

Article

# Transracial Families, Race, and Whiteness in Sweden

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**Abstract:** In this article, we use the results from two studies, one on interracial relationship and the other on transnational adoption, to explore how notions of race and ethnicity shape family policies, family building and everyday life in Sweden. Transnational adoption and interracial marriage in Sweden have previously never been compared in research, even though they both are about transracial family formation. By bringing these two topics together in a critical race theory framework we got a deeper understanding of how transracial families are perceived and affected by societal beliefs and norms. The analysis revealed a somewhat contradictory and complex picture on the norms of family formation. The color-blind ideology that characterizes the Swedes' self-understanding, together with the privileged position of whiteness in relation to Swedishness, makes the attitude towards different forms of transracial families ambivalent and contradictory. Transracial children and their parents are perceived differently depending on their origin and degree of visible differences and non-whiteness, but also based on the historical and social context. Since family formation involves an active choice, the knowledge and discussion on how race and whiteness norms structure our thoughts and behavior are essential in today's multicultural Sweden.

**Keywords:** transracial families; race; whiteness; transnational adoptees; Sweden; interracial marriages

## 1. Introduction

Race and ethnicity, together with class and gender, are usually highlighted as important categories within humanist and social science research. These categories are often operationalized by researchers to better understand social inequalities and asymmetries of power. For example, the concepts are used to understand processes of inclusion and exclusion in societies, communities, organizations, families, and other social relationships based on an individual's or a group's physical appearance, origin, or cultural background. Within Swedish academia, the concepts of race and ethnicity gained traction with the introduction of postcolonial theory and perspectives, and the emergence of migration studies around the turn of the millennium. In particular, the research focus has been on how immigrant and minority groups have suffered discrimination and experience inequalities due to their background. Only in recent years has the white majority population become the research in Swedish academia, inspired by American and British critical race and whiteness studies. Within this new and emerging field of Swedish critical race and whiteness studies, Swedishness and whiteness have become analytical categories that are operationalized to problematize white norms and privileges. The idea of Swedishness and whiteness and the reality of the racialized segregation and stratification structures that exist in contemporary Swedish society have coalesced to the extent that it is difficult to inhabit the position of being a non-white Swede and be considered "fully Swedish" (Hübinette 2017).

In this article, we combine two studies, one on Swedish family policy concerning transnational adoption ([Jonsson Malm 2011](#)) and the other on Swedes' attitudes towards interracial dating, marriage and childbearing ([Osanami Törngren 2011](#)), to explore societal beliefs and norms surrounding transracial family formations in today's Sweden. Inspired by critical race and whiteness studies, we analyze the results from the two studies to be able to find common themes and parallels. Transnational adoption and interracial marriage are rarely compared with each other in Sweden, even though they are both about transracial family formations. The comparison of our results enables an analysis of how transracial families are perceived and defined differently in relation to the norms of family in Sweden. The comparison provides an opportunity to identify nuances that otherwise would be overlooked in a singular case study. At the beginning of this article, we contextualize the two studies by briefly introducing the racial and ethnic diversity of Sweden, and by placing Sweden in a broader international context. Thereafter we give a short presentation of the two studies and their respective results. The latter part of the article discusses and analyzes our research results in order to deepen the analysis on how transracial family formations are perceived in Sweden from a critical race and whiteness studies perspective.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Sweden—A Multiethnic and Multiracial Country

Except for five historical minority groups—the indigenous Samis, the Finns, the Tornedalians, the Jews and the Roma (Travellers)—Sweden was a rather ethnically and racially homogenous country compared to most other Western countries until the end of the 20th century. Sweden was rather a country of emigration until the 1950s when labor immigration to Sweden from other Nordic and European labor became prominent. Sweden today has transformed into a multiethnic and multiracial nation as a result of the non-European migration flows that started in the mid-1970s onwards, and increased in particular after the end of the Cold War, consisting mainly of refugees and their family members.

Today, Sweden is a country of immigration. Immigration from the non-Western world has increased steadily in the past decades, with 2015 being the highest ever recorded immigration year. In 2016, some 18 per cent of the 10 million residents of Sweden were born abroad. In total, 5 per cent of those born in Sweden had two foreign-born parents, while another 7 per cent were the children of one Sweden-born parent and one foreign-born parent (Statistics Sweden). As both the category of immigration and the country of origin of the immigrants have shifted, Sweden has faced different challenges concerning integration and discrimination.

With regards to the number of residents under 18 years of age in Sweden's three largest cities, the ethnic and racial diversity is evident and is on par with countries like the UK, France and the Netherlands. At the end of 2016, a total of 54 per cent, 49 per cent, and 36 per cent of all inhabitants in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö respectively had two parents who were born in Sweden, while 29 per cent, 35 per cent, and 47 per cent had a foreign background have foreign backgrounds (that is, either themselves or both of their parents were born abroad). In all three cities, around 17 per cent were born in Sweden, with one parent born in Sweden and one parent born outside Sweden ([Statistics Sweden 2017](#)). In 2015 a record high 163,000 asylum seekers arrived in Sweden whereof the majority received residency permit, which means that the racial and ethnic landscape of the country will continue to be affected in the coming future.

With the fast changing racial and ethnic landscape of Sweden, integration of the newly arrived and problems of discrimination and socioeconomic inequality faced by migrant groups are evident in Sweden. Swedish researchers have tried to explain and understand the increasing inequalities between the white majority and the non-white minority through the concepts of ethnicity and culture. However, during recent years voices have been raised claiming that ethnic and cultural differences are not sufficient to explain the levels of racial segregation and discrimination in Sweden (see e.g.,

Hübinette 2017; Hübinette and Wasniowski 2018; Osanami Törngren 2015). Inspired by critical race and whiteness studies in the English speaking countries, these scholars argue that it is not only the individuals' ethnicity and culture that matter but also how they are perceived racially and how visible phenotypical differences shape the definitions of Swedishness and non-Swedishness (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Kalonaityté et al. 2007; Khosravi 2006; Mattsson 2005; Runfors 2006). These scholars demonstrate in their studies that non-whites who grow up and live in Sweden are rarely seen and treated as being "fully Swedish" due to the strong legacy of equalizing Swedishness with whiteness.

## 2.2. Race, Ethnicity, Whiteness and Transracial Families

Race is a product of scientific thought that is culturally, socially, and historically determined. Up to the late 19th to the early 20th century, European researchers, including prominent Swedish scholars, were engaged in studies dividing human beings into different races. Initially, this was conducted, supposedly, without any racist implications. However, a racist ideology was introduced into the division of human "races" by names such as Arthur de Gobineau and others who promoted social Darwinism. Inspired by social Darwinism, cultural, social, and moral differences were explained by biological racial differences which entailed hierarchical ideas of superiority and inferiority. Swedish involvement in this development of the idea of race and so-called race science was substantial. In 1922, Sweden established the world's first state run and state funded race science institute. Hagerman (2006) has pointed out that through the dissemination of so-called scientific knowledge of race, ordinary Swedes were taught to be able to differentiate between the white Swedish majority population i.e., "the Nordic race", and those inhabitants that were deemed to be inferior and undesirable. During the first half of the 20th century, it was the Samis, the Finnish speakers, the Roma and the Jews who were often regarded to be non-Swedish and not fully white, therefore preventing further mixing with the majority Swedes was regarded as being in the national interest national interest (Hagerman 2006). The legacy of Sweden's racialized nation-building process during the last century even excluded representatives from historical minorities that today would pass as white such as the Finnish-speaking minority.

Interestingly enough, Sweden was also one of the first countries to dismiss the ideas of race science after World War Two and Swedish scholars were involved in the various declarations on race made by UNESCO in the 1950s. These declarations affirmed that there were no superior or inferior human races (Jacobsson 1999).

Even though the country was heavily involved in the development of race science, Swedes and Swedish society are reluctant to admit that racism and discrimination exist and ideas of race play a part still today in Sweden. Within the critical race and whiteness studies, this attitude towards race is known as color-blindness which Ruth Frankenberg has described as "a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not 'see', or, at any rate, not to acknowledge, race differences" (Frankenberg 1993, p. 142). While Bonilla-Silva (2010) sees color-blindness as a specific expression of racism which he calls color-blind racism, Lentin (2018) analyzes color-blindness as a reflection of a "not racism"-attitude within the context of an hyperindividualistic and ahistorical Western culture which is becoming increasingly blind to power asymmetries. David Theo Goldberg conceptualizes color-blindness as "antiracism" and defines; "Antiracism is to take a stand, instrumental and institutional, against a concept, a name, a category, a categorizing (Goldberg 2009, p. 10). The Swedish version of color-blindness is arguably closest to Goldberg's antiracism as Sweden also became the first country to abolish the concept of race in the beginning of the 2000s. This is similar to what Jan-Paul Brekke and Tordis Borchgrevink (Brekke and Borchgrevink 2007) write about the ambiguous categorization of people in Sweden according to skin color. They state, "[t]he sensible approach to the issue, which is also the official Swedish approach, is to consider color irrelevant to the appraisal of an individual" (Brekke and Borchgrevink 2007, p. 79). The authors suggest that Swedes generally do not consider skin color to be relevant or crucial to an individual's characteristics or value.

Generally speaking, Swedes understand themselves as being democratic, liberal, equal, tolerant and individualistic. Moreover, they highly value antiracism, gender equality, secularism and universalism. It is not only that Swedes understand themselves as such but also that they express and practice these values to a large extent (Johansson Heinö 2009). These core values, which are also seen as Swedish values, are reflected in the Swedish integration policy which is based on a color-blind ideology that revolves around the idea that everybody is equal regardless of his or her background (Schierup and Ålund 2010). The principles of equality, freedom of choice, and partnership—which correspond to the principles of liberal modernity in its Swedish version—have formed the basis for Swedish integration policy since 1975. The latest integration reform, made in 2009, states that the objectives of integration are equal rights, equal obligations and equal opportunities for all inhabitants of Sweden regardless of ethnic and cultural background (Johansson Heinö 2009). Access to the labor market is a central feature of Swedish integration policy, which derives from a strong belief that the labor market is color-blind and rational (Johansson Heinö 2009; Mattsson 2005; Rakar 2010). It is a paradox that color-blindness is so embedded in the integration policy of Sweden, considering that the country at the same time officially embraces multiculturalism. Swedish multiculturalism has for example centered around the idea of “positive” measures, that is providing minorities the right to state support rather than promoting “negative” measures that give minorities the right to exemptions from state intervention (Borevi 2013). However as Swedish multiculturalism is based on the idea that everybody should be able to participate in Swedish society and that all should be treated equally, multiculturalism can co-exist with Swedish color-blindness.

The antiracial attitudes and color-blindness have had such a deep impact on Sweden that the very concept of race has been erased completely from official language of public administrations. A parliamentary decision in 2001 to abolish the concept of race from public language was followed by the removal of the word “race (ras)” as the basis for discrimination in 2009 (Hübinette and Hyltén-Cavallius 2014). In 2014, the Swedish government announced that the last vestiges of the word race should be removed from all existing legislation in Sweden (Hambraeus 2014). Even in everyday language, the word is avoided, and the bulk of the antiracist movement in Sweden of today refuses to use the word race. Most Swedes associate the concept of race and racial groups with biology and not how the concept is used to describe a socially constructed category and groups of people who experience inequality. Even though the contemporary and postmodern way of understanding race is far from the understanding of the biological race, the term has such a negative connotation in Sweden that people are afraid to use it, fearing that it will be misunderstood or misused. Hübinette and Hyltén-Cavallius write:

Colorblindness in the Swedish contemporary context means that for many Swedes it is even difficult to utter the word “race” in everyday speech, and it is equally uncomfortable to talk about white and non-white Swedes. (Hübinette and Hyltén-Cavallius 2014, p. 30)

Despite this Swedish color-blind discourse which might well be the most extreme in the world, it is clear that the social reality and meaning of race—that is, the idea of race and stereotyping of, and prejudice against certain groups of people—lives on even in contemporary Sweden. In this article, we understand race in contemporary Sweden as a socially constructed idea evoked by perceived visible phenotypical differences. Race is not a biological reality but a social reality, because racism and discrimination based on the idea of race still prevail widely. Race as a social construct means that the meanings and categories of race are constructed in a specific context, and it varies according to place, society, and over time. Although race is a social construction and racial categories and understandings of race vary according to place, society, and over time, race is socially real for many people and “affect[s] their social life whether individual members of the races want it or not” (Bonilla-Silva 1997, p. 473). Race is a social reality because the lives of the people who are categorized as different according to their visible differences are manifested through discrimination and racism.

Ethnicity, which is the more preferred term in Sweden is defined in various ways, does not always capture the reasons of inequality and discrimination. Ethnicity is built on the notion of shared culture (e.g., [Cornell and Hartmann 2007](#); [Fenton 2003](#)). However, as [Cantle \(2005\)](#) argues, an ethnic difference may not explain a difference in culture, unless culture is treated and perceived as something fixed and essential to each ethnic group. Ethnicity can also be symbolic ([Gans 1979](#)) and people may pick and choose certain aspects of culture. Ethnicity should therefore be understood as an identification of cultural origin and heritage independent of if the individuals practice the culture or not. Many researchers and ordinary people alike tend to conflate the concepts of race and ethnicity. On a general level, the two concepts are distinct from each other as race is perceived to be visible while ethnicity is not always visible. Race is also often an ascribed category while ethnicity is often an acquired category by the individuals of a certain group.

To sum up, Sweden is an interesting case and context in relation to issues of race and whiteness as the country played an important role in the scientific construction of race, as it is today one of the world's more or even most color-blind countries. The majority of Swedes are harboring relatively strong antiracist and progressive opinions and values while at the same time Swedishness is still very much equal to whiteness.

### 2.3. Study 1: *The Stranger*

The first study which this article is based on analyzes official norms and values surrounding the family as reflected in Swedish transnational adoption policies. By investigating policy texts related to transnational adoption, the study seeks to understand changing perceptions of what is considered natural, normal, good and ethically sound in relation to kinship and family building. The empirical data consist of so-called Official Government Reports on transnational adoption published between 1967 and 2009. Official Government Reports are interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial efforts to prepare the government's legislative proposals, thus reflecting different views on a certain political issue, but with the overarching aim to obtain a consensus and present a set of policy proposals and legislative recommendations. For this study, six reports were selected for in-depth analysis. The theoretical framework of the study combines insights from feminist and postcolonial studies to explore how notions of family, kinship, race, ethnicity, national belonging and origin influence and are influenced by political rhetoric and practice. Consequently, the methodological approach is concerned with deconstructing knowledge and power relations. The study is performed as a governmentality and discourse analysis, which assumes that the law has a special position as a normative statement in a society and thereby affects all inhabitants in a country. By studying Official Government Reports and the law, it is not only possible to get a deeper understanding of the prevailing norms and values of a society, but also an understanding of in which direction the government is steering a nation and its citizens. For example, by indicating what is normal and what is not, or who belongs and who does not, the law both reflects and structures how people think and act ([Jonsson Malm 2011](#)).

The results of the analysis show that the attitudes towards transnational adoption were complex and changed between 1967 and 2009. The attitudes were influenced by the dramatic increase in transnational adoptions in the 1960s and 1970s, which made Sweden the world's leading adopting country per head in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as by the gradual decrease in the number of adoptions from the 1990s and onwards, which has continued until today. During this period of time, because of the almost lack of domestic children available for adoption due to a combination of women's liberation, the legalization of free abortion and the de-stigmatization of single and unmarried mothers, thousands upon thousands of foreign-born children were adopted to Swedish homes. Almost all of these adoptions involve white parents living in Sweden and non-white children from countries in the Global South. In total, about 60,000 foreign-born children have been adopted to Sweden and out of whom well over half derive from Asia and mainly from East Asia (with South Korea and China being the biggest countries of origin) as well as from South Asia, while the rest come from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and partly also from Eastern Europe. According to



Statistics Sweden, around 60 percent of transnational adoptees derive from Asia, 25 percent from South America, 10 percent from Europe and 5 percent from Africa. This mixing of nations and races on a mass scale given the small population of Sweden plays a crucial role in the attitudes toward transnational adoption. The design of Swedish adoption policies is very much grounded on whether transnational adoptions are regarded as positive or negative. Three possible approaches were observed in the reports: an advocating attitude, an antagonistic attitude, and a pragmatic attitude. Advocates are positive to transnational adoption and want to increase the number of adoptions and facilitate the adoption process. Antagonists are negative towards transnational adoptions and see them as problematic and as something that should be limited or even prevented and prohibited. The pragmatics are to be found somewhere in between these two positions as they do not want to ban transnational adoptions, but they believe that the adoption industry must be regulated by strict legislation and that there should be no major increase in adoption cases (Jonsson Malm 2011).

Furthermore, the analysis of the government reports also shows that between 1967 and 2009 the attitudes toward transnational adoption were expressed in different ways and had different degrees of influence on the legislation. In the beginning, there were strong opinions against transnational adoptions, with some arguments based in so-called race science. However, the government reports from that time were more concerned about the well-being of the child and feared that being adopted transnationally is not in “the child’s best interest”. The perceived problem had mostly to do with the child’s ethnic background and physical appearance. In the early government reports, the underlying assumption was that a child adopted from another country is different from white Swedish people in terms of culture and race and therefore would grow up as an “outsider” or a “stranger”, which could lead to social and emotional complications. Being different was not solely described as something negative, the adoptees were also appraised for their exotic looks and attributes, which some people found “interesting” and “fascinating”. However, the assumption was that most Swedes carry racist attitudes towards people who do not look like them. The answer to this problem, according to the reports, was a two-way solution: the adopted children should become “Swedish” and be assimilated into Swedish society, and the Swedes and the Swedish society should be “fostered to color-blindness” to facilitate this process (Jonsson Malm 2011).

The reports’ pragmatic approach resulted in a more favorable legislation contributing to the increase in transnational adoptions in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period of time, adopting a child from a so-called developing country in the non-Western world was primarily regarded as a good act and as a form of humanitarian aid. The general opinion was that the child would always have a better life in Sweden than in its country of origin. That opinion started to change in the late 1980s, with raised concerns over the adoption industry’s role in child trafficking, and in the exploitation of the Third World. The decrease in the number of transnational adoptions, which took hold after the Cold War, is a complex issue and can partly be explained by nationalist sentiments and even anti-Western attitudes in many countries of origin and partly by a growing middle-class in many Asian and Latin American countries, as well as in some African countries, wanting to adopt the children that once were sent to the West. The decrease is also a consequence of a growing number of reproduction techniques, which has made transnational adoption more and more obsolete, such as egg and sperm donations and surrogacy arrangements (Jonsson Malm 2011).

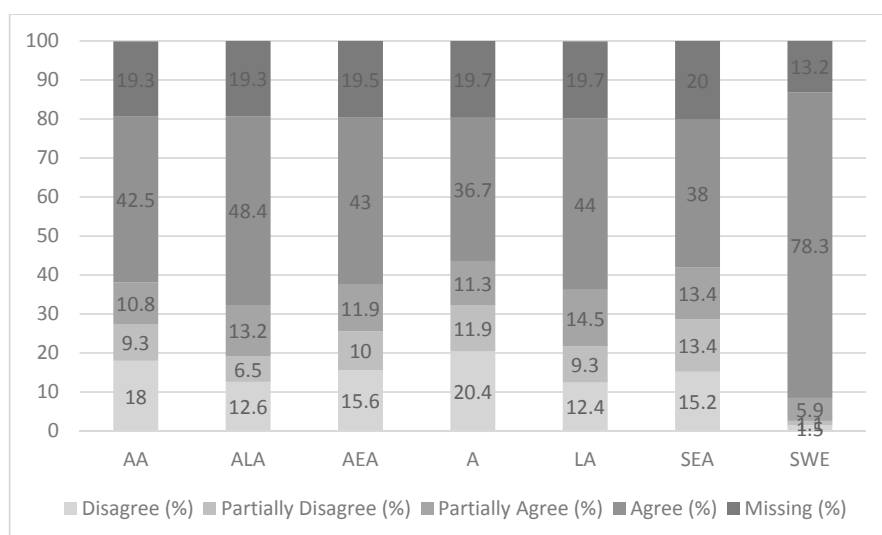
In the reports from the latter time period, the growing antagonistic attitudes towards transnational adoption were also related to changing attitudes towards the child’s right to know its origins, as stated in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which by many is interpreted as the child’s right to stay in its birth country. The reports refer to the adoptees’ so-called “psychological vulnerability”, which is assumed to be the result of their separation from their biological, ethnic, racial and national origin, which is described as “a trauma”. The solution is therefore to encourage the adoptees to affirm their ethnic origins by visiting their birth country and by seeking their roots instead of discouraging them to do so, which had more or less been the norm before the 1990s when nurture was seen as trumping nature. In that way, the adoptees would learn to accept that they are different from the

majority Swedes, and they would embrace their dual ethnic identities, rather than being “fully” Swedish. Learning to live with this duality would help adoptee’s struggling with psychological distress. The idea that the adoptees’ psychological vulnerability could be caused or affected by racial discrimination is, however, dismissed thereby placing the responsibility for integration solely at the individual level rather than at the societal level. The underlying assumption is that race and racism is not an issue in today’s modern and multicultural Swedish society as the majority Swedes have, at least according to the government reports, been fostered to color-blindness (Jonsson Malm 2011).

#### 2.4. Study 2: Color-Blind Love?

The second study which this article is based on examines attitudes among white majority Swedes on interracial relationships including on dating, marrying, and having children with someone whose background is from Africa, Central/Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, South/East Asia, South/Western Europe, or Scandinavia. The study also investigates the attitudes towards having a relationship with non-white adoptees from Africa, Latin America and East Asia. The attitudes interracial relationships were examined by the way of a quantitative questionnaire, which was followed up with qualitative interviews with some of the questionnaire respondents. The survey was sent to 2000 randomly selected residents in the city of Malmö out of which 620 responded. Among these, 30 people were selected for a follow-up interview.

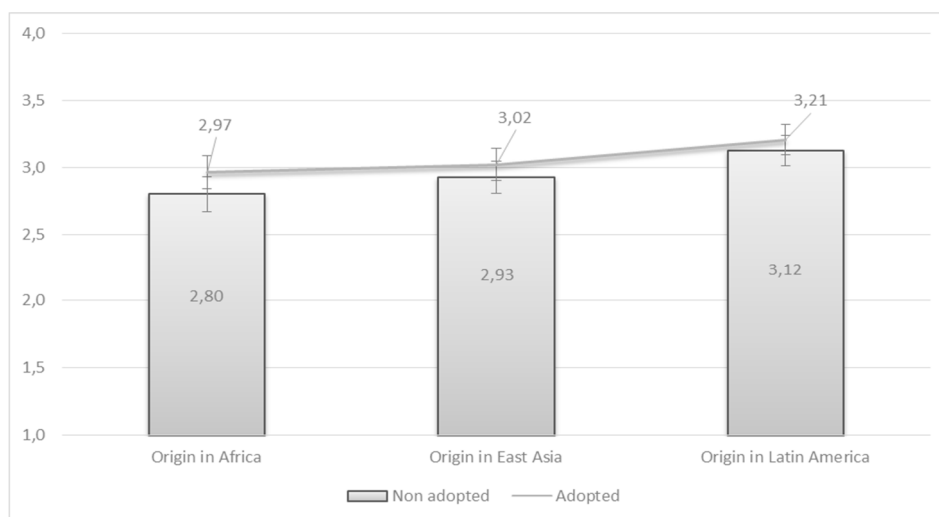
The survey and interview results show that the majority of the participants could imagine dating, marrying, or having children with someone with a different background than themselves. However, there was a clear hierarchical preference for different racial and ethnic backgrounds of the imagined partner (See Figure 1). White Swedes preferred having intimate relationships with people with a background from Scandinavia, Western Europe, or Southern Europe. Thereafter, they preferred partners originating in Central/Eastern Europe and Latin America. Persons with a background in South/East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East were the least desired and preferred imagined partners. The attitudes towards non-white adoptees also showed an unexpected outcome: their desirability was based on their continent of origin as adoptees from Latin America were preferred the most in comparison to adoptees from East Asia. Adoptees from Africa were the least preferred as potential intimate partners.



Note: AA (Adopted African), ALA (Adopted Latin American), AEA (Adopted East Asian), A (people of African origin), LA (people of Latin American origin), SEA (people of South East Asian origin), and SWE (ethnic Swedes with two parents born in Sweden)

**Figure 1.** Can you imagine marrying someone of the following origin? Respondents with a white European background (N = 416, %).

By comparing the attitudes towards non-white adoptees and the attitudes towards the equivalent immigrant groups who share the same continents or regions of origin, the differences in attitudes were not significant, while the differences were obvious and statistically significant between the attitudes toward non-white adoptees and white Scandinavians or other white Western European groups (See Figure 2).



Note: 1 represents negative responses and 4 represents positive answers. The numbers represent the mean attitudes.

**Figure 2.** Attitudes towards interracial marriage: Comparison of white European respondents' attitudes towards non-white adoptees and non-white migrants.

This result goes against the general Swedish perception that non-white adoptees are “like any other Swedes” and the fact that they are visibly different from white majority Swedes is officially seen as being of little significance. The importance of skin color and other racial markers is particularly prominent in the case of non-white adoptees, who all share the same culture as white majority Swedes (Osanami Törngren 2011).

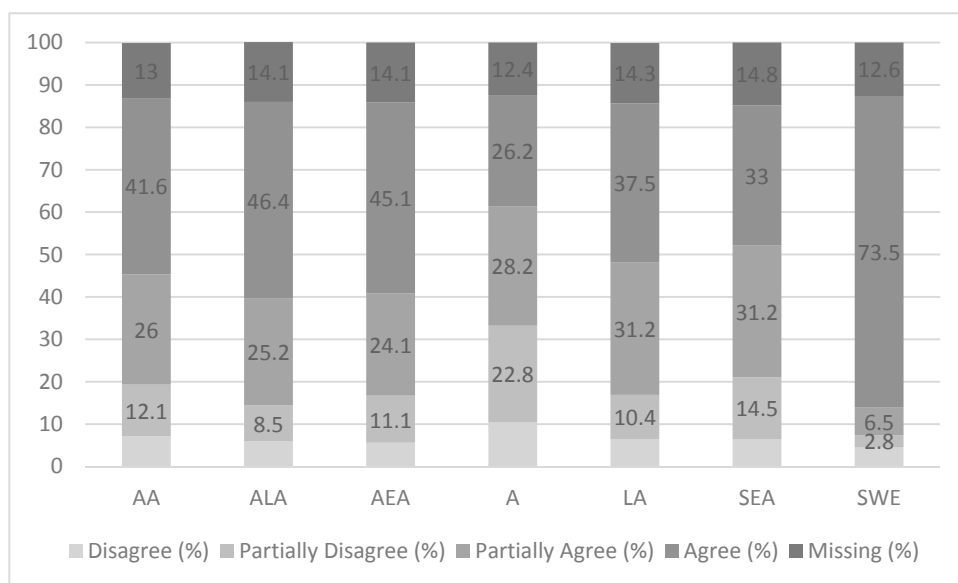
Furthermore, the majority of the survey respondents were positive to dating someone with a migrant background but they were at the same time less positive to be a part of a long-term and permanent relationship. When it came to childbearing, the answers were even more negative. The differences in attitudes towards dating and childbearing were statistically significant. As the interviewees suggested that children imply more responsibility, they were more reserved to having children with someone with a foreign background. However, the majority of the respondents answered that they would not react negatively if someone in their family or others in their close surroundings chose to live in a mixed marriage and interracial relationship. At the same time, they responded that not all relationships were seen as equally accepted in Swedish society at large and that a marriage with someone originating in South/East Asia, Africa, or the Middle East was less accepted than a marriage with someone originating in other regions and continents.

Relationships with adoptees were seen as more accepted in Swedish society than relationships with the corresponding immigrant groups (see Figure 3). Contrary to the attitudes towards interracial marriage, there was statistically significant differences in the responses given towards non-white immigrant groups and non-white adoptees (see Figure 4). This shows that there is on the whole a wider cultural acceptance of adoptees than of immigrants, and the responses reflect the color-blind idea that adoptees are Swedes (Osanami Törngren 2011).

When speaking about mixed relationships, the interviewees' choice of words and expressions strongly reflected their color-blind attitudes towards race as they had great difficulties to talk about skin color and other visible differences. In particular, they tended to highlight cultural differences

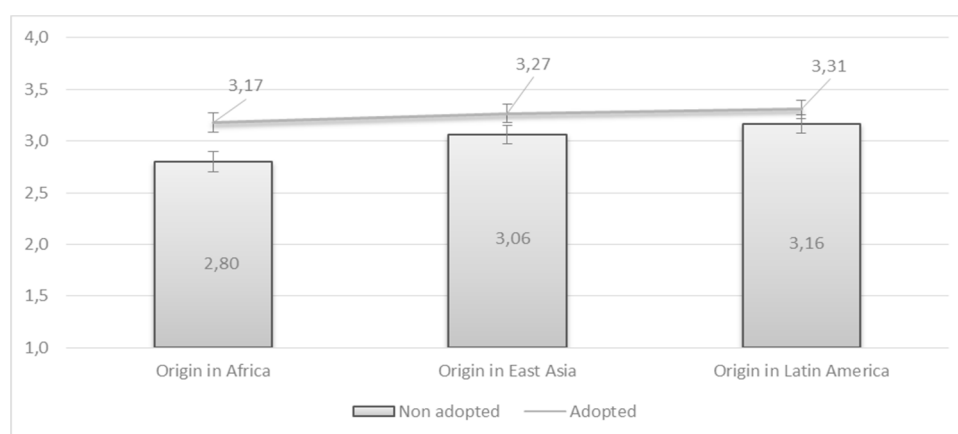


that may or may not exist instead of talking about visible differences. Many interviewees stated that they preferred European partners because of cultural similarities, whereas they linked an origin from South/East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to notions of cultural differences. Perceptions of gender equality were regarded as one particularly important cultural difference. The idea of the Swedes and of Sweden as being gender equal was contrasted with “other cultures” as being patriarchal and oppressing women. Also prominent in the interview material was the color-blind idea of making an individual choice as the interviewees tended to claim that a certain origin does not matter when it comes to love (Osanami Törngren 2011; Osanami Törngren 2018).



Note: AA (Adopted African), ALA (Adopted Latin American), AEA (Adopted East Asian), A (people of African origin), LA (people of Latin American origin), SEA (people of South East Asian origin), and SWE (ethnic Swedes with two parents born in Sweden)

Figure 3. Is it accepted in Swedish society to intermarry? Respondents of white European background (N = 416, %).



Note: 1 represents negative responses and 4 represents positive answers. The numbers represent the mean attitudes.

Figure 4. Social acceptance of interracial marriages: Comparison of white European respondents’ attitudes towards non-white adoptees and non-white migrants.

### 2.5. Empirical Materials and Methods

The empirical material of our two studies consists of three types of material—interviews, surveys and government reports. The comparison between our two studies offers an opportunity for a mixed method analysis (Tashakkori and Creswell 2008) and contributes to emergent field of Swedish critical race and whiteness studies by highlighting how transracial families are perceived depending on the forms of families. The content analysis of the government reports reflects the national discourse on transracial families, while the surveys and the interviews reflect people's everyday attitudes and opinions on transracial families. The combination of these three distinct types of material enables a holistic analysis that mirrors both the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of understanding the situation for transracial families in contemporary Sweden.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. The Fear of Talking About Race and Whiteness in Sweden

When comparing our two studies' empirical material, which consist of interviews, surveys and government reports, several interesting similarities appear. One of the most striking similarities is the difficulty of talking about and finding words to refer to race and various expressions of racism. Another similarity is the reluctance and even inability to see racial inequalities as explanations of social injustices and unequal power structures. These difficulties have historical roots and are related to changing ideas on race in Sweden. A telling example is when one of the Official Government Reports states that Sweden is a country where "racism is not very widespread". When racism is mentioned at all, it is essentially viewed as something that happens somewhere else than in Sweden or among others than among Swedes. It is not seen as a mindset or as a societal structure that everyone is a part of. How can we understand racism and the idea of race in today's Sweden in light of our empirical material? Due to the previously mentioned fear of using the concepts of race and whiteness and even the word race itself, as well as the inability to understand and accept how they can be used to highlight unequal power structures, it is evident that our combined empirical material lacks a discussion on race and whiteness.

The color-blind ideology of Sweden also leads to an inability to identify and distinguish racism as the basis for exclusion and marginalization processes. Instead the concepts of ethnicity and culture are widely accepted and applied to analyze and understand what is in practice expressions of various racialization processes (Hübinette et al. 2012). For example, some of the government reports do admit that transnational adoptees face the risk of being marginalized and discriminated against in Swedish society because of their phenotypical looks. However, these statements are never linked to any in-depth discussion on racism. The reports also lack a critical view on the adoptees' own perspectives and how they themselves contribute to maintaining norms and beliefs about family, origin, and national belonging.

The same applies to the respondents who were interviewed by Osanami Törngren, who also do not reflect on their color-blindness or how their reasoning around attitudes towards interracial marriages often becomes contradictory when they almost solely talk about ethnicity and culture. The interview material shows that Scandinavians, West Europeans and South Europeans are the most preferred potential partners for white respondents and that those with a background in Africa and the Middle East are the least preferred. "It is the *culture* that matters" was the most frequent message that came across throughout the interviews when explaining this hierarchy of preferences. For instance, one interviewee specifically articulated that phenotypical appearance does not matter, but that *culture* does. The interviewees' words also reflected the idea that the more "cultural differences" the more problems there are in interracial marriages. One interviewee for example stated that "it would not be easy to have a relationship with two different cultures". Ethnicity and culture, which are the preferred terms in Sweden to understand any kind of differences, are also often forced upon individuals and groups which are of non-Western descent. While the concepts of ethnicity and culture are often applied

to Muslims, Africans, Asians or Latin Americans, and other visible minorities, they are almost never applied when discussing white immigrants such as Finns, Germans or Danes, who also constitute some of the larger immigrant groups in Sweden (e.g., [Pred 2000](#)). The terms ethnicity and culture, therefore, becomes a color-blind way of referring to people who are non-white but without referring directly to the racial and visible differences.

### 3.2. Racialization Based on Parenthood

Another finding that is related to the above problem is the lack of any reflection on whiteness and how it is intimately linked to Swedishness. As mentioned earlier, several previous studies have demonstrated how whiteness is closely linked to Swedishness ([Hübinette and Lundström 2011](#); [Mattsson 2005](#); [Runfors 2006](#)). In practice it is not the individuals' ethnicity and culture, but rather their visible differences, such as skin color and other physical markers that matter when it comes to being able to pass as a Swede and be treated and accepted as "fully Swedish". African, East Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern identities are developed through interaction and contact with the majority society, through which they become aware of their skin and hair color and other visible features being different ([Kalonaityté et al. 2007](#); [Khosravi 2006](#); [Lundström 2007](#)).

It is very clear that the notions of whiteness, race, and ethnicity are intimately intertwined with the view of normative views on family and family formation. In the government reports analyzed by Jonsson Malm, it is for example always understood that white Swedes are expected to adopt foreign and non-white children coming from a non-Swedish culture. That non-white Swedes would be interested in transnational adoptions seems almost unimaginable and is not discussed in the material. To be Swedish is thereby equated with being white in the reports. It is also clear that the adopted child will become majority Swedish and that the adoptive family will be interpreted as a majority Swedish adoptive family, and not for example a Swedish-Chinese or a Swedish-Colombian family.

However, in the study of the attitudes towards interracial relationships, a different pattern is revealed. A family consisting of one non-white parent is instead interpreted as a non-Swedish family and therefore mixed children are not perceived as belonging to the Swedish majority population. It is clear, though, that some mixed families and children can become "fully Swedish" through their whiteness. Several of the interviewees in Osanami Törngren's study said that children of Swedes and Eastern Europeans are considered Swedes according to them as they do not differ in appearance from white majority Swedes. For example, one interviewee said that "my children and my grandchildren will look like me." In contrast, a child with a non-white parent is instead seen as "half-Swedish" or as "mixed" and not as "fully Swedish". In particular, biracial black-white children were seen as "problematic" by some of the interviewees because they may face racism in society. Several interviewees expressed worries about how the white majority surrounding would react to the visible phenotypical differences of the mixed children. For example, one interviewee said that "when you think about what the children will look like . . . I don't know, maybe you think about the appearance." The underlying idea behind such responses is that visible differences relate to "problems" of some sorts. Another interviewee specified a concern that Swedish language fluency is not always enough to be counted as a Swede for a non-white mixed child:

. . . you maybe think about how the child will be looked upon from the surrounding when he or she grows up, that people will be prejudiced towards the children. Even though they may speak perfect Swedish, it doesn't always protect the child from prejudice.

Responses like these also indicates that mixed children who are born and raised in Sweden are not always seen as "fully Swedish" and they are also not perceived to be "half-white", a concept that barely exists in Swedish language ([Osanami Törngren 2011](#)). As critical mixed race studies in countries like the US, the UK, and Germany have shown, the situation and position of multiracial and mixed people are good examples of how arbitrary and flexible all racialized categories are and they are also examples of how national belonging, race and whiteness are related to each other ([Haritaworn 2012](#);

Ifekwunigwe 1999). However, the Swedish mixed children and mixed people do not seem to be related to the idea of post-race which Suki Ali (2003) finds in the UK context, but instead they seem to be relegated to the same logics as practically all non-white inhabitants of Sweden who are seen as not being “fully Swedish”, even if they are born in Sweden, speak Swedish fluently and in many cases only know about Swedish culture. This idea of Swedishness as being more or less equivalent to whiteness is also worrying in light of the contemporary political climate of today’s Europe as it opens up the possibility for the far-right to mobilize around an exclusionary construction of Swedishness.

In other words, while an adoptive family consisting of two white parents and a non-white adopted child is considered to be Swedish, a family consisting of a transracial couple and their mixed child is considered to be half-Swedish and sometimes perhaps even non-Swedish. As a transnational adoptive family is regarded as more Swedish and thereby also as whiter than an interracial mixed family, this indicates that the racialization of a family in Sweden is primarily based on the parents’ whiteness and origins rather than on the children.

### 3.3. *The Problem of Belonging*

In the former section, we argued that the adoptive family is seen as more Swedish than the mixed family, but this does not mean that the adoptees themselves are seen as being “fully Swedish”. The government reports on transnational adoption instead reveal that the adopted children are not seen as “fully Swedish”, either on arrival or later in life. In the first decades of the examined time period (the 1960s and 1970s), the concern was raised that the children deviate too much visibly and physically from the white Swedish majority population and that a child with a “non-Swedish appearance” may always be seen as an “outsider” or a “stranger” in Swedish society. Here again, it is interesting to point out that the expression a “non-Swedish appearance” which is used in the reports refers to being non-white. Different strategies for making adoptees more “Swedish” are therefore discussed although the “positive” aspects of the adopted children having “exotic” looks are also highlighted (Jonsson Malm 2011).

In the 1990s and 2000s, the government reports also express concern for the adopted children’s well-being. However, this pertains more to their mental health and how they should try to “integrate their biological and ethnic heritage with the image of themselves today”, and where the “biological heritage” is defined as the relationship to the biological family and the inhabitants in the country of origin, and the ethnic heritage as the relation to the culture of the biological family and the country of origin. A failure to integrate these identities is believed to result in fragmentation and mental health issues for the adoptees. During the 1990s, so-called “return trips” became popular, where the adoptees were encouraged to return to and seek out their “roots” in their birth country (Jonsson Malm 2011). This shift towards the emphasizing of the adoptees’ origins and roots, which Heather Jacobson has called “culture keeping”, is something which has been studied in the US context and also been criticized as it oftentimes becomes both shallow and stereotypical as the vast majority of white adoptive parents know very little or even nothing about the countries of origin of their children (Jacobson 2008; Tuan and Shiao 2011). This search for roots becomes a kind of a therapeutic method, which is supposed to lead to the well-being of the adoptees. However, it simultaneously signals that they are not perceived as fully Swedish and that they are culturally, ethnically, and biologically positioned outside of Sweden (Jonsson Malm 2011). This is also argued by Yngvesson (2010), in her ethnographic study of Chilean adoptees in Sweden going on a so-called “return trip” to Chile.

That transnational adoptees are not seen as “fully Swedish” also becomes apparent when studying the attitude survey and the interview material on interracial relationships. Some interviewees also talked about how they cannot sometimes distinguish between non-white adoptees and non-white migrants:

I would think that the unwillingness to marry and have children with someone from another country lies more in their culture and what they bring with them, rather than their physical

appearance. But I interpret that physical appearance matters more than you believe or I have believed.

Another interviewee explained that this is why, when looking for a partner, it is “safer” to approach someone who looks white because then the likelihood that that person is Swedish is higher. When the interviewees were faced with the survey results, showing that non-white adoptees are less preferred as long-term relationship partners for the white respondents, some explained that adoptees are culturally Swedish but that their non-white appearance challenges their Swedishness. Here, it becomes clear that the color-blind ideology of Sweden has its limits. If you are not white, it is difficult to be perceived as a “real Swede” and to be seen as “fully Swedish” by the white Swedish majority population. One interviewee’s words clearly stated this limit of color-blindness by saying the following when being confronted with the survey results showing that white respondents do not prefer non-white adoptees and non-white migrants as potential partners.

... then it actually doesn’t matter whether you are adopted, when you look at this result. Then you may say that my explanation about the cultural clash is not valid because it is purely race if you look at the groups.

Osanami Törngren did not include attitudes towards mixed race persons as potential partners in her survey but in hindsight, we can see that it would have been interesting to know whether mixed people are more or less preferred as potential partners compared to non-white adoptees. Here, we can only speculate on how the idea of race and the idea of culture may interact. However, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the results would not differ significantly from what we have discussed so far—the more “whiter” and, therefore, the more “Swedish” you are perceived as being, the more attractive as a potential partner you become for the white Swedish majority population.

As mentioned earlier, the adoptees’ mental health might be undermined by the gap between their Swedish identity and their cultural and ethnic origin, according to the government reports (Jonsson Malm 2011). For mixed children, all “problems” are always related to the culture of the non-Swedish and non-white parent (Osanami Törngren 2011). The “problems” always derive from the culture of “the other” and not from Swedish culture and from the white Swedish parent, as the interviewees never problematized or questioned Swedishness. Like the adopted children, the mixed children are also assigned a double belonging and an ambivalent identity, which is something mixed people historically always have been associated with (Park 1928; Stonequist 1935).

In the English speaking context, the mixed people are sometimes also seen as positive figures and role models who are said to be able to serve as a bridges between the white majority population and the minority communities. An increased number of interracial marriages and mixed race children are considered to contribute to contribute to the blurring of racial and ethnic boundaries in a certain society according to Ali (2003), thereby accelerating post-racial and color-blind thinking (e.g., Ali 2003). According to this idea, the mixed people become a fantasy and a hope for the future desiring the so-called “Generation E.A.” (Ethnically Ambiguous) (La Ferla 2003). In the Swedish context, mixed race persons may even be thought of as helping Sweden in its new nation-building process marked by racial and ethnic diversity apart from being designated a mediator and as a bridge between the white and the non-white inhabitants of Sweden. However, in Osanami Törngren’s study none of the interviewees drew attention to the positive aspects of being mixed as the focus of the discussion was on how mixed children’s visible appearance and cultural background will differ from the white Swedish majority population and how it can lead to the children being exposed to exclusion and marginalization (Osanami Törngren 2011). In contrast to the appraisal of the “exotic” appearance of the non-white adoptees, which is discernable in Jonsson Malm’s study, when it comes to mixed people their non-whiteness is instead more seen as something negative and potentially harmful for the wellbeing of the mixed person.



#### 4. Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to re-analyze the empirical material of two studies and thereby to further contribute to the emergence of a Swedish field of critical race and whiteness studies. The practices of transnational adoptions and interracial marriages are rarely compared with each other in Swedish research even though they are both about transracial family formation. By bringing these two transracial family formations together it is possible to analyze different perceptions of what is considered normal, natural, and desirable in relation to families in general and transracial families in particular in contemporary Sweden. Furthermore, we are able to tease out how various notions and norms of national belonging are manifested which otherwise might have been difficult to see.

The article focuses on three analytical themes that was particularly visible when comparing the two studies: the fear of talking about race and whiteness in Sweden, racialization based on parenthood, and the problem of belonging. These themes revealed a somewhat contradictory and complex picture. The color-blind ideology that characterizes white majority Swedes' self-understanding, together with the privileged position of whiteness in relation to Swedishness, makes the attitudes towards transracial families ambivalent and often problematic. The non-white adoptee or mixed children and their white and non-white parents are perceived differently depending on their origins and on their degrees of visible differences but also in relation to the historical and social context. Transnational adoption across racial lines has almost always been praised in Sweden, which has resulted in a positive view on transracial adoptive families which are seen as Swedish families, although the non-white adoptees themselves are not always perceived as "fully Swedish". On the other hand, interracial families and mixed children are instead associated with so-called cultural "problems" and with not being "fully Swedish" to the same extent as the adoptive families.

We live in a time characterized by major transformations when it comes to how people live, structure their everyday lives, and organize their social environments while Sweden, as well as almost every Western country becomes increasingly racially diverse. Although we can never choose freely who we want to work with and go to school with we may believe that we have a certain freedom of choice when it comes to who we want to live with and have and raise children together with. However, when it comes to intimate relationships and family formations, cultural and societal norms and ideals play a crucial role consciously or unconsciously, including ideas of who belongs or not in relation to race and whiteness. According to us, it is essential to be conscious about how racial norms shape individual choices even when it comes to choosing partners, and therefore a color-blind attitude towards family formation is not a constructive path in today's multiracial and already highly diverse Sweden.

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