within their schools, and these groups in turn had a positive effect on keeping up their high standards of achievement.

In chapter 10 the mindset supporting study and aspirations to higher education is seen as socially influenced mainly by *family*. The correlation between parents with high education and students' high grades is well-established. Therefore it is an interesting result how families with low education had had a positive effect on their children's interest in keeping on with their studies and achieving high performance. The informants had valued their parents' taking an interest in learning and providing an encouraging family *atmosphere*, rather than demanding performance and results. The parents had also, although lacking in formal education, been role models through *traits* such as endurance and high work ethics. Some informants with migratory background gave importance to push factors deriving from experiences in their country of origin, such as inequality based on gender, and to the fact that parents had been denied their own right to further education.

In chapter 11 an analysis is made of the informants' retrospective thoughts about the future they perceived during their school years. Their *goals* had not been particularly cued to outside motivation and specific ends. Rather, they were characterized by self-worth, social security and perceived future freedom of choice. It was not unusual that goals were of a social character, to some extent fuelled by experiences of social class.

Encountering the educational system
The third and last empirical section deals with experiences of encountering the educational system.

In chapter 13 about school effects in these low income area schools, it is evident that the informants had seen many of their fellow school friends not attaining good grades and thus failing to continue to further studies. From the standpoint of equity this can be seen as a negative school effect. The informants had stayed in their home district schools. A positive factor contributing to this decision is that they experienced these schools as a nonalienating, culturally inclusive environment, as having an inclusive institutional habitus. Teachers' commitment to their students and to learning had been of critical importance for some informants. It is evident that *commitment had a formative significance for students' concerns*. The students' own agency, rather than formal compensatory guidance by student counsellors, had enabled them to acquire the information necessary to access higher education.

In chapter 14 the informants' encounters with studies at university level are best described as their entering a new social *field*. The meeting with university studies revealed to the students that they did not lack in the knowledge to manage their

studies. But their background in the marginalized suburb made them feel that they had entered a different social field, and one that initially made them somewhat doubt their own properties and powers. They experienced *university as a very 'Swedish' place*, which made their upbringing in an increasingly 'Swedish-scarce' background become significant. As a result, many of the informants gave witness to strong groupings of students according to whether the group came from an immigrant suburb background or not. Differences in culture were manifested in the way people talked about different subjects and in what they found to laugh about.

Conclusions and policy implications

This study has school policy implications. Even though it gives a picture of young people who succeed with their studies from a starting point in an underprivileged suburb, the picture also exposes a background of more negative circumstances related to place. A segregated city appears in the background with a non-equivalent school system where many students do not get to participate in the meritocratically demanding city of knowledge. Negative area effects seem to become school effects that undermine aspirations at many levels. However, several positive factors emerged from this study. The importance of place to identity suggests that a higher awareness of this condition in teachers' everyday work can be of importance to understanding and influencing students' concerns. Since emotions play a critical role in forming students' enduring practices and goals, this is of importance in making studies relevant to what students care about. Since the study revealed the importance of an inclusive institutional habitus, avoiding praxis of otherization is of paramount importance. In the family–school relationship the significance of a supportive family atmosphere directed to learning rather than to achievement can be stressed. Groups in schools with the potential of being compensatory in respect to barriers of education can be actively supported. On the other hand, at university level, groupings based on social, cultural or ethnic divisions can be questioned as narrowing rather than widening participation.

At first glance, contextual factors might seem to be 'non-school' factors. Nonetheless, this study suggests that without paying pedagogical attention to the importance of contextual factors associated with students' varied backgrounds and placed experiences, it is only with great difficulty that a school relevant to students' concerns can be achieved. Whilst discussing the problems of segregation, it is important to see underprivileged areas as places that also symbolize potential, home

districts, pride and solidarity. This makes it important for society at large not to miss out on the contribution that people with these experiences have to offer.

Looking at Gothenburg as a city of knowledge from an underprivileged suburban point of view stresses that equality of opportunity is at risk of getting undermined by a lack of equality of conditions. This is contrary to the intentions of central policy documents. In Gothenburg, with its high concentration of educational possibilities, this paradoxical relationship is obvious. It seems rather that the city of knowledge can be described as a city with city walls. Today there are no physical city walls that keep people out; instead, there are social barriers that are just as hard for the individual to get past and that make demands on the educational system's compensatory role. These educational barriers are large, multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing. The problem is not just to be understood as an assortment of possibilities that is available. It should also be understood as the extent to which students from different backgrounds can develop an identity that allows space for higher education to be sought after and seen as worth the effort.

On the basis of unequivalence in area-based school results, as well as the narratives of the informants on what happened to many of their fellow schoolmates who dropped out along the journey to higher education, a school development undertaking is required. This mission needs to target the goal that all schools, regardless of area, should be good schools. An empirical result of the study is that teachers' agency, also taking the form of personal and social commitment, is of critical importance to students' concerns. This suggests a long-term process of supporting such qualities by drawing on both scientific research and proven experience within the organization. To explicitly target agency, this school development process could preferably be achieved through a systematic process that shares experience by making it visible *as well as* challenging it through scientific research that is reviewed in a collegial context before it is applied. This school development venture ought to be directed to the question of social inclusion and how positive aspects of the marginalized suburb can also be made to play a positive part in the process of learning. Many actors, not only school institutions, can play a more active role in guiding students to a place in the city of knowledge.

To conclude, a greater awareness of contextual differences, the importance of place and of identity work are starting points in addressing issues of social inclusion and equity in education. The interviews leave a lasting impression that the journey from a marginalized periphery to higher education is an emotional one. In searching for mechanisms, the study contributes by specifying the conditions that has made

agency possible. The underprivileged suburb is not only marginalized spatially on a horizontal plane. It is vertically so, looked at from a social point of view. *The foremost result is confirmation that young people have to deal with how their background in the marginalized suburb is perceived.* This is an identity-related question that requires emotional work. To fully understand the barrier of education that stopped so many of their fellow schoolmates, it is necessary to ascribe importance to agency and to personal properties and powers, as made known by the young people that so generously contributed to this study by sharing their experiences. It is important to notice what has supported agency, but in order to address social inclusion it is simultaneously essential to understand agency and freedom of choice as structurally conditioned by class, otherization and place, where emotions play a major role understood as mediating mechanisms. We are all in need of a socially inclusive school that can be a transformative force realizing the goal of success for all students. Segregation as well as social imbalance in recruitment at different levels of the school system is part of the larger question of equality. Schools cannot solve these larger societal questions by themselves. But what could be expected of schools, at all levels of the educational system, is that on good grounds, regardless of the point of origin, they can ensure that they are perceived as relevant and inclusive.