

# Does race matter in Sweden? Challenging colorblindness in Sweden

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スウェーデンに人種差別はあるのか — カラーブラインドネスに対する批判

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## 要旨

現代スウェーデンは、人口約 900 万人のうち約 14% がスウェーデン国外出生者という移民国家である。スウェーデンへの移民は過去 3 年間さらに増加傾向にあり、2014 年の移民総数は過去最高になるだろうと示唆される。1980 年代まではスウェーデンへの移民は主に労働移民であったが、今日はその大半を難民やその家族呼び寄せが占めている。労働移民から難民へと移民のカテゴリーが移行するにあたり、移民の出生地がヨーロッパ各国からヨーロッパ国外に移り、それに伴い人種差別や社会統合への新たな課題が発生した。

スウェーデンでは人種や肌の色の議論をすることはあまり好まれない。スウェーデンの社会統合政策はカラーブラインドのイデオロギーで成立しており、国全体として人種ということを語りたがらず、移民が置かれている状況は、文化やエスニシティの違いによって説明されることが多い。現代では人種ということを語らないスウェーデンであるが、20 世紀には人種という概念の構築にはスウェーデンは大きな役割をもっていた。この論文は、スウェーデンが人種という概念の構築にどのように関わっていたかを説明し、現代の移民が置かれている状況の先行研究また自身の研究結果をもとに、現代社会においても人種や肌の色ということに着目して社会問題を見ることの必要性を説き、スウェーデンのカラーブラインドネスを批判する。

## Abstract

Sweden is a country of immigration, where fourteen percent of about nine million residents are born outside of the country. Immigration to Sweden has increased for three consecutive years, and it is expected that the number of

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immigrants to Sweden in 2014 will be the highest ever recorded. Up until the 1980s immigration to Sweden was dominated by European labor migrants; however, today it is dominated by non-European asylum seekers and family members of the existing immigrant population. As the type of immigration and the countries of origin have shifted, Sweden has faced different issues concerning integration and discrimination.

Swedish society is reluctant to admit that race and visible differences matter. Swedish integration policy is based around the ideology of colorblindness, and consequently discriminatory problems faced by immigrants are often attributed to cultural and ethnic differences. In contrast to the current resistance to talk about race, Sweden was deeply involved with the development of the idea of race. This article challenges the current colorblind ideal and resistance to talk about race and visible differences in Sweden. A short presentation of previous research and the results from my own research on attitudes towards interracial marriages will demonstrate that race does matter in Sweden.

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## Introduction

*“Stockholm riots leave Sweden’s dreams of perfect society up in smoke”* (The Telegraph, May 25, 2013)

*“Swedish riots: if instability can happen here, what might unfold elsewhere?”* (The Guardian, May 27, 2013)

*“Sweden’s riots: A blazing surprise - A Scandinavian idyll is disrupted by arson and unrest”* (The Economist, June 1, 2013)

These are some of international media’s responses to the riots that took place in the immigrant concentrated suburbs of Stockholm in May 2013. Sweden is a country of immigration. It is a country facing issues of discrimination. Immigration to Sweden has increased for three consecutive years, and it is expected that the number of immigrants to Sweden in 2014 will be the highest ever recorded (Statistics Sweden: 2014; 2010). Today fourteen percent of the population of Sweden is born outside the country, and that the number is expected to reach eighteen percent by the year 2060. Immigration to Sweden was dominated by European labor migrants up until the 1970s

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and 80s; however, now it is dominated by non-European asylum seekers and family members of the existing immigrant population. As the category of immigration and the country of origin of the immigrants has shifted, Sweden has faced different issues concerning integration and discrimination.

Swedish integration policy is based on the colorblind ideology which revolves around the idea that everybody is equal regardless of their cultural or ethnic background. Swedes understand themselves as being “democratic, liberal, equal, tolerant and individualist”, highly value “anti-racism, universalism, secularism and gender equality”, and they realize these values to a great extent (Heinö 2009:303). These values are also reflected in Swedish integration politics. The principles of equality, freedom of choice and partnership, which is the equivalent of the principle of liberal modernity, have formed the basis of Swedish immigration and integration policies since 1975 (Schierup and Ålund 2010). In the most recent reform of 2009, the goal of integration policy included the same rights, duties and possibilities for everyone irrespective of ethnic and cultural background, with a focus on individuals. Access to the labor market is a central feature of integration policy, which derives from a belief that the labor market is colorblind and rational (Heinö 2009; Rakar 2010; Mattsson 2004). The idea of colorblindness is officially applied, to such an extent that there are efforts to eliminate the word “race” in Sweden. A parliamentary decision to abolish the word “race (ras)” from official language in 2001 was followed by the removal of race as a basis of discrimination in 2009 (Hübinette and Hylten-Cavallius 2014). In 2014, the Swedish government announced that the word “race” should be erased from all existing legislation in Sweden and should be replaced with another word (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet 2014). The argument behind this being the idea that race does not exist. Moreover, rejection of the term race has been at the very core of the Swedish anti-racist movement. Sweden truly believes in colorblindness. Hübinette and Hylten-Cavallius write; “Colour-blindness 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” (2014:30).

In reality, Sweden struggles with these self-images and the ideals reflected in these colorblind policy. However, Sweden is still reluctant to admit the fact that racism and discrimination are partly based on the idea of race that exists in the Swedish

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host society. Race evolved theoretically as a biological category first, until science proved that there is no such thing as biological racial categories explaining inferiority and superiority. Yet the idea of race, and stereotypes and prejudices against certain groups of people has remained alive. Therefore today in the field of social science, race is commonly understood as a socially constructed idea evoked by visible differences; race is something that exists not as a biological reality but as a social reality. Although a social construction, race is socially real for some groups of people and “affect[s] their social life whether individual members of the races want it or not” (Bonilla-Silva 1997:473). Many Swedish scholars cling to the idea of ethnicity, culture and citizenship to explain racism and discrimination in Sweden, and avoid discussing discrimination in racial terms, with a strong belief that race does not exist. Ethnicity and culture, which are supposedly colorblind concepts, are widely accepted and applied to analyze and understand racism, anti-racism and racialization. The word ethnicity is used when discussing the situations of Muslims, Africans or Latin Americans in Sweden, but is never used to discuss the situations of white Danish, Norwegian or German immigrants. The terms ethnicity and culture are actually used as a means of referring to people who are non-white, in other words, racial minorities, without referring to the visible differences. Talking about race and arguing that race matters is highly controversial in Sweden and in the Nordic context. An example can be seen in the recent correspondence between Annika Rabo, professor in Social Anthropology at Stockholm University and Rikke Andreassen, associate professor at Roskilde University and a leading critical race study scholar in Denmark. Criticisms raised by Rabo that Andreassen essentializes racial groups are typical of those faced by scholars of critical race studies, including myself, in Sweden and the other Nordic countries (2014).

This article will briefly explain the Swedish involvement with the development of the idea of race and will go on to challenge the current colorblind ideal and resistance to talk about visible differences in Sweden. A short presentation of previous research and the results from my own research on attitudes towards interracial marriages will demonstrate that race does matter in Sweden.

## Race in Sweden

The concept of race first appeared in the English language during the 16th century. Up to the late 19th to the early 20th century race was used as a biological term, and scientific theories about different human races emerged. At this time some European researchers started to divide human beings in different races, without racist implications. Mapping different types and races of human beings was the equivalent of mapping different animal and plant types and species. A racist ideology was first introduced into the division of human “race” by scholars like Gobineau and those who promoted Social Darwinism. With the emergence of Social Darwinism, cultural, social and moral differences started to be explained by biological racial differences and inferiority. With this, different disciplines carried out what is today understood as studies of racial biology and Eugenics. The biological view of race changed when the scientific value of dividing humans in different races proved to have little meaning. Already during the 1920s, the concept of race as a fluid social category, or in other words, the idea of race as a social construct rather than a biological one was established. American sociologists like Robert Park and Milton Gordon influenced the field of what later came to be called the study of race relations. By 1950, the idea of biological race was officially clarified in a declaration by UNESCO, which affirmed that there was no biologically superior or inferior human race (Jacobsson 1999).

Sweden played an undeniable role in the development of race biology. The belief in race in the biological sense was constructed and widespread in Sweden during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only in the medical field but also in many anthropological studies involving the examination of human skulls. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a specific racial beliefs, for example the concept of the “yellow peril”, and the attribution of negative physical characteristics as a central theme in anti-Semitic trends, could be identified in Sweden. Swedish physician and psychiatrist Herman Lundborg played a prominent role in the development and the construction of the idea of the Swedish race as “the pure race”. He was greatly influenced by Gobineau’s idea of race and was deeply convinced and concerned that the Swedish race was threatened by degeneration, and that the pureness of the Swedish race should be kept. The conception of race developed by defining the Swedes and the “Arian” White race as the one that was ideal and superior, and others as inferior. In his books and articles, Lundborg propagated

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that he was against immigration and “racial mixing,” and in favor of Eugenics; moreover he was in favor of Swedes’ emigration to the U.S. since this could contribute to white supremacy. Lundborg eventually became the head of the National Institute for Racial Biology, the world’s first governmental institute engaging in racial biology, which was established in Uppsala in 1922 (Hagerman 2007; Broberg and Tydén 2005; Gustafsson 2007; Furuhausen ; Jacobsson 1997). Through the dissemination of racial biology people learned to differentiate the superior “Arian” and the inferior and undesirable race. Through literature, cartoons and films, racial and visible stereotypes were communicated to the public (Gustafsson 2007; Andersson 2000; Catomeris 2005; Sandberg 2010).

In 1936 when Gunnar Dahlberg became the head of the National Institute for Racial Biology, Sweden took on a different turn: Dahlberg maintained that there was no evidence of racial difference when only looking at visible features such as skin color and facial forms, and that there was no reason to believe that one race was better than the other. Dahlberg also took a clear distance from the idea of the “pure Nordic race”. The question of the pureness of the biological race became less important officially and instead people focused on the unity of Swedes in cultural and historical terms. Even though the focus has shifted from the biological to the cultural aspects, a belief that “the feeling of having the same appearance as others makes it easy for the spirit of commonness, while the opposite can make it difficult” was expressed. This idea of common Swedishness based on visible similarity was strengthened by the notion that everybody spoke the same language and belonged to the same church. Even in the school textbook “Civic Education,” which was used up to 1959, the message was clear that Scandinavians had never been subjugated by people of another origin and that this had maintained the pure German origin and had undoubtedly helped society’s and people’s advancement (Hagerman 2007; Jacobsson 223). Culture starts to be defined through the idea of racial belonging, and the belief in race and Swedes as something unique and pure continued to flourish from here on.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of biological race was officially dismissed in 1950 after World War II in a declaration made by UNESCO, which affirmed that there was no biologically superior or inferior human race. The Swedish scholars Gunnar Dahlberg and Gunnar Myrdal were among the scholars who signed the declaration. With the declaration, the idea of race in the biological sense became unacceptable and an

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explanation of social and cultural differences deriving from biological differences and inferiority vanished. Hagerman states that the anthropological studies that were conducted during the 19th century in Sweden are difficult to find in modern reference books or historical works in Sweden, even though Sweden was deeply involved in the development of Eugenics. This disappearance of the history led to the belief that Sweden was more homogeneous than other countries, even compared to the neighboring country of Denmark, without further inquiry into the history of racial biology. The colorblind ideology emerged from this selective forgetting of the history of racial biology and the belief that Sweden was a homogeneous country (Hagerman 2007). It is probably not difficult to forget the history of racial biology, especially as Sweden played a major role from the very beginning to the ending of it. Indeed, Sweden was the first country to establish a nationally funded race biological research institute; at the same time Swedish scholars were the experts who declared the meaninglessness of biological race and put an end to the belief that there was a biological superior and inferior human race.

### **Does race matter in contemporary Sweden?**

In Sweden today, concepts such as ethnicity and culture are widely used to explain discrimination and racism. Ethnicity and culture, which do not necessarily focus on the visible differences, make it possible to convey a colorblind debate. However, ethnicity and culture often refers to people or groups who are non-Western and appear visibly different compared to what is considered to be “Swedish” (Pred 2000; Hervik 2011). Many contemporary studies and researchers demonstrate how whiteness and visible differences shape the definition of Swedishness and non-Swedishness (Runfors 2006; Mattsson 2005; Hübinette and Lundström 2011). These studies illustrate that it is not the individuals’ ethnicity and culture that matter but rather their race. For example, many youths with an African background develop a “black” identity through interaction and contact with the majority society. They become aware of their skin- and hair color being different and they are insulted by racist words and abuse (Kalonaitye, Kwesa and Tedros 2007). A quote from another study that investigates how it is to be black and Swedish reveals how:

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[...] Even if you are adopted and have been brought up in this country, you are forced, by pure self-preservation and defense mechanisms, to seek out the power in your roots. Because you will come to be offended sooner or later by this racism and xenophobia, that makes it hard to really feel, and have the courage to go out and say, 'I am Swedish'. Because then you risk to be encounter people who point their finger and say 'but you are not Swedish at all. You look...you are black.' (Sawyer 2000:187)

It is not only black youth in Sweden who become aware of their racial belonging. A conversation between two Latin American Swedish youth quoted in Lundström's study depicts their experience of how they are defined as non-Swedish:

"Will I ever become Swedish?" asks Marisol rhetorically. "How long do I have to live here before I have proved that I ...?" She stops and adds: "After all, I have lived in Sweden for most of my life." "It doesn't matter", answers Juana. "It is only about appearance. That is [appearance] what determines whether you are called an immigrant or a Swede", she adds with certainty [...] . "To be able to say 'yeah, but I am Swedish. But then they say come on. Stop joking. You are not Swedish'" [...] "Yes, it is to do with appearance. It doesn't matter where you live or how many Swedish friends you hang out with or whether you speak with an accent. I mean, it is only about appearance." (Lundström 2007:75-76)

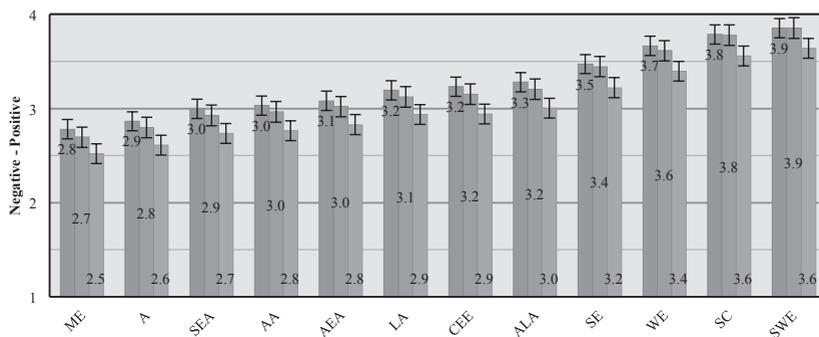
The same experience is shared by Swedes with Asian and Middle Eastern background (Khosravi 2006; Nam 2007). Trotzig and Lundberg's auto-biographical books present the experiences of discrimination faced by adopted Koreans in Sweden, growing up culturally Swedish but racially Asian (Lundberg 2014; Trotzig 2001).

My own study on attitudes towards interracial relationships clearly shows that race matters in Sweden in the question of potential intimate partner choice (Osanami Törngren 2011). A survey and interviews were conducted in the city of Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden. Malmö is one of Sweden's most multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural cities, where about thirty-one percent of the residents are foreign born, and where interracial contacts are very common (Malmöstad 2014). The survey

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results showed that the majority of the white European respondents<sup>1</sup> could imagine dating, marrying and having children interracially. However, the hierarchical preference is obvious. Table 1 below shows the mean responses towards whether respondents can imagine engaging in interracial dating, marriage and childbearing (From left to right on each given group). The responses are coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). It is clear that Swedes (SWE), West and South European (WE, SE) are the most preferred, followed by Central/East European (CEE) and Latin American (LA). South/East Asian (SEA), African (A) and Middle Easterner (ME) are the least preferred as a dating, marriage and childbearing partner. The hierarchical attitudes were justified through the idea of culture, individual choice and the idea that love is colorblind. However this was highly contested and questioned when examining attitudes towards non-white transnational adoptees. Attitudes towards adoptees were measured separately and the result shows dispersed preferences towards adoptees, namely that Adopted Latin American (ALA) was the most preferred, followed by Adopted East Asian (AEA) and Adopted African (AA). Moreover, even though the mean attitudes are slightly more positive for the adopted groups, the 95 percent confidence interval (the black line) showed that there were no statistically significant differences between attitudes towards the adopted groups and the equivalent non-adopted groups. Since adoptees grow up in a Swedish family, sharing Swedish culture and speaking the Swedish language as their mother tongue, the survey results clearly indicate that the racial belonging of the adoptees plays a role in the preference of an intimate partner.

Table 1. Mean attitudes towards interracial marriages among white European respondents (N=461)



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## Conclusion

No social scientists today use the concept of race in debates and scholarly works to refer to the idea of race as a biological category. Today race is understood as a socially constructed category: Race is only a belief in race evoked by the selective perception of visible differences. Promoting the analytical term race does not mean that I assert that society should categorize people according to race. I respect the fact that the word race has developed differently in English speaking countries and other European countries, and it should be discussed whether the word race itself is the most appropriate word or not to be used in Sweden. Even though science has proved that genetics indicates that most physical variation lies within the same racial groups and that “the physical variations have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them” (American Sociological Association 2003; American Anthropological Association 1998), by reusing the term race, and by referring to reality and to physically visible differences, the classical discussion of biological race and essentialism inevitably follows. The problem seems not to be the word itself but the Swedish approach and persuasiveness of the colorblind ideal. Brekke and Borchgrevink highlight the ambiguity of Swedish categorizations of people, such as ethnicity, culture and country of origin. Despite the fact that people are defined and categorized according to the color of the skin, “[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” (2007:79). Therefore criticisms are raised against scholars who advocate the usage of race, that they are essentializing a group of people and treating race as something static, when in fact the same criticisms can actually be raised to scholars who apply the terms ethnicity and culture. While concepts of ethnicity and culture can ignore the visible differences and shift the focus to cultural traditions or shared values among a group of people, the idea of race forces one to treat visible differences as something relevant. I believe that this is why the concept of race is so contested and debated in Sweden. The strong resistance to the word race truly reflects the self-image and the colorblind belief that race does not matter in Sweden. The resistance to talk about race in contemporary Sweden can be understood as a national collective forgetting of a past where Sweden played a crucial role in the development of the idea of biological race, and where the notions of Sweden and Swedishness were built on the idea of the

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white superior race. Parallel to Rosenberg's analysis in the U.S., the Swedish context only proves that blindness to skin color and race is a "privilege" that is offered to white people and that "color blindness only serves to perpetuate and institutionalize the very divisions between people that it seeks to overcome" (2004:232).

In an ideal world, race should not matter: This is why I believe it is important to discuss issues concerning integration and discrimination in Sweden in terms of race. Lentin states that "[t]he argument for seeing race is not based on a wish to revive race as biology, but on the recognition that the effects of racial division continue to have a profound impact on society and politics" (2008:91). Failing to discuss how race matters and continuing to pursue the belief of colorblindness in Sweden, I believe will only inhibit the efforts towards tackling discrimination and racism that exist in Sweden today and achieving a truly colorblind society.

### [Endnotes]

- 1 Respondents who have reported that neither one of their parents have an origin in another country than Sweden nor adopted (N=404), and those who have reported an origin in Scandinavia (N=31), Southern Europe (N=6), Western Europe (N=14) including North America, and respondents who have reported a mixture of the previously named origin (N=6) are categorized as white European for the purpose of this study.

### [Acknowledgment]

I would like to thank Richard Wyver for the valuable input and the language editing for this article.

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