



Exploring young people's experiences of race, gender and socioeconomic status in relation to everyday challenges: A focus group study

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Abstract

Reports indicate a decrease in youth mental health in Sweden but at the same time research suggests that what is interpreted as mental ill-health could be considered everyday challenges by young people themselves. The distribution of mental health and illness among young people is uneven based on inequities related to factors such as race, gender and socioeconomic status. Sweden in particular is a country with large socioeconomic inequities in youth mental health and in school results, compared to other European countries. The aim of this study was to explore young people's experiences of the role of race, gender and socioeconomic status in relation to everyday challenges. Sixty-five young people aged 13–15 years old were recruited by student health services and participated in focus group discussions at schools in the southernmost part of Sweden. Data were analysed by secondary analysis with deductive qualitative content analysis using Ecosocial theory of disease distribution as theoretical framework. The analysis resulted in one main theme; Navigating inequities to gain and keep social status, with three underlying themes; Guided by social norms, Negative impact in everyday life and Importance of family influence. Participants were aware

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and critical of norms and expectations related to race, gender and socioeconomic status. Experiences of prejudice and unfairness was both own lived experiences by the participants as well as observed through friends and classmates. Young people spontaneously identify everyday challenges related to race, gender and socioeconomic status, even when not asked directly about these issues. Conforming to sexist, racist and classist, expectations is a way to lose and gain status in a school setting. Many of the inequities discussed related to socioeconomic status and the direct consequences of having or not having money. Young people's everyday experience of inequities is important to consider in youth mental health promotion aiming to tackle health inequities. Further research is needed on those experiences and how this affects mental health.

KEYWORDS

everyday challenges, mental health equity, qualitative secondary analysis, youth mental health

BACKGROUND

Globally, mental health problems are among the leading cause of illness among young people (World Health Organization, 2020). In Sweden, a majority of young people report good mental health and well-being, but the distribution between different groups is not equal. A similar pattern of inequities as observed in health in general can also be seen in youth mental health. Girls, young people of gender and/or sexual minorities, young people from families with lower socioeconomic status and young people with migrant background, report lower levels of mental health and well-being compared to other groups (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2019).

Previous research shows difference in youth mental health depending on migration status, and young people of immigrant background report higher prevalence of mental health problems compared to young people of Swedish background, also after controlling for socioeconomic status and gender (Kim et al., 2020). A study by Mittendorfer-Rutz et al. (2019) indicates that unaccompanied minors in Sweden had a suicide rate that was eight times higher than young people in the host population. Factors explaining the higher rates of mental health problems among people with migrant background includes migration trauma, changes in family structures and intragenerational conflicts due to the migration process (Kirmayer et al., 2011), as well as discrimination and socioeconomic factors (Missinne & Bracke, 2012).

Boys generally report higher levels of mental health compared to girls. In Sweden, a majority of 15-year-olds report good mental well-being, but there is a gender gap with 66% of girls compared to 85% of boys reporting good mental well-being (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2019). Girls also report higher rates of psychosomatic symptoms compared to boys, globally as well as

in Sweden (World Health Organization, 2020). Furthermore, boys rate their self-efficacy higher than girls, with 87 per cent of the boys and 81 per cent of the girls report that they always or often can find solutions to their problems (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2019), which could contribute to boys' better mental health status. However, even though boys report better mental health than girls, boys at the same time account for 55 per cent of child suicides in Sweden. The gender gap among child suicides is still smaller than in other countries, for example, the USA (Junuzovic et al., 2022). Furthermore, recent studies have found that the gender gap in youth mental well-being and life satisfaction, favouring boys, is larger in more gender equal countries compared to less gender equal countries (Campbell et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022). Possible explanations for this paradox that have been discussed are the double roles of girls in more gender equal societies, with expectations on the girls to both enter into the previously male arenas of economics and politics, and conform to traditional femininity, as well as more social comparisons between boys and girls, which might shed light on discrimination affecting girls (Campbell et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022).

The pattern of socioeconomic inequities in self-rated health is similar among girls and boys. Among girls from low-affluence families, 30% report good health, compared to 50% among girls from high-affluence families. A similar difference is seen among boys, where 40% of boys from low-affluence families and 58% of boys from high-affluence families report good health (World Health Organization, 2020). Global research also shows that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged families have a two- to three-fold higher risk of developing mental health problems, compared to those with families of higher socioeconomic position, also in high-income countries (Reiss, 2013; Weinberg et al., 2019). According to the World Health Organization (2020), Sweden has among the largest socioeconomic inequities in youth self-rated health in Europe. The report *Equity in school education in Europe* (Eurydice, 2020) shows a similar pattern related to school results, with Sweden having a larger socioeconomic gap in school results compared to the European average.

There are many theories aiming to explain the unjust distribution of health and illness as well as the health implications of being subjected to oppression and poverty. Minority stress theory concerns how being a minority and being subjected to oppression, such as racism or queerphobia, results in constant stress that affects mental and physical health (Meyer, 2003). This is also considered in the ecosocial theory of disease distribution, which concerns how disease and health is distributed in the population by combining a biological and a psychosocial perspective (Krieger, 2001). Experiences of discrimination and injustice are, according to this theory, embodied and thus affects the health of the individual. The theory also considers the time aspect by including a life-course and an inter-generational perspective. Ecosocial theory differ from theories that aims to explain health inequities using biomedical models or theories regarding differences in lifestyle factors. Ecosocial theory pays attention to the social system that creates discrimination and inequities as contributing to an uneven distribution of disease and health (Krieger, 2021). At the centre of the theory lies inequities related to socioeconomic status/class, gender/sexuality and race/ethnicity (Krieger, 2021).

Many studies of youth mental health are based on data from the 'Health Behavior among School-Aged Children' survey that is conducted every fourth year in several countries in Europe and North America, including Sweden. What is often highlighted in the public debate is that the survey shows a decline in mental health in the past decades, mostly related to higher rates of reported psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, stomach aches, sleep difficulties and bad mood (World Health Organization, 2020). However, a study by Wickström and Lindholm (2020) indicates that young people do not necessarily understand the psychosomatic symptoms reported

in the survey as deeper mental health problems, but as a part of everyday challenges related to relationships, school and the body.

Despite the vast knowledge of youth mental health inequities, there seems to be a lack of studies exploring young people's own experiences of inequities in everyday life and what role inequities play in relation to everyday challenges and mental health. There also seems to be a lack of literature about young people's everyday challenges and how young people themselves would define those challenges. In light of previous research (Wickström & Lindholm, 2020) indicating that young people might have a different interpretation of psychosomatic symptoms reported in surveys, compared to the interpretation made by researchers and the public, it is important to include young people in research regarding youth mental health. These findings also illuminate the importance of further exploring youth perceptions of the manifestation and effect of everyday challenges. Knowledge of young people's understanding of the role of race, gender and socioeconomic status in everyday life is also important in youth mental health equity promotion. This includes not only understandings of oppression but also privileges and un-reflected assumptions. The aim of this study was to explore young people's experiences of the role of race, gender and socioeconomic status in relation to everyday challenges.

METHOD

Design

The study is part of a larger project titled ALICE (Authentic Life-Intervention Challenges Everyday) aiming to develop a school-based mental health promoting intervention, with the focus on supporting young people in handling everyday challenges. The project has a participatory approach in that it involves young people as co-researchers in developing the intervention. Thus, young people have been involved in identifying everyday challenges and what is needed, as well as undesired, in an intervention. This study is conducted using qualitative secondary analysis (Heaton, 2008) on already conducted focus group discussions aiming to explore everyday challenges among young people. Doing a secondary analysis on qualitative data involves re-using already existing data from previous studies. While reading through the transcript to identify potential pathways for analysis, it was noticeable that the data set was rich with experiences regarding equity, inequities, oppression, socioeconomic status, race or gender. It was interesting that the participants were not asked about these issues, but the experiences were brought up spontaneously when asked about everyday challenges in general. This was not part of the aim when collecting the data, and doing a secondary analysis was a useful method to process and extract data that did not fit the original aim (Heaton, 2008). Performing a secondary analysis of previously conducted focus group discussions involves both limitation and strengths (Heaton, 2008). The first author was not part of the data collection which means some nuances, for instance, body language or group interaction that was not evident in the recorded interviews could have been missed. However, the second, third and fourth author were involved in planning and conducting the focus group discussions. The participants were not asked directly about equity, inequities, oppression, race, gender or socioeconomic status, which is a limitation since it could mean that important experiences were missed. However, the fact that the discussions that took part happened spontaneously, based only on the encouragement to discuss everyday challenges could also be a strength.

Data collection

Students from schools in the county of Scania in southern Sweden participated in focus group discussions in the original study. Focus groups are a commonly used method of data collection in youth research, as it is a good method to engage participants through group interaction and exploring the issue under study collectively rather than disclosing individual experiences (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). This method was chosen because the researchers were interested in the common understanding of young people's everyday challenges among young people themselves. Each focus group met at three occasions, with every occasion having a different topic. This study is based on the data from the first occasion, which consisted of the participants identifying and discussing what everyday challenges could be. Each focus group were asked to divide themselves into smaller groups to discuss and write down everyday challenges. No interview guide was used, instead, an opening question was asked in every group, namely 'What everyday challenges could people your age face?' and probing questions were posed in order for the participants to clarify and specify what they meant. They were then asked to present their discussions to the whole group and put their sticky notes on a white board. At the end of each focus group, the participants were asked to analyse and group the challenges that they thought to be similar into different themes by moving the sticky notes. This was also fruitful to trigger further discussion among participants in the whole group. The discussions were recorded, and photographs were taken of the participants' sticky notes on the white board. The transcribed recordings of the focus group discussions served as the data for this study. Everyday challenges discussed in one focus group were raised at succeeding focus groups with other participants, when aligning with or contradicting what the participants in those focus groups were discussing, to enhance the discussion. This also served somewhat as a member check of the material. Four researchers, in total, conducted the focus group discussions in pairs, with one of them taking the role of facilitator and the other the role of notetaker. Among the authors of this study, the second, third and fourth author were part of the data collection.

Study population

The participants were recruited with the help of the school nurse. Students with an interest in discussing everyday challenges were asked to participate. Exclusion criteria were not speaking Swedish and having severe mental ill health. The reason for the latter criterion was to limit the risk of participants disclosing information about their own health that they might have regretted later, and it was also part of the ethical approval for the study. Written informed consent were collected from the participants; for those under the age of 15, written informed consent from legal guardians was also collected.

In total, 65 young people participated in seven focus groups with between 4 and 11 participants in each group (see Table 1). The study participants were young people between 13 and 15 years old. The schools were located in areas with varying socioeconomic conditions, but with an emphasis on schools in areas with high socioeconomic status, measured by parental educational background. The participants were not asked about their own gender, race or socioeconomic status. Gender was assumed by the researchers conducting the focus groups, and demographic data on parental educational background and on students with a foreign background is presented on school level (see Table 1). The focus groups were conducted at the participants' schools during school hours, with a mix of students from grade 7 to grade 9, which meant that participants potentially knew some, but not all, of the other participants in the group.

TABLE 1 Demographics of participants and participating schools.

Focus group number	Number of participants			Proportion of parents with post-secondary education on school level ^a	Proportion of students with foreign background on school level ^b
		Boys	Girls		
School 1	10	7	3	25%	92%
School 2	10	2	8	31%	73%
School 3	8	6	2	48%	29%
School 4	10	2	8	56%	15%
School 5	11	0	11	71%	10%
School 6	4	1	3	60%	18%
School 7	12	2	10	74%	25%

^aDefined as parents with education past secondary school (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020).

^bDefined as the student and/or both parents being born outside of Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020).

Data analysis

The focus group discussions had been transcribed verbatim. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. This method was chosen as it is an appropriate method to explore experiences and it also allows for searching for a variation in the data (Graneheim et al., 2017; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). First, a deductive approach was applied to select the unit of analysis, using the ecosocial theory of disease distribution. The transcripts were read through, and data concerning race, gender and socioeconomic status, was identified and selected as the unit of analysis. There was a variation between the different focus groups in how much they discussed race, gender and socioeconomic status; hence, some focus groups provided a lot of data, while some provided less data. The selected unit of analysis was then analysed using an inductive approach to explore young people's experiences of race, gender and socioeconomic status, in relation to everyday challenges. The unit of the analysis was read through several times in order to understand the concept and find variations within the text. Notes were taken of preliminary thoughts and ideas for analysis.

Once the unit of analysis had been selected, the next step of the analysis was to identify meaning units and condensing the data. The purpose of condensing the data was to shorten and find the core of words, sentences and paragraphs that shared the same content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This made the data more manageable when proceeding with the analysis. Some of the data material was considered already condensed, while other parts were condensed by the first author. The division of the data into meaning units, and condensation when needed, was followed by labelling the meaning units with codes. The codes were kept closed to the data, aiming to capture how the participants discussed the issues. When the entire material was coded, the codes were read through and sorted into sub-themes based on similarities and differences between the codes. The sub-themes were subsequently sorted into themes and finally one main theme; see Table 2. The sorting of codes and creation of themes were a back-and-forth process with sub-themes and themes being created and re-created until the analysis was considered capturing the essence of participants' discussion. The coding was done by the first author and the codes, sub-themes and themes were also discussed with the co-authors. The second, third and fourth author have done other analyses of the material, while the second author was not familiar with the material and could provide an outside perspective. The full transcripts and the unit of analysis was read through several times in the last stages of the process to ensure that the analysis

TABLE 2 Examples of steps in the analysis.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
No, you should not [have to accept racism], but it still happens	—	Should not have to stand racism	Questioning unjust expectations	Guided by social norms
Let us say that I'm Christian and I want to change [gender], then it's not, maybe my parents think it's not acceptable since it's not a part of the religion.	If I'm Christian and want to change gender my parent's might not accept it	Maybe not accepted to be trans when Christian	Dealing with parents' opinions	Importance of family influence
And if you do not [wear designer clothes] it's easy to be left out	—	Left out if not wearing the right clothes	Being left out	Negative impact in everyday life

TABLE 3 Main theme, themes and sub-themes.

Main theme	Navigating inequities to gain and keep social status			
Themes	Guided by social norms	Negative impact in everyday life	Importance of family influence	
Sub-themes	Money equalling social status	Experiencing prejudice	Family affluence affecting	
	Requirements being sexist	Causing insecurity	Dealing with parents' opinions	
	Having a 'different' background	Being left out	Feeling pressure for a good future	
	Questioning unjust expectations			

was capturing the voices of the participants. The first author also went back to notes being taken regarding initial thoughts and observations of the data.

RESULTS

The analysis resulted in one main theme: *Navigating inequities to gain and keep social status*, with three underlying themes. The themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 3.

Guided by social norms

The theme was built up by four sub-themes, *Money equalling social status*, *Requirements being sexist*, *Having a 'different' background* and *Questioning unjust expectations*. The participants were aware and reflecting on how factors such as race, gender and socioeconomics impacted their

lives and the lives of others. They expressed awareness of which norms and expectations they had to navigate in order to gain and keep social status. The impact of expectations related to race, gender and socioeconomics was often expressed in terms of stress or pressure. Social norms and expectations guided the participants' behaviour and reasoning in everyday life, but at the same time they were critical of them, expressing that they should not have to conform themselves to these norms and expectations.

Complying with the social norms, for instance, by having money, could give young people status among their peers, as discussed in the sub-theme *Money equalling social status*. The main experience discussed was having less money than other people at school, with only a few expressing that they had more money than someone else. Having money was described to be an important marker for social status, making some people better than others. This was expressed by two participants discussing the pressure relating to money:

Girl 1: 'Here, [where we live] it is a lot of baiting about money, you should always be the best and be better than everyone else, that is something that we thought about'.

Interviewer: 'Could you develop a bit about this baiting, how can you experience that at your age?'

Girl 2: 'It's a lot of competitions, like who has the most expensive clothes and stuff like that'. (School 5)

The opposite, not being able to afford certain things, could signal low status. It was described as a stressful experience, not only to be able to afford to live up the expected lifestyle ideals, but also to be seen as less than others. One of the participants discussed how having money is necessary in order to keep up with expectations at their school:

'How you should be and look like, what stuff you're supposed to have, which is linked to money. If you don't have the newest cellphone, you're considered poor, or if you don't have designer clothes, don't have a lot of money, don't live in a fancy neighborhood and stuff like that'. (Boy, School 4).

Some of the everyday expectations experienced were considered gendered and sexist by the participants, as expressed within the sub-theme *Requirements being sexist*, where participants discussed how social expectations were different for boys and girls. The expectations to be met in everyday life were seen as conforming to traditional gender roles, with girls considered being more concerned with their looks than boys. Still, the importance of designer clothes was also discussed in terms of being more of a burden for boys, while boys were at the same time described as being more free to wear whatever, and look however, they wanted, as expressed by some participants:

Girl 1: 'Guys can wear sweats, but us girls, make-up, hair, jeans, well everything. We have to, "I have to have a body". Guys don't think about the body, it's more girls'.

Boy 1: 'I can agree with that'.

Boys 2: 'I can put on anything, then I go to school'. (School 1)

Another equity-related aspect affecting everyday challenges were described as 'background'. Social factors such as race, culture, religion, language and nationality, were all discussed under the label of 'background'. "Background" was often highlighted in the terms of 'different background', expressing that it deviated from the norm, within the sub-theme of *Having a 'different'*

background. The normative assumptions related to ‘background’ became visible by what was labelled as ‘different’. Examples of what was deemed different in the discussion among participants were: not being white, not being Swedish or not being a secular Christian. This terminology was used both to describe others, in terms of others having a different background, and to describe oneself as having a different background. Being one of those seen as having a ‘different’ background meant not being able to go unnoticed, as described by one participant talking about their friend who did not celebrate Christmas:

‘It was like, people didn’t think it was weird but still said “that’s so weird, isn’t it super weird to not celebrate Christmas like everyone else, what do you do on Christmas Eve?”. And she didn’t like hearing this, it became a big deal in school’.

(Girl, School 6)

Within the sub-theme Questioning unjust expectations, the participants reflected on social norms and how they provide different opportunities for different people. This was often discussed in a spirit of solidarity for others, such as awareness of the fact that the pressure to wear expensive clothes or to engage in expensive activities would hit some peers, who could not afford these things, harder. Some also expressed that they should not have to suffer negative consequences because of their socioeconomic position or race, while being aware that this still happened. Participants could relate to such unfairness through observing friends as well as through their own experiences of feeling that others were more privileged.

In addition to identifying specific social norms and being aware of related injustice, the participants were critical of these social norms and of the prejudice they implied. Despite expressing some compliance with normative expectations, they were also critical of the normative expectations related to, for instance, gender and race, and the impact those expectations had in their everyday life. Moreover, participants voiced criticism on how adults, for instance, school staff, imposed normative expectations on them, as expressed by one participant:

‘We have cafeteria hosts at school, who are supposed to clean up after others and stuff like that. And then she, the same teacher, says “I understand if the guys don’t want to clean, but you girls have to clean since you’re going to be mothers” and such... And that makes us late for class’. (Girl, School 1).

Although aware and critical of being guided by social norms, participants attempted to navigate these norms and expectations to the best of their ability, as they were also aware of the consequences of not fitting in according to the normative expectations.

Negative impact in everyday life

This theme consists of three sub-themes, *Experiencing prejudice*, *Being left out* and *Causing insecurity*. Participants were highly aware of negative impact of not being able to navigate the structural norms related to race, gender and socioeconomics in everyday life. The negative impact experienced could be both direct and outspoken, as well as more indirect and subtle.

In the sub-theme *Experiencing prejudice*, participants shared experiences of, for instance, racism, classism, sexism and homophobia in everyday situations. These experiences included words not only related to race or sexual identity being used as bad words in general but also slurs

directed at individuals. One participant shared their experience of racism in school and how they perceived it as being less frequent in higher grades:

And it's the same with race and stuff, that you often hear. Well, not often since we've outgrown it by now. Let's say that if you have dark skin, you are worth less because those with dark skin are a minority. More people are white.

(Boy, School 6)

Apart from prejudice, most of the negative impacts of inequities and oppression in everyday life that the participants experienced and discussed were subtle and indirect. This was illustrated in the sub-theme *Being left out* where participants expressed feelings of becoming an outsider if not complying with social norms and expectations. One aspect discussed is not having enough money, which could mean not being able to join friends at different activities. Some participants discussed how not being able to join expensive activities could lead to exclusion from the friend group, and to being forgotten and no longer invited by the friends. Being included among peers was discussed as important and something participants were willing to make sacrifices to achieve. One participant illustrated this describing how they sometimes skipped school lunch to be with friends, even if this affected school performance:

Like school lunch, maybe there's a dish that you would have eaten but nobody else wants to eat it. So, they go to McDonald's or Burger King and you don't want to sit by yourself in the cafeteria, so you join them, but you don't have any money for it. So, you just sit there and skip lunch to be with your friends. And that affects you at school and stuff.

(Boy, School 3)

Another negative effect, in everyday life, of structures relating to socioeconomics, race and gender is described in the sub-theme *Causing insecurity*. Constant comparison with peers contributed to these feelings of insecurity and trying to fit in with the social norms was also seen as a result of insecurity. Not complying with social norms, or the risk of others perceiving them as non-conforming to the expectations related to race, gender and socioeconomics, was described as scary. The participants discussed how standing out too much will lead to people judging them. The fear of being judged could result in people not being able to be themselves, as expressed by one participant taking the example of people perhaps not being able to be open about being gay in a homophobic environment:

... many uses 'gay' as a slur and people might, people feel bad because of that and don't dare to come out. You don't want to stand out from the crowd, because there will always be someone judging you and commenting on it.

(Boy, School 4)

The participants shared experiences of negative impact related to inequities and stated that avoiding these negative impacts by navigating the social norms was not always possible. Many of the experiences surrounded around school and friends, but there were also experiences of negative impact due to adults, such as school staff or family members.

Importance of family influence

The theme is built up by three sub-themes, *Family affluence affecting*, *Dealing with parents' opinions* and *Feeling pressure for a good future*. The influence of family was yet another aspect that had to be considered by the participants as they navigated social norms. Family and parents had a big influence on the participants' experiences related to race, gender and socioeconomics, both in a sense that parental background was experienced as inherited and in the way the opinions and values of parents affected the participants.

The sub-theme *Family affluence affecting* concerns both having a family with high affluence and with low affluence. The level of family affluence was discussed in relation to affluence of friends or classmates, rather than in relation to a larger societal context. Comparing the financial situation of their own family with that of the family of friends was described as a part of everyday life and this was causing stress. Two participants discussed examples of how they compared their own families to the families of others:

Girl 1: 'Personal baiting... We thought about..., what did we think about?'

Girl 2: 'Yeah, for example, "my friend has a really big house that I don't have' or 'my friend's mom has a really nice new car, my mom doesn't have that"' (School 6)

Family socioeconomic status was considered directly to the young person's future socioeconomic status. Participants discussed how coming from a poor background could lead to mental illness and problems in the future. Certain factors, such as having divorced parent, were perceived as increasing the risk of financial problems and related effects.

In the sub-theme *Dealing with parents' opinions*, participants discussed how they dealt with parents having different opinions or values than themselves. These differences of opinions were described as relating both to the 'background' of the parent and to prejudice about other groups. The background of parents was discussed as influencing how strict parents were in their approach to their children. 'Background' was understood to relate to national, ethnical and religious background of parents, often talked about, and labelled as, 'different background' when discussing parents not born in Sweden, and/or religious parents. Parents could also voice prejudice, which influenced younger siblings and was difficult to deal with. One participant reflected on how the racist opinions of their father affected their family reputation in a negative way.

'My dad can also, not like that, but my dad can also be a bit condescending to people from other countries, like Muslims, and my little brother passes this on. And that makes us look bad...' (Girl, School 6).

The sub-theme *Feeling pressure for a good future* consists of feelings and perceptions of stress from the family, to reach what is seen as a 'good' future. Having the 'right' education or the 'right' job was seen as desirable, the 'right' job being understood as a career requiring higher education or with a high salary in order to be of high status. The pressure felt relating to the future of the participants was considered coming from their families, but they themselves also agreed that making the right choices in order to reach a good future was important. Three participants used examples of different professions to illustrate what they viewed as an undesirable future:

Boy 1: You have to think about your future.

Boy 2: I don't think anyone here wants to work at Lidl [a discount supermarket].

Boy 3: Working at Lidl is better than cleaning.

Boy 2: Those who clean make more money than those working at Lidl. (School 1)

Participants also discussed experiences of feeling the need to carry on the family reputation and be able to take care of their parents in the future. Both hopes and worries about the future were expressed in terms of stress. Feeling stressed when thinking about the future was discussed in relation to parental pressure to do well in school now, in order reach a status position, that is, a high education, a high salary and a desirable profession, in the future.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore young people's experiences of race, gender and socioeconomic status in relation to everyday challenges. Among the participants, there was an awareness of social norms and inequities which they attempted to navigate. This awareness was both due to personal experiences and to observations of how others received privileges or punishments due to their race, gender or what they could afford. Solidarity with others was expressed and participants discussed that no one should have to endure inequities, but that it still happened. Participants' experiences related to race, gender and socioeconomic status were often discussed not separately but conjointly. For instances, gaining or losing social status due to the right or wrong clothes was related not only to socioeconomics and being able to afford what was right, but also to gender, with a clear distinction of right or wrong between girls and boys respectively.

Overall, the navigation of factors relating to inequities and oppression was guided by social norms and expectations in the everyday life of the participants. Not living up to these social norms and expectations, due to oneself or one's family background, resulted in negative consequences. The participants used terminology referring to background, and different backgrounds, when referring to someone's race, ethnicity, religion, race, nationality or migration experience. What they deemed 'different' highlighted what was seen as 'normal', with everyone not being white, secular Christian and identifying as Swedish being labelled as different. The choice of terminology in these segments of the data, which the authors identified as relating to race, was not surprising in a Swedish setting. Talking about background and 'different' background aligns with the Swedish discourse about race, ethnicity, religion, nationality and migration experiences. Labelling certain groups of people as 'different' points to the othering of these groups and is also a clear indicator of the distribution of power between groups, regarding who is considered the norm and who is considered the other.

Perspectives of race, gender and socioeconomics were all present in the data, but socioeconomics was the dominating equity perspective recurring in the focus group discussions. Socioeconomic status is commonly used background variable in health research, which is often defined by income or education level. For children, socioeconomic status is often measured by different combinations of parental socioeconomic status, such as parental income and education level (Statistics Sweden, 2021). In this study, participants discuss their subjective understanding of their socioeconomic position and they often expressed socioeconomic status in very direct terms, having money or not. Being, or not, being able to afford was something that had a big impact on the participants everyday life. This is supported by the findings of Ahlborg et al. (2017) who found that subjective measures of socioeconomic status had a bigger impact on health inequalities than objective measures. For the participants, their background, current position and their hopes and fears about the future both affect and are being affected by the losing and gaining of

social status. This aligns with previous research regarding social status and health which suggests that self-perceived low social status (Plenty & Mood, 2016) and status-related shame (Bosma, Brandts, et al., 2014) influence health and can contribute to explain the socioeconomic gradient in health (Bosma, Simons, et al., 2014; Plenty & Mood, 2016; Wilkinson, 1999).

Considering social status from a youth perspective, Joffer et al. (2020) found that, similarly to this study, young people were highly aware of their own status and social factors such as gender, ethnicity, age and parent's financial situation influenced status, with boys, white people, older adolescents and those whose parent's had money having a higher position in the social hierarchy. Girls also compared themselves to other girls to a greater extent than the boys compared themselves to other boys (Joffer et al., 2020). The gender difference in comparing yourself when it comes to appearance and clothes was also experienced by participants in this study, although a bit inconclusive. On one hand, girls were considered to care more about their appearance, but on the other hand, wearing the 'right' designer label was considered more important for boys.

The result of this study shows that young people experience structural inequities in everyday life which according to ecosocial theory of disease distribution affect health. According to Krieger (Krieger, 2021), the negative health consequences of this embodiment can be seen from a life course and from an intergenerational perspective. This ties in with this study, where the parental socioeconomic status, culture and race affected the social status of the child in the present, and would, or so the participants assumed, also affect their future. Furthermore, the participants expressed awareness of the negative effects of inequities not only related to race, gender and socioeconomics on a structural level, but also referred to lived experiences, by themselves and their peers, of oppression. They discussed this in terms of a stressor in everyday life, which could be argued to contribute to the embodiment of injustice. This stress was particularly present in the discussions when it came to financial and socioeconomic status. This result is also supported by previous research, such as a study by Bosma, Brandts, et al. (2014) who found that childhood poverty was associated with feelings of shame in adults and that childhood poverty had a stronger effect on the feeling of shame in adulthood than low socioeconomic status as an adult.

Methodological considerations

The first author has previous experience of working with equity and social justice issues which meant some preunderstanding which could have influenced the analysis. This was balanced, however, by discussions and input from co-authors, who had experience with qualitative design and studies about youth health.

Since this study was a secondary analysis performed on already collected data, it was not possible to collect background information about the participants that might have been valuable in interpreting the results. More girls and students from school areas with good socioeconomic conditions participated in the focus groups, which could have affected the results. Race of the participants was not collected. The skewed sample, and not knowing the race of the participants, could be a limitation for the study. However, collecting information about race from individuals is not common practice in Sweden and could be considered difficult due to the lack of generally accepted and understood terminology. The fact that race is considered a sensitive topic is being criticized and problematized by activists and scholars who argue that the policy is part of a colour-blind antiracism discourse that contributes to deny or disguise racism (Wikström & Hübinette, 2021). This could be problematic when studying issues related to inequities and

racism and is a limitation to the present and similar studies. Moreover, the fact that the gender of the participants was assumed and not asked of the participants is a further weakness, as some participants may not identify with the assumed gender. However, the purpose of using the focus group discussion method was to explore general attitudes, experiences and acceptance in the discussions and not the experiences of the individuals. Demographic data on school level could contribute to the interpretation of the results on group level.

Qualitative content analysis was considered an appropriate method of analysis for this study as it focuses on what the participants are saying, aiming aims to stay close to the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The codes were kept closed to the way the participants discussed but still with a certain level of interpretation, while the sub-themes, themes and main theme had a higher level of interpretation and abstraction (Lindgren et al., 2020). With qualitative content analysis, the focus was not *how* the participants spoke of the issues but *what* they had to say. Further, the aim was both to find what the text said, the manifest content and what it talked about, the latent content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Describing the process of content analysis is of importance to enable an evaluation of trustworthiness. Elo et al. (2014) discusses trustworthiness in the different stages of qualitative content analysis, preparation, organization and reporting. Preparation involves not only data collection but also choosing the unit of analysis. This study selected the unit of analysis using a deductively, through a theoretical framework. The advantages of this procedure, from a trustworthiness perspective, could be that the process of selecting the unit of analysis is more transparent and clearer to the reader. A disadvantage could be that potential data that would fit the aim but not the theory is disregarded. Some parts of the focus group discussions concerned data that could be related to a broad definition of equity, for example, discussions about age or disability but was excluded as it did not fit the aim of this study. Presenting the organization phase in a clear way could be challenging as it is not a straightforward process but rather a back-and-forth process. However, this back-and-forth process is necessary for the analysis and a description of the steps can still be provided. The process of data organization also included going back to the transcripts of the focus group discussions to ensure that the analysis captured what was said and talked about by the participants. This step of the analysis also included discussing the codes, sub-themes and themes with all the authors. A way of ensuring trustworthiness in reporting of the results is to show the participants' voices by including quotations from the focus groups.

CONCLUSION

The young people in this study identified challenges related to race, gender and socioeconomics in their everyday life, even when not asked specifically about this but spontaneously in discussions of everyday challenges in general. Conforming or not conforming to racist, sexist and classist, expectations was a way to lose and gain status in a school setting. The perspective of inequity was more present than an equity perspective, with socioeconomic inequities being the dominating inequity experience. Inequities due to socioeconomics is discussed in direct terms, having money or not, which also results in direct consequences, such as not being able to join friends for activities due to cost. These experiences align with ecosocial theory of disease distribution as the effects of injustice on a concrete level affect people's life. This is also important to consider in youth mental health promotion if the aim is to reduce health inequities. Further research is needed on young people's everyday experiences of equity and how inequities, with an emphasis on socioeconomic inequities, related to the result of this study, affect everyday challenges.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The results presented in this study are based on youth participation, and data material in the form of recordings or transcripts of focus group discussions cannot be made available for privacy reasons. In accordance with national legislation, the Swedish Ethical Review Authority does not allow the release of sensitive raw data to the general public. Excerpts from the focus group discussions have been translated and are a part of the results as quotations.

ETHICAL APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The young people and their legal guardians received information about the study, and about what participation would entail, before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and for participants under the age of 15 years, informed consent was also obtained from legal guardians. The study was conducted following the ethical principles set out in the Declaration of Helsinki and by the Swedish Ethics Review Board. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reg.no. 2019-06430/2020-04-07).

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