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To be Non-white in a Colour-Blind Society: Conversations with Adoptees and Adoptive Parents in Sweden on Everyday Racism

Tobias Hübinette & Carina Tigervall

This study is based on qualitative interviews with 20 adult international adoptees of colour and 8 adoptive parents with internationally adopted children in Sweden regarding their experiences of racialisation, ethnic identifications and coping strategies. The study finds that the non-white bodies of the adoptees are constantly made significant in their everyday lives in interactions with the white Swedish majority population, whether expressed as 'curious questions' concerning the ethnic origin of the adoptees or as outright aggressive racialisation. The study argues that race has to be taken into consideration by Swedish adoption research and the Swedish adoption community, in order to fully grasp the high occurrence of mental illness among adult adoptees as found by quantitative adoption research.

Keywords: Adoption; Colour-Blind; Everyday Racism; Racialisation; Sweden

Internationally, Sweden is considered to be a paradise for human rights, where not only social justice and gender equality have been accomplished to the fullest extent, but also an antiracist society or even a post-racial utopia, where colour-blindness is the norm, and where race as a concept and as a category has been made completely irrelevant and obsolete. With 50,000 foreign-born adoptees out of a total population of 9 million, the Northern European nation-state of Sweden is proportionally the

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leading adopting country in the world. Ever since transnational adoption was institutionalised in Sweden in the late 1960s on a cultural, societal, political and legal level, it has been seen as an unproblematic child welfare practice and as a legitimate reproductive method. As Sweden was heavily affected by, and deeply involved in, the social revolution of 1968, transnational adoption has also been conceived of as a leftist-liberal project. This means that contrary to, for example, the situations in the USA and the UK, no one has questioned white Swedes' right to adopt children of colour from non-Western countries and there is no ongoing debate on the dark sides of transnational and transracial adoption. The fact that Sweden is the leading adopting country in the world has also contributed to and strengthened the Swedish self-image of being the only country in the Western world standing outside the histories of colonialism and imperialism, and the experiences of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. The image of Sweden as being the most progressive Western country and the Third World's patron and benefactor in the West, is very much established also on an international level.

However, during recent years new critical migration research has come out challenging this image of Sweden as a haven for migrants from the developing world and people of colour by showing that discrimination against migrants and minorities is widespread in practically every different area of Swedish society (Burns et al.; *SOU Det blågula glashuset; Integrationens*). On the other hand, when this topic is discussed and researched, national, cultural, linguistic and religious differences and conflicts as well as socio-economic and institutional factors are brought up to explain outcomes such as residential segregation and discrimination in the labour market. Seldom if ever, the category of race and the relevance of inhabiting a non-white body in relation to the white Swedish majority population are considered and taken up; there is a strong resistance and reluctance to talk about different appearances within Swedish academia and in Swedish culture on the whole. In contrast to the situation in the USA, race – like in all Scandinavia – is a taboo subject, and the ideology of colour-blindness is therefore hegemonic with the consequence that racism today is solely connected to political right-wing extremism and mostly only to explicit and outright National Socialism. Therefore, the non-white bodies of the adoptees are not an issue within the field of transnational adoption, whether in academia, among practitioners and professionals, or among adoptive parents and adoptees themselves. This study challenges the silence around race in contemporary Swedish society in general, and within the Swedish adoption community in particular.

The current study presents the results from our research project "Adoption, Discrimination and Ethnic Identity",¹ which is based on qualitative interviews with 20 adult transnational adoptees and 8 adoptive parents with transnationally adopted children in Sweden. Experiences of discrimination among adoptees and adopters is seen by the study as a way of examining how exclusion – due to a non-white appearance – is put into practice in contemporary Swedish society, and how individuals are influenced by and answer to it. Adoptees and adoptive parents are the most ideal groups to examine discrimination based on a non-white appearance, as Sweden's 50,000 transnational

adoptees must be considered to be ethno-culturally Swedish, and above all, they are the only demographic subgroup of foreign-born first-generation migrants from non-Western countries who share socio-economic conditions with the most privileged part of the native-born white Swedish majority population. In other words, adult adoptees are not just completely Swedish and Western according to all existing definitions of nationality and ethnicity; they also normally belong to the upper socio-economic strata of Swedish society, a fact which makes race the only category at work when they are discriminated against. Furthermore, this study also wants to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the role of adoptive parents and their experiences of discrimination – something which has never before been studied by Swedish adoption research – and therefore adoptive parents' experiences of discrimination towards the family and their children are also included in the study as well as their relations to their child's ethnic origin, and their strategies to cope with the fact that the child has a non-white appearance. The research question of the study is therefore: what are the experiences of discrimination among adoptees and adopters of Sweden, and how are the two groups responding to discrimination and what are the strategies being used among them?

Swedish adoption research has mainly concentrated itself upon examining adjustment and attachment issues during childhood and adolescence, while Swedish migration research has focused itself upon groups that are ethno-culturally different from the majority population of Sweden. Swedish adoption research and Swedish migration research have been separated from each other, as adoptees are not conceptualised as migrants and minorities even if foreign-born adoptees make up around 10 per cent of the non-white population of Sweden. Accordingly, up until recently, there has not been any Swedish research on the experiences of adult adoptees, and no Swedish research on adoptive parents. Furthermore, up until now, there have been no Swedish studies examining experiences of discrimination among adoptive families. In this study, the results from Swedish adoption and migration studies are therefore combined with the aim of examining the significance of having a non-white appearance in everyday life of contemporary Sweden, by making use of adult adoptees and adoptive parents and their experiences of discrimination as the empirical material.

Research Area and Previous Studies

In total, 50,000 foreign-born children have been adopted into Sweden during a period of 50 years, and Sweden is the country in the world that has adopted the most transnationally in proportion to its native-born population (Hübinette "Adopted Koreans of Sweden"). In 2000, 62 per cent of the adult adoptee population of Sweden above 25 years old was female and 38 per cent male, and 51 per cent of the women and 29 per cent of the men were born in Korea (Rooth "Etnisk diskriminering"). In 2006, China was the dominant country of birth for transnationally adopted children between the age of 0 and 14 years, and India for those between 15 and 29 years, while

Korea by far dominated as the country of origin for those between 30 and 44 years old (Bernhardt and Klintefelt). The transnationally adopting parents are in turn characterised by a high proportion belonging to the upper strata of the Swedish society in terms of education and income measures: it is estimated that 50 per cent or more belong to the upper class and 40 per cent to the middle class, while 10 per cent or less belong to the working class (Reuterberg and Hansen).

Swedish adoption research has traditionally, like in all Western countries, been dominated by the disciplines of psychology, medicine and social work, and has examined the adjustment and attachment of adoptees as children and adolescents to their adoptive parents and families (Cederblad; Lindblad). In sum, mainstream Swedish adoption research tends to privilege childhood before adulthood, family before society, and the adoption factor before the race factor. The dominant adoption research of Sweden has accordingly never been interested in the adult lives of adoptees or their experiences of inhabiting a non-white body, and there are few studies with adoptive parents as research objects while most researchers themselves are adoptive parents. One exception when it comes to the former topic is a study examining experiences of sexualisation among adult adopted women born in Asia, and two studies based on interviews with adoptive parents which both reveal that adoptees are subjected to discrimination in their everyday lives (Halldén; von Greiff; Lindblad and Signell). There is also a growing body of autobiographical texts and interviews published by adoptees and adopters which also indicate that experiences of everyday racism are common among adult adoptees of colour in Sweden (HübINETTE "Disembedded"; HübINETTE and Tigervall; Lindström and Trotzig; von Melen; Trotzig).

Further, recently new quantitative adoption research has come out examining the situation of adult adoptees by the way of Sweden's unique population registers, which make it possible to statistically examine practically every registered inhabitant in the country, citizen and non-citizen alike. This new research has concluded that many adult adoptees have a lower psychic health compared to both the Swedish majority population and immigrant groups coming from the same countries as the adoptees, when it comes to, for example, psychiatric illnesses, alcohol and drug abuse, criminality and suicide behaviour (von Borczyskowski et al.; Hjern and Allebeck; Hjern et al.). In fact, no other demographic subgroup in Sweden has a higher suicide rate than adult adoptees, as accomplished suicide is four to five times higher among the group than among the Swedish majority population. This new quantitative adoption research based on population registers has also found that many adult adoptees have substantial problems reproducing their adoptive parents' socio-economic status when it comes to, for example, establishing themselves in the labour market, and dependence on allowances and sick leave, in spite of the fact that the adoptees have grown up in the most privileged strata of Swedish society (Carlberg and Nordin Jareno; Lindblad, Hjern and Vinnerljung; Rooth "Etnisk diskriminering"; "Adopted Children"). Compared to both the majority population and non-adopted migrants from the same countries of origin, adult adoptees have a lower mental health, while both migrants and adoptees tend to end up in the lower strata of

Swedish society as adults. The dominant explanation for these statistical results has been a combination of pre-adoption traumas and separations, genetic defects and cognitive underdevelopment, meaning that pre-adoption factors such as maternal deprivation and separation issues together with bad hereditary and low IQ are said to be causing the adoptees' overrepresentations in mental health problems, suicide rates and unemployment statistics. However, our hypothesis is that these statistical results can be explained as the consequences of a routinised and systematic discrimination in everyday life as a result of the presence of the adoptees' non-white bodies.

Swedish migration research has seldom if ever included adoptees and adoptive families as research objects within its research agenda, as transnational adoption is not considered to be a part of international migration, and adoptees are therefore not seen as migrants at all (FAS; Westin). As Swedish migration research focuses on migrants and minorities who are ethno-culturally and most often also socio-economically different from the majority population and does not consider the significance of race and a non-white appearance, Swedish adoption research and Swedish migration research have been completely separated up until now. However, recently new qualitative Swedish migration research has come out indicating that a non-white body is a factor to be considered when it comes to being exposed to discrimination in contemporary Sweden (Akrami, Ekehammar and Araya; Hällgren; Kalonaityté, Kawesa and Tedros; Kamali; de los Reyes, Molina and Mulinari; de los Reyes and Wingborg). This new and critical discrimination research argues that the segregation of residential areas and the unemployment rates among non-Western migrants are not caused by the 'ethnic difference' of the migrants, but can be explained as a result of discrimination. Previously, mainstream Swedish migration research has tended to blame segregation and unemployment among non-white minorities on the social and cultural 'deviancy' and 'abnormality' of non-Western people.

This study challenges these genetic and cultural hypotheses among mainstream Swedish adoption and migration research, by trying to bridge together the recent results coming from the new adoption research and the new discrimination research as well as filling up the lack of Swedish adoption research with a critical race and whiteness studies perspective. The study mainly relates to a number of qualitative studies that have recently come out, based on in-depth interviews with Swedish people of colour, which show that everyday racism and racialisation practices are common in Sweden just as they are in any other Western country, in spite of the dominant Swedish colour-blindness approach and the hegemonic self-image of being a non-racist society (Lundström; Motsieloa; Sawyer *Black and Swedish*; "Race, African Diasporas"; Schmauch). Thus, there is a slow but steadily growing recognition of the existence of racism and the significance of race in Sweden, even if the question of different experiences of racism for adoptees of colour and non-adopted immigrants of colour still remains to be explored within the background of the ongoing gradual transformation of Sweden into a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society.

Research Subjects and Theoretical Concepts

This is a qualitative study based on taped and transcribed interviews with 20 adult adoptees and 8 adoptive parents, which were conducted during 2007, and focused on how they experience and relate to discrimination. The subjects were recruited by the use of advertisements; these were placed on the Internet through adoptees and adoptive parents' organisations, and in different magazines and journals published and read within the Swedish adoption community. The age of the adoptee subjects ranged from 21 to 48, and 10 were adopted from Korea while other countries of origin were Ethiopia (2), Sri Lanka (1), Iran (1), Bangladesh (1), Colombia (1), Chile (2), Morocco (1) and the Dominican Republic (1). The adoptive parents had transnationally adopted children who were between the ages of 0 and 35 years old, and who were born in countries like India, China, Thailand, Korea and Colombia. Eleven of the adoptees and all of the adoptive parents were women, a gender breakdown which in the latter case is interesting to note in itself as the adoption community of Sweden and probably of most Western countries is very much a female-dominated world. As quantitative researchers, we do not claim that the informants' experiences are generalisable to all adoptees and adopters of Sweden; instead they simply reflect the informants who came forward and contacted us and were prepared to tell us about their sometimes very painful and intimate memories of discrimination. The interviews were semi-structured, and the central themes which were brought up with the subjects were: experiences of discrimination in school, working life, in public and the private spheres, attitudes to stereotypes and images of different non-white groups, feelings of belongingness to Swedish society and culture, and strategies to handle experiences of discrimination. However, in this study only the empirical material explicitly dealing with experiences of discrimination will be presented and analysed.

This study is based on a social-constructivist understanding of concepts like ethnicity, race and identity, and is inspired by postcolonial feminist studies, and critical race and whiteness studies (Crenshaw et al.; Essed; Essed and Goldberg; Matsuda et al.; Omi and Winant). This perspective means that concepts like Swedishness and whiteness are continuously (re)produced, and have never signified an authentic or original essence since their conception. Concepts like ethnicity and race are likewise always relational and embedded within different historicised power relations and structures, and ethnic and racial identities are always negotiable and under construction, and never finished nor final. When it comes to the case of adoptees and adoptive parents, the 'ethnic' aspect is, however, only a matter of appearance, and to claim that adoptees have another ethnic identity than a Swedish or Western is therefore problematic, impossible and even absurd as they have grown up with, and continue to live within a wholly Swedish ethno-cultural and national environment and milieu.

The central concept for this study is therefore racialisation rather than ethnic identity, namely, the practice and process whereby different bodies and appearances

are linked to certain stereotypes and images, as well as certain geographical origins and cultural histories (Anthias and Yuval-Davis; Miles; Omi and Winant). Within postcolonial theory, these links and images derive from Western modernity and colonialism and its scientific knowledge production, which mainly took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the time of European nation and empire building (Bhabha; Said *Orientalism*; *Culture and Imperialism*; Spivak *In Other Worlds*; *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*). However, it is not always easy to separate ethnic identities from racialisation, as such 'ethnic' variables like language, culture and religion almost always seem to fall back upon a certain body, which is decoded and read as belonging to a certain race, which in its turn is linked to a certain ethnicity. Accordingly, the theoretical understanding of this study is that it is practices and processes of racialisation that create and uphold the idea and notion of races and the subsequent ethnic identities, and not that races and ethnicities exist as pure entities. In other words, neither ethnicity nor race are inherited or owned, they are instead ascribed to certain individuals and groups, and they are therefore neither static nor unchangeable, but on the contrary always contested and under transformation.

This study presents material from the interviews where the significance of a non-white body is in focus in everyday life situations and contexts. The account will move from public spaces dominated by white Swedes belonging to the upper class, where a non-white body is made hyper-visible and non-normative, to a contextualisation of the meaning of different geographical spaces, and to the painful experiences of discrimination taking place within the intimate sphere. At the end, the study argues that race as a concept and as a category has to be considered when it comes to understanding the situation of adult adoptees and adoptive families, as in spite of the image of Sweden as an antiracist or even non-racist society, the empirical material indicates that inhabiting a non-white body is a significant factor in everyday life even in contemporary Sweden.

Racialisation in Public Space

Isabella: Me and a friend who is adopted from Colombia were in a shop, and we were followed by the shop owner, and it was quite unpleasant. Also, when me and the same friend and another friend who is wholly Swedish had been in Copenhagen, my Colombian friend was stopped at the customs, while me and my other friend could pass through without any problems. This was at the time of the ferry [between Sweden and Denmark], but I have also been stopped on the bridge [between Sweden and Denmark], but I didn't have to show my driver's license as I spoke fluent Swedish.

The negative treatment which adoptees are subjected to in everyday life does not seem to differ substantially from the one that migrant's experience, in spite of the fact that these two groups radically differ from each other both ethno-culturally and socio-economically. However, one factor erases and collapses these otherwise enormous differences for the white Swedish majority population: their non-white bodies. Thus,

it is not surprising that the most common examples of discrimination in everyday life such as ‘shop racism’ and ‘customs racism’ appear in the empirical material. Isabella who is adopted from Bangladesh, has been exposed to special surveillance in shops, and has experienced the problem of returning to Sweden after having been abroad. It also seems as if the customs officers are making use of some kind of racial profiling, as Isabella’s adopted friend from Colombia is sometimes stopped and searched, according to the widespread and popular image of Latin Americans as criminals. Isabella also contrasts her Swedish experiences with the ones she has from visits to the USA and the UK, where she claims that she has no problems convincing the custom officers that she is Swedish. In other words, Isabella’s experience shows that Swedishness is still today strongly linked to anatomical whiteness.

Fredrik: Once I was with my former girlfriend and her friends, and I was withdrawing money from an automatic cash dispensing machine. Behind us, there were some older Swedish guys, and immediately they started to say “damn negro” and so on, and they didn’t say it in a subtle way but in a rather high voice. At that moment, you are very vulnerable, because I was with my former girlfriend and her friends, so I was pretty alone there.

Fredrik is adopted from the Dominican Republic, and he tells about the sudden and unexpected experience of being humiliated and harassed in the company of white Swedish significant others in such everyday situations as when withdrawing money. Fredrik expresses a frustration at being alone as the only person of colour in such occasions, as he claims that he can never be sure if he will be ‘backed up’ and receive support, or if his white Swedish friends are even registering the harassment. Fredrik also claims that experiences like this happen especially when he is in the company of white people who are close to him, as if the provocation is even greater when non-white people are socialising with white people, something which of course is the norm for the vast majority of adoptees. It may also be assumed that this type of racialisation is even more shameful and humiliating, when it takes place in the presence of those who are the closest to the adoptees, such as their partners and parents.

Andreas: I have experienced a lot, but I don’t know if it’s racism, I really don’t know. For example on the morning bus, and I have only lived in neighbourhoods with Swedes, I’ve never lived in immigrant dominated areas. So when I’m on the bus, no one wants to sit beside me, so instead they stand up! And then one wonders, well, I don’t smell, I don’t look particularly ugly, you know! Or when I’m going home from the pub and someone passes by, and they become afraid. Okay, they are afraid because I’m black, they show it pretty well. And old ladies who are holding their handbags tightly, as if I’m a criminal and an immigrant who is going to rob them. And when I’m entering a supermarket, a guard is following me, and when I am in a jeweller’s shop, they remove the gold.

For adoptees who live in urban centres, experiences of racialisation in the public sphere are usually a question of strangers ‘on the street’ who mark their hostility

towards them by placing themselves and moving themselves according to a choreography and a body language which signals differentiation and distancing. Andreas who is adopted from Colombia also brings up the association of blackness with violence, which is easily recognised in an American context, and one may suspect that this racialising discourse has been imported into Sweden by way of the ever-present American popular cultural productions. Even as Andreas is able to tell several stories from his adult life containing clear examples of racialisation, he at the same time doubts that these experiences can be named and categorised as racism. This doubt is expressed by many of the other informants, both adoptees and parents, and it can be analysed as an expression of the Swedish silence around race, whereby there is always this suspicion that the bad treatment may have been caused by something other than the non-white body.

Mia: And then there is this playground racism. If you are at a public playground, and if I am in the background and they are running around playing, and one of my sons is pretty dark, one can hear "I don't want to sit next to that brown boy in the sandbox". I mean, if someone had said, "I don't want to play with that blonde girl with the pink skirt", one would have said "everyone is welcome in the sandbox". But at these occasions, no adult is doing anything [...] However, when I approach, and they start to connect me to him, then they start to behave normally again, and then they say "everybody is allowed to be here". And that is an interesting observation: "oh, he is not just any immigrant child".

An everyday situation which some adoptive parents bring up is when their children are exposed to negative comments and exclusionary treatments from strangers at public playgrounds. Mia, an adoptive mother with two sons from India, has coined the term 'playground racism', which has a nasty connotation as playgrounds and racism of course should be as far away from each other as possible. However, non-white adopted children apparently seem to be excluded now and then from playgrounds and sandboxes. The most noteworthy factor is that other parents who would be expected to encourage Swedish core values of democracy and equality, seem to ignore their children's excluding attitudes towards children of colour. However, when the child in question is recognised and identified as a transnational adoptee, the parents start to 'behave normally' and the democratic principle of equal treatment is suddenly reactivated and reinstalled. This playground situation can be seen as an allegory for how a discriminating society is structured and functions: only white children/people are allowed to enter the sandbox/Sweden, and children/people of colour can be excluded by way of surveillance from Swedish people/authorities. On the other hand, when a non-white person is acknowledged as a legitimate Swedish subject by way of adoptive parents/judicial documents, then the exclusion diminishes or disappears. Negative experiences of being observed as different and as not belonging to Sweden, are also strengthened when encountering different institutions and authorities, such as customs. In the interviews, experiences among adoptees of not being able to pass through customs without producing a passport or speaking in fluent Swedish to prove their Swedish citizenship and their belongingness

to Sweden, are therefore good examples of when a non-white appearance weighs more than a national citizenship.

The study's empirical material clearly shows that processes of racialisation are played out in the public sphere in everyday life in Sweden. The aforementioned extracts have presented experiences of a more explicit negative nature. However, the most common form of racialisation among the informants is above all the constant bombardment of questions regarding the national, regional, ethnic and racial origin of the adoptees, which seems to practically harass both the adoptees and their parents. Some of the informants view these questions as an expression of mere 'curiosity', while others analyse them as the most typical but subtle form of exclusion from the kind of bourgeois Swedishness and whiteness that most of the adoptees and the adoptive families naturally identify themselves with. However, many adoptees doubt their own experiences of racialisation, and whether they are expressions of racism or not, and even consciously antiracist adoptive parents seem to have great problems talking about discrimination based on a non-white appearance, and instead turn the issue into a question of 'roots' and/or a question of not having any 'blood ties'. In this way, the interviews clearly reflect the Swedish taboo regarding everything that has to do with race, and the Swedish self-image of being a country where race has no significance at all.

The Meaning of Different Spaces

Sofia: It was really here in Stockholm, after when I moved here, that I started to encounter racist attacks as far as I can remember. It happened before maybe, but there were so few occasions. Here, suddenly it happened often, or at least every month. That, I had never experienced before, so it was a shock for me to be exposed to this sort of hate.

The socio-economic and ethno-cultural demographic make-up of different geographical locations is decisive when it comes to how racialisation practices are experienced among the informants. The differences are obvious – when it comes to being stared at on the streets for example – within small homogenous cities than in more ethno-racially mixed mid-sized and big cities. The homogenous small town is often mentioned as a problematic location for migrants and minorities, but big cities are not necessarily spaces of tolerance, as the antagonism between native Swedes and immigrants of colour can be even more articulated and pronounced in, for example, Stockholm or Gothenburg. The significance of the adoptees' different life trajectories and the experiences they have accumulated from different spaces, is well illustrated by Sofia who is adopted from Korea, and who grew up in a small town where 'everyone knew her', which in reality means that she was known as a transnational adoptee and not a 'Third World migrant'. For Sofia, it was only when she moved to Stockholm that she started to experience a more explicit and aggressive form of racialisation in the public sphere, or at least that is how she remembers it. Sofia mentions that

children and older people are the ones who she regards as the worst perpetrators, and interestingly enough, these two age groups are likewise identified in a study based on interviews with adult adoptees of Asian origin and their experiences of sexualisation (Lindblad and Signell). In fact, the mere physical presence of white Swedish children or pensioners seems able to provoke stress, fear and anxiety among adult adoptees, given that they can never be sure which kind of verbal attacks that will follow.

Rebecka: For a while, I lived in downtown Stockholm, and there I really felt, here I don't fit it! There were no people of colour, and I experienced, although it might have been my own insecurity, that people stared at me in a hostile way, so I moved from there to a suburb where I definitely felt more at home.

All of the adoptee informants with the exception of two were living in white Swedish-dominated upper middle-class areas and neighbourhoods when the interviews took place. Rebecka, who is adopted from Iran, has both experienced living in Stockholm's white elite-dominated downtown area, and in one of Stockholm's immigrant-dominated suburbs, and it is obvious that she felt more secure and at home in the last neighbourhood. Rebecka also expresses another typical attitude among the adoptee informants towards being exposed to negative treatment, namely, to blame it on herself as an expected result of her own 'insecurity'. The adopter informants have also reflected upon where to live as an ethno-racially mixed family. However, for most of the parents, socio-economic sameness and social networks are more important than the ethno-racial make-up of the neighbourhood, which in practice means that most of them are living in white upper middle-class residential areas.

Åsa: When the children entered the day-care centre, we were grateful to have found a place where there were children with many different skin colours. I thought it was positive, so that one wouldn't stick out and instead be able to accept different appearances. But I'm not sure if it was successful though, because the children, they knew – it was so cruel – they knew their place so early. So Noah, the youngest boy, he is a bit dark, and the children measured their skin colours with each other, and the one with the lightest skin had the highest status. And I brought this up with the day-care centre personnel, as they hadn't noticed it, and they became really worried and talked about it, so they acted correctly. But it shows that these [immigrant] children who have come to Sweden, that they already knew that there is a difference, and they also conveyed it to our [adopted] children.

Åsa and her family who has two adopted sons, has deliberately chosen to move to an area which is more ethno-culturally mixed, which makes her children less visible in the neighbourhood. In spite of that, Åsa's choice to live in a more heterogeneous place resulted in making her son experience a racialising practice among the minority children, where status was measured within their group according to skin colour. Evidently, immigrant children of Sweden are very conscious of racial hierarchies from an early age, and they may also convey this information to adoptive children in a rather brutal way, who in turn might otherwise be more protected from this knowledge when living in homogenous white-dominated areas. This special conveyance of knowledge of

race and racism might appear as a cruel act by the immigrant children, but it also reflects how the society is structured, locally as well as globally.

Racialisation in School

Mia: When Oscar went to the child minder, and I think he was 4 years old, and when they played a shop game, someone decided that he was not allowed to purchase in the shop as he was brown. And when we told this to the child minders, they were shocked and said “this is not how it should be!” There is this naïve image of small children that they are not thinking in this way, so the adult world gets shocked when it happens. I mean, small children reflect upon the world around them, so I don’t think it’s strange that it happens, but I actually think it’s strange to be unaware of it. And sometimes one feels as if the pre-school and school personnel don’t have so much knowledge, and maybe haven’t even reflected upon their own prejudices [...] there are for example these comments that Oscar is brown, like poo-poo.

Carina: So what happens then?

Mia: Nothing special, as children are smart and the adults are staying within their adult spheres, especially in school. So nothing happens directly in front of the school personnel who have playground duty, but if you move away from them in another direction, there, quite a lot happens [...] And there, one may hear “you cannot come to my party because you are brown”, but they would never say that in front of adults, as they know that the adults will object to it.

Mia’s story regarding her child’s experiences in school shows the problem with racialisation in Swedish society in general: behind an antiracist façade, here exemplified with probably the most central societal institution, the school, humiliating commentaries and excluding practices take place against people of colour. So the official antiracism and the negative treatment exist within the same sphere and space, but are made invisible for those who are there to stop and combat it, namely, the teachers and the adults. Mia’s story offers a multi-dimensional insight into how non-compatible values are able to exist side by side, and how complicated it may be to intervene as an antiracist adoptive parent.

Alexander: The first contact I had with another culture was when I was 10 years old, and a Kurdish boy came to my class. I was the only dark person in my class, so of course I became his friend and was supposed to take care of him.

Tobias: But who decided that?

Alexander: Our teacher.

All of the adoptee informants can relate to being treated differently in school during childhood and adolescence in some way or another. What is most striking is that not only other children turn up as ‘perpetrators’ in the interviews, but also adults in the form of teachers and school personnel, while the school environment is regarded as an explicitly antiracist institution according to numerous policy documents (Gruber; Parszyk; Sawyer and Kamali). A common experience is to have been connected to other

classmates with a foreign background regardless of country of birth or ethno-racial appearance. Alexander, who is adopted from Sri Lanka, was for example ordered to 'take care of' a boy with a Kurdish background despite the fact that they were practically unable to communicate with each other, and Arvid who was adopted from Chile was instructed to 'take care of' two Chinese immigrant siblings by his school teacher. This active lumping together of adopted and immigrant children by teachers is a good example of how non-white bodies tend to collapse into one 'Third World mass' regardless of country or even continent of origin.

Mia: In primary school there was a boy from Senegal, and when they are out walking, they pair the children together in couples to make them walk in a line, and for some reason Hassan and Oscar always walked together. It is not a problem in itself, but finally Oscar said: why must I always walk together with Hassan, I want to walk with Carl! So it was like, I think it was unconsciously, as if they paired together the two dark boys.

Several of the adoptive parents also talk about how teachers and school personnel bring adopted and immigrant children together. When it comes to the practice of pairing children together based on a common appearance, it might be a way of caring for children with a non-normative body, and accordingly all children of colour are put together with the supposed idea that they share certain common interests. However, in reality this is nothing but a segregating practice, namely, to divide people according to appearance, and which goes back to racist practices of segregation and apartheid in Europe's settler colonies that the school is said to both educate about and combat. When school personnel are making use of the very same practice, it has a strong symbolic significance, beyond the fact that it might not always necessarily be a bad thing for the individual child to be paired together with those having a similar appearance.

Racialisation in the Intimate Sphere

Åsa: Noa is dark-skinned, and he easily becomes tanned, and in a Swedish perspective he might appear a bit "filthy-like", and my own mother has reacted upon that. I have told her off properly that I don't tolerate such talk, and that she must accept them as they are.

Carina: Has your mother told you that when your children are absent?

Åsa: Yes, yes, I think so, and it's a huge problem, and I've told her that. For her, there are "Swedes" and "foreigners", that kind of talk, and she lives in a town where there is a shop owned by, in her perspective, a "foreigner", and she used to say "go to the foreigner and buy that and that". So I've told her, I don't think like that, it's an individual, why do you have to say so?

In the interviews with the parents, there were several examples whereby relatives, mainly older ones, harbour negative attitudes towards people of colour and those from the developing world, and how these attitudes create problems for the adoptive

family. When it comes to combating these kinds of attitudes and opinions, the delicate issue of the possibility or impossibility of continuing to have a good relationship with certain parts of the family or certain close friends arises. When it comes to close relatives, the dilemma is even greater, as an open conflict may erupt if the adoptive parents protest explicitly against racialising practices from their own family members: either contact is avoided completely, which means that the children will not be in contact with certain relatives during their childhood, or one risks exposing the child to racist opinions, which in the longer term will influence them in a destructive way.

Linnea: I have always been singled out at home. As soon as there is something about Korea on television, they have said “look it’s about Korea!” And if something about Korea comes up, they have always emphasised it to me, as if I didn’t get it the first time. And my mother has her favourite stories, such as when I arrived in Sweden and sat on the floor and looked down. Her favourite story, I think she has told it hundreds of times, is that my cousin says, “Oh it looks as if she is sleeping”, because I have narrow eyes. This story has amused her so many times!

Also for the adoptees, racialisation doesn’t always take place only in public places, but also in the intimate sphere, as some informants talk about how their appearance has always been highlighted by family members and significant others. Linnea remembers how her non-white body has been highlighted within the family ever since she was adopted to Sweden from Korea in a manner which seems to be similar to some kind of harassment. Linnea grew up in a wholly white Swedish upper middle-class area in the greater Stockholm region, and her adoptive mother had a whole repertoire of ‘funny stories’ regarding her physical otherness to share among her female friends in the neighbourhood. As a mother to an Asian child, she also likes to stare at other Asians whom she encounters on the streets, and she often thinks that they “look like her daughter” according to the well-known logic that all Asians look the same in the eyes of the white gaze. Linnea has not protested against these racialising attitudes and practices from her own family, but she does not think that she looks like many Asians she has seen in Stockholm and it is quite obvious that her experiences of racialisation within the intimate sphere has been damaging for her psyche in the long run.

To be a Non-white Swede

Simon: I feel that it is mostly children and elders who say things that make me sad. For example, “oh do you speak Swedish?”, and that I am met by scepticism. I have worked in several small towns, and I feel that they are so sceptic in the beginning, but after a while they think, “Okay this person speaks Swedish and has a Swedish name!” So before I open my mouth and speak, they think that I’m an immigrant, and then after a while, they reassess me. It is so tough – that I have to explain myself in every new meeting!

There is a strong culturally ingrained and taken-for-granted correlation between a certain appearance, and a certain language and name: white people are expected to speak a Western (Indo-European) language, and to have Western and mainly Christian names. Simon who is adopted from Korea, expresses a frustration bordering on despair when it comes to this widespread imagined and naturalised connection between language, name and race, which is activated in everyday life, and he also repeats that children and older people are the main perpetrators when it comes to verbal racism. Simon has worked in several homogenous small towns of Sweden, and he feels that every time he meets a new white Swede, he has to explain the dissonance between why he inhabits a non-white body, and why he, in spite of that, speaks fluent Swedish, and has a Western and Christian name.

Mia: There are many who asks us if we speak English with the children, and who wonder which language we use to communicate with them.

Carina: So who is asking that?

Mia: Adults! Highly educated people who should be able to think, but who ask us which language we are using. And then I use to answer that I speak Swedish, because my Bengali is not so good!

Language is probably the strongest ethnic and national marker in contemporary Sweden, and likely in other Western countries as well, given the crucial importance of language research when it comes to the historical development of race thinking, and a good example is the discourse around Indo-European languages and the 'Aryans' (Renfrew). Mia tells about how highly educated upper middle-class adults ask her which language she is using when she communicates with her children who are adopted from South Asia. Some of the adoptee informants also testify that when they are sometimes hailed in English, and they answer in fluent Swedish, the white Swedes continue speaking in English with them, as if a neurological blockage is activated when a non-white person behaves perfectly like a Swedish person.

So in spite of a compact belongingness to Swedishness and Swedish culture, having a Swedish citizenship, a Swedish language, a Swedish and Christian name, and above all, being fully integrated within a white Swedish family network, adoptees are obviously constantly racialised in everyday life; their non-white bodies are localised to a certain geographical origin, connected to a certain ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and race, and sometimes also linked to certain cultural and mental characteristics. Mostly, it is not even possible to differentiate between race and ethnicity, as a certain body and appearance almost always seems to go back to a certain group and collectivity and vice versa. The socially constructed entities of race and ethnicity are, in other words, as inseparable as the categories of sex and gender to give a parallel, and together with the specific Swedish context where Swedishness is so intimately connected to whiteness, this creates huge problems for adoptees and adoptive families in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

Lately, quantitative adoption research has found a high preponderance of mental illnesses and socio-economic deprivation among adult transnational adoptees of Sweden. With the aim of wanting to understand these statistical results within the framework of critical race and whiteness studies, this research is based on interviews with 20 adult adoptees and 8 adoptive parents and focuses on their experiences of discrimination. Sweden is officially an antiracist country which actively combats discrimination of immigrants and minorities, but despite this, people of colour including adoptees are discriminated against because of their non-normative appearance. Although, we cannot generalise the experiences of the informants to all adoptees and adoptive parents in Sweden, this study's material clearly shows that the non-white bodies of the adoptees are made significant in their everyday lives in interactions with the white Swedish majority population, and that discrimination of people of colour in general cannot just be explained by socio-economic or ethno-cultural and national, or linguistic and religious factors and differences. The historically embedded and scientifically produced images of different races and their inner and outer characteristics, including their geographical and cultural ascriptions, are in other words still very much alive in everyday life in contemporary Sweden beyond the official declarations and celebrations of being a colour-blind society and a post-racial utopia.

Therefore, we argue that the race factor has to be taken into consideration by Swedish adoption research and the Swedish adoption community, to be able to fully grasp the specific and vulnerable situation of adult adoptees as indicated by new quantitative research on Swedish adoption, which among other things identifies staggering suicide rates. Furthermore, adoptive families and particularly adoptive parents could potentially play a crucial role when it comes to combating racism, discrimination and segregation in Swedish society given their privileged socio-economic status and the strong agency that comes with that. The mere presence of their non-white adopted children in heavily segregated affluent white neighbourhoods and communities could potentially change the whole idea of Swedishness and bears the hope of being able to be a non-white Swede, but in order to accomplish that, colour-blindness has to be discarded and the problem of discrimination based on race has to be spoken about in public. We therefore argue that race as a concept and as a category should also be a part of Swedish migration research to be able to understand the phenomenon of discrimination, and the contemporary racial formations of Sweden, where a non-white appearance is used more and more to differentiate between 'Swedes' and 'non-Swedes'. Finally, we argue for the consideration of the category of race also within government policy and practice, and we deplore the fact that the new Swedish discrimination law which came into effect at the beginning of 2009 excluded discrimination on race as a basis for legal action.

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