

The meaning of race and culture in attitudes toward interracial relationships in Sweden

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1. Aim

Talking about race or “seeing” race is still a taboo in Swedish context; however this does not mean that people in Sweden do not talk about or “see” race. This paper explores the meaning of race and culture in attitudes toward interracial relationships in Sweden.

2. Data & Methods

To explore attitudes towards interracial relationships in Sweden, quantitative survey and qualitative interviews were conducted. The analysis is based on some 420 survey responses and 28 interviews carried out in Malmö, Sweden.

3. Results

Results from the quantitative survey on attitudes toward interracial relationships reveal that race matters in choosing a life-time partner. Survey results show that respondents could imagine having a relationship with someone of Scandinavian, Western, Southern, Central East European or Latin American origin to a larger extent than having a relationship with someone of African, Middle Eastern or South/East Asian origin. Moreover the results show that transnational adoptees who are culturally and ethnically Swedish but are racially non-white are not as preferred as a marriage partner compared to Swedes. Qualitative interview results expose that racial preference in choosing a partner is justified and explained by the notion of cultural differences, gender equality and individual choice. Analyzing the interview results, it becomes clear that the notion of Swedishness and whiteness is strongly embedded in the justifications and the perception of differences. The notion of culture and gender equality especially divides “us” and “them”, the Swedes and the non-white persons of immigrant background from non-Western countries.

4. Conclusion

From these findings, I conclude that even though Swedes try to explain their attitudes towards interracial relationships in a color-blind manner by utilizing the notion of culture, there are racial thinking underlying the notion of culture. Especially the case of adoptees cannot be explained by the notion of cultural differences, and highlights the importance of addressing the issue of race in Swedish context.