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'As Swedish as anybody else' or 'Swedish, but also something else'?
Discourses on transnational adoptee identities in Sweden

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Abstract

The consequences of looking visibly 'non-white' are a recurrent theme in the accounts of many trans national adoptees in Sweden, who frequently find their Swedishness challenged in everyday life. The guidance and education material published by the Swedish Intercountry Adoption Authority (MIA) suggests a strategy of dealing with this by developing pride in the adoptees' non-Swedish origin. The implicit message is that the Swedishness they are excluded from is not worth aspiring to and having additional national origins is more desirable. While this might seem to be a plausible strategy, it raises various problems. For example, despite official discourse on the value of multiculturalism, non-Swedishness in Sweden continues to have predominantly negative connotations. Further, it is a strategy that requires certain cultural and language competencies that are difficult to acquire. Judith Lind analyses the accounts of 22 young adult transnational adoptees in nine focus group discussions in relation to the recommendations made by the MIA. In so doing, she contextualises the Swedish recommendations by considering the background in which they were produced.

Key words: transnational adoption, whiteness, Sweden, discrimination

Introduction

In the education material for adoption applicants published in 2007 by the Swedish Intercountry Adoption Authority (MIA)¹, and the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, adoptive parents are urged to: . . . affirm the child's origin as well as the attachment to Sweden so that the child feels s/he is allowed to be proud of her/ his foreign origin and her/his belonging in Sweden (Socialstyrelsen/MIA, 2007, p 94).² The exact meaning of 'origin' is not made explicit. It may refer to biogenetic origin – the birth parents and the reasons why the adoptee was separated from them – the social, cultural and political context of this separation, or the details of a pre-adoption past, including personal experiences and perhaps memories of an orphanage or foster family. This information constitutes personal or individual origin and there are myriad reasons why it may be of importance to the adopted person. However, the quoted advice to prospective adoptive parents also emphasises that the origin of transnational adoptees is foreign. In so doing, and by simultaneously stressing their belonging in Sweden, the quotation refers to a collective origin constituted by a cultural, ethnic, national or racial belonging. Since most adoptions in Sweden are not only transracial but transnational, and

¹ Previously the Swedish Council for Intercountry Adoptions (NIA) – up until 2006.

² All quotations in this article are translated from the Swedish by the author.

concern the adoption of non-Swedish children by Swedish couples, questions regarding adoptee identities are addressed not only, or even primarily, in terms of race or ethnicity, but also in terms of nationality. But why precisely is pride in one's foreign origin important? Why is pride in one's origin not enough? The emphasis on the Swedishness as well as the foreignness of transnational adoptees can only be understood in relation to recommendations and claims made in previous decades. In keeping with ideologies in many countries, the pioneers of transnational adoption in Sweden in the late 1960s took a 'colour blind' approach, the message being that transnationally adopted children were as Swedish as anybody else. This claim was partly fuelled by the desire to convince sending countries that the children they sent for adoption would enjoy the same status as children born in Sweden (Lindgren, 2010).

In the early 1980s, however, when the first cohorts of transnational adoptees had grown and were teenagers, it became obvious that not everyone perceived them to be as Swedish as anybody else. When they were not with their white adoptive parents, non-white adoptees were assumed to be immigrants and, like other immigrants to Sweden, were subjected to xenophobia and racial discrimination (Lind, 2012). Accordingly, the message to adoptive parents was changed so that they were now urged to acknowledge their child's status as an immigrant and to show respect for his or her foreign background. Adoptive parents who aimed to 'Swedishise' their child as quickly as possible – or to 'paint their kid yellow and blue' (the colours of the Swedish flag), as adoption researcher Marianne Cederblad sarcastically put it – were now frowned upon (Lind, 2012). When interviewed for the monthly NIA newsletter, the commissioner of the government-appointed 1982 enquiry on discrimination stated: "There is always something in the ethnic identity of the adopted child – sometimes a great deal – that is not 'Swedish' and you cannot make that disappear." (Swedish Council for Intercountry Adoptions, 1983, p 3). In line with this statement, the new message given to adoptive parents and their children from that point onwards was that 'being Swedish, but also something else is enriching' (Swedish Council for Intercountry Adoptions, 1992, p 2). Hence, when the 'non-whiteness' of transnational adoptees was finally acknowledged in Swedish adoption discourse, it was framed as non-Swedishness. Other scholars have commented on the prevailing unwillingness in Sweden to ascribe significance to race. As a result, the word 'race' (ras) is often replaced with other words, such as 'origin' or 'ethnicity' (Skovdahl, 1996; Wigerfelt, 2004). Consequently, the discursive logic of the importance ascribed to transnational adoptees' pride in their foreign origins is that being denied inclusion in Swedishness as one's only national identity is not problematic because it is not worth aspiring to anyway and having additional national origins is more desirable. On one hand, it can be said to celebrate difference and hence constitute a tribute to multiculturalism. On the other hand, it also ascribes cultural otherness to transnational adoptees. The success of such a strategy for adoptees presupposes that the value of non-Swedish backgrounds, and multiculturalism in general, is widely recognised in Swedish society, and that adoptees have acquired the culture and language competencies that enable them successfully to employ this strategy.

Swedish adoption researchers Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2008) claim legitimately that adoption research hitherto has paid too little attention to the racial discrimination directed at transnational adoptees. In their study, the consequences for transnational adoptees of being identifiably 'non-white' and 'non-Swedish' in appearance are a recurrent theme. Accounts range from encounters with racism, defined as abusive or aggressive behaviour, to questions or actions from others that challenge adoptees' Swedishness. Adoptees described both experiences as equally uncomfortable (see also von

Greiff, 2000; Martinell Barfoed, 2008). It is not unusual for those subjected to questions that construct them as outside the nation to feel excluded (see, for example, Davis and Nencel, 2009) and exclusions from western nations are frequently linked to skin colour, with whiteness allowing inclusion (Gilroy, 1987; Parekh, 2000). Therefore, in order to understand why questions that appear to be innocent or even culturally sensitive, but imply that adoptees have non-Swedish origins, may be perceived as uncomfortable and even hurtful, the relationship between Swedishness and whiteness, as well as the negative associations of non-Swedishness, must be addressed.

This article examines the ways in which recommendations emphasizing the foreign origin of transnational adoptees serve to restrict their rights fully to identify as Swedish. It does so by relating the accounts of young adult transnational adoptees in focus group discussions (FGDs) to the results of my previous study analysing the recommendations of the Swedish Council for Intercountry Adoptions (NIA) between 1972 and 2004 (Lind, 2012), and to a wider social discourse on adoption and Swedishness. Both studies are part of a wider research project funded by the Swedish Research Council.³ The overall aim of the project is to analyse the meanings and varying levels of importance that have been ascribed to adoptees' culture of origin by the NIA and by the adoptees themselves. This article is divided into three main parts: the introduction presents the NIA guidance; the next section considers the Swedish adoption experience in relation to the adoption contexts of other countries and to discourses of Swedishness; and the third section discusses young transnational adoptees' accounts and relates these to the impact of the NIA guidance.

Data, method and analysis

Nine focus group discussions were conducted between June 2007 and April 2008.⁴ A total of 25 adopted young men and women participated in one of the groups. Twenty-two of the participants were transnationally adopted from the following countries: the Republic of Korea (9), Sri Lanka (3), Chile (3), Colombia (2), India (2), Thailand (1), Indonesia (1) and Ethiopia (1). In addition, one woman whose birth parents were German and Pakistani and who was adopted within Sweden took part in one of the groups. These 23 participants were between 18 and 38 years of age. Fourteen of them are women and nine are men and it is their accounts that constitute the data for this study. In addition, one nationally adopted woman and one man took part in two of the discussion groups. Their participation contributed substantially to the discussions that unfolded, but since their adoption experiences were that of a Swedish child with white Swedish birth and adoptive parents, their accounts are not discussed here. The participants in six of the focus groups were recruited via advertisements on digital student notice boards at a university in a mid-sized city in Sweden. Members of the remaining three groups were recruited through a combination of contacts with organisations for adoptees and snowballing. The advertisement contained a brief description of the research project, in which the aim of the sub-study based on focus group discussions was worded as follows: "... to investigate how young adult transnational adoptees think about the significance of culture for their own identity and self-esteem in relation to their health and quality of life. It will take into account the culture of origin as well as Swedish culture."⁵

³ Reg. no. 427-2005-8687

⁴ The focus group discussions were led by Professor Karin Zetterqvist Nelson, PhD Cecilia Lindgren, Cecilia Wikström and myself.

⁵ Information sheet, Adopterades ursprungskultur och uppväxtkultur, used for advertisement about the research project in order to find participants for focus group discussions.

The focus groups varied in size between two and six participants. The discussions were unstructured and the role of the moderator was to facilitate them around broad topics rather than trying to get direct answers to specific questions. The aim was to allow the adoptees to discuss their own meanings of the words used by the moderator, such as culture and identity, origin and roots, rather than to ask them to discuss predefined meanings. Discussions flowed freely in all groups with participants showing a great interest in one another's experiences and points of view. In most focus groups, members had similar thoughts on their Swedishness, but in one the variations between participants' views were greater. All discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To guarantee anonymity, people's names have been replaced by pseudonyms. For this study the transcripts were first searched for statements on Swedishness. All these were then categorised into two groups: statements from adoptees who said they saw themselves as and felt entirely Swedish, and statements from those who said that they did not. The extent to which one felt Swedish was a recurrent theme in all focus group discussions. No participant claimed not to feel this at all, but the degree to which they said they felt Swedish varied between them. The focus of the analysis was not so much on the actual numbers of participants who could be categorised as belonging to either of the two categories, but rather the explanations they gave for perceiving or not perceiving themselves as entirely Swedish. Two points of reference recurred in the discussions: the consequences of having a 'non-Swedish', ie 'nonwhite', appearance and identification with the birth nationality as an alternative to Swedishness. I then reread all discussion transcripts, marking every section that contained references to physical appearance and to country of origin, birth culture or roots. It was then possible to group them into two categories: accounts of experiences of situations in which the Swedishness of the adoptee had been questioned and accounts of the effort involved successfully to identify with the birth culture. These accounts are by no means unique. Similar stories appear in several other Scandinavian academic studies (Botvar, 1999; Brottveit, 1999; Cederblad et al, 1999; Sætersdal and Dalen, 1999; von Greiff, 2000; Hübinette, 2007; Hübinette and Tigervall, 2008; Martinell Barfoed, 2008). Hence, rather than replicate the results of previous research studies, this article aims to use the accounts of the transnational adoptees as a point of departure for a critical discussion of the Swedish discourse on transnational adoption, origins and Swedishness, and of the recommendations made in the information published by the Swedish Intercountry Adoption Authority (MIA).

Rights and cultural backgrounds

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), a child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background should be paid due regard in adoption and other permanent placements outside the family, as should the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing (Article 20). Article 16b of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption (HCCH, 1993) contains similar wording. Both Conventions also stipulate that intercountry adoptions should only take place after possibilities for placing the child within the state of origin have been given due consideration (UNCRC, 1989, Article 21b; HCCH, 1993, Article 4b). The above provisions must be understood in light of a history that contains many examples of violations of the rights of ethnic or cultural minority groups to cultural expression and self governance, as well as examples of the taking into custody of minority ethnic children by state authorities, thus contributing to these children and their families being over-represented in child welfare cases, foster care and adoption (van Krieken, 1999; Slaughter, 2000). A will to redress such violations also finds expression in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) and the Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994).

The association of adoption with violations of the rights of ethnic minority groups has had a significant effect on adoption debates in countries such as the UK and the US. Both saw an increase in the number of transracial adoptions of black children by white families in the 1960s and 70s, accompanied by powerful reactions against this development in public debates (Bartholet, 1991; Gaber, 1994). Themes of racial and cultural identity were central to black struggles at that time, and culture was viewed as an important factor in the identity development and personality formation of black children. In the UK, the British Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP) in 1983 publicly denounced transracial adoption in the same manner that its US counterpart had done a decade earlier. Black children, ABSWAP argued, belonged with black families (Gaber, 1994; Kirton 2000). Transracial adoption was claimed to dispossess black communities of their most valuable assets, their children, and was therefore equated with domestic colonialism. Further, if black children were to be able to develop a positive black identity and successfully handle encounters with racism, ABSWAP claimed, they needed to grow up with parents who could imbue their child with the necessary strategies (Gaber, 1994; Kirton, 2000). Following these statements, an increasing number of local child welfare authorities and organisations took a critical stance on transracial adoptions, and British and US adoption research came to be dominated by studies concerned with whether transracially adopted children identified with their own race or with that of their adoptive parents (Gill and Jackson, 1983; McRoy et al, 1984; Simon and Altstein, 1992; DeBerry et al, 1996; Hollingsworth, 1997).

In Sweden, too, the cultural and national backgrounds of adoptees were ascribed increasing importance in the 1980s (Lind, 2012). However, whereas adoption debates in the UK and the US were highly politicised and concerned with the question of whether transracial adoptions should be carried out at all, the adoption discourse in Sweden soon ceased to be preoccupied with the legitimacy of transnational adoption and became more focused on the question of how the origins and backgrounds of adoptees could be given due regard once the child had arrived in Sweden (Lind, 2012). The positive affirmation of the cultural backgrounds of transnational adoptees in Sweden must be understood as a response to the xenophobia that was aimed at transnational adoptees and other immigrants to Sweden and through which their Swedishness came to be questioned. Whereas in the UK and the US the blackness of transracially adopted children has been ascribed importance by social workers, other professionals and community members who themselves are black, the non-Swedishness of transnational adoptees in Sweden has been emphasised mainly by professionals and representatives of adoption agencies who themselves are generally perceived as 'authentic' Swedes. The birth culture and language competencies of transnational adoptees in Sweden are hence not framed as minority group rights, but rather as a matter of importance to individual adoptees.

As Swedish as anybody else?

Social science scholars adhering to an anti-essentialist school of thought have struggled with the concept of race. Race is not acknowledged as a biological or genetic category, which can explain a person's characteristics or talents. Nevertheless, we can often identify others and ourselves as, for example, black, white or Asian. The challenge has been to deny its biologically explanatory value while at the same time acknowledging its manifest significance as a category in our society. As a response to this challenge, Sally Haslanger (2005) has suggested the term 'the geographically marked body' to refer to the geographical associations connected with the differences in physical appearance of human beings, such as skin colour, hair texture, facial structure or body size. In the everyday lives of transnational adoptees it is

primarily these geographical associations that remind them of their foreign origins and constitute the grounds for their ascription as non-Swedish (Hübinette and Tigervall, 2008; Martinell Barfoed, 2008).

In a 2004 government-appointed enquiry on discrimination, Katarina Mattsson (2005) identified five principles that constitute Swedishness, and hence its boundaries: (1) being born in Sweden; (2) having Swedish citizenship; (3) culture and language; (4) ties of kinship, ie having biogenetic parents who are Swedish; and (5) Swedish appearance. Individuals who meet all five criteria are rewarded with the status of authentic Swedishness, whereas those who fulfil some but not all of them cannot expect to be defined as Swedish in every context, regardless of whether their self-perception is Swedish (Mattsson, 2005). Transnational adoptees fail to meet the first and fourth criteria. 'Non-white' transnational adoptees also fail to meet the fifth. Whiteness, or Swedish appearance, thus becomes a prerequisite for Swedishness (Lundström, 2007). The importance of whiteness is also demonstrated by Törngren's (2011) study on attitudes towards inter-racial relationships. Her survey revealed that respondents could not imagine having relationships with transnational adoptees to the same extent as they could with Swedish or Scandinavian-born people. It is in light of these criteria for Swedishness that Hübinette's and Tigervall's (2008) demand that all transnational adopted Swedes be 'socially and culturally treated and perceived as unconditional [ovillkorliga] Swedes' must be understood (p 13). This demand differs from the colourblind claims of the pioneers of the early 1970s. Instead of saying that race does not matter, Hübinette and Tigervall make their demand because they recognise that it does. Colour blindness, as Fogg-Davis (2001) points out, denies the victims of racism a language with which to articulate their injury. A strong commitment to non-discrimination, therefore, requires that the supposed contradiction between 'non-whiteness' and Swedishness is critically scrutinised and explicitly challenged.

The association between whiteness and a certain nationality is not exclusive to Sweden. Socio-psychological studies have demonstrated the association that is often made between Americanness and whiteness. As a result, white Americans are generally viewed as being more American, and are thus construed as prototypical exemplars of the category 'American', whereas Asian Americans and African Americans are viewed as less American (Devos and Banaji, 2005). Consequently, the choice of non-white migrants to America, adopted or otherwise, to identify solely as Americans is not legitimated by other (white) Americans. Frequently asked questions such as, 'Where are you really from?' and 'Do you speak English?' not only challenge their self-perception but also associate them with a non-Americanness that is commonly judged negatively (Tuan, 1999; Cheryan and Monin, 2005). Despite the dominant official discourse on the value of multiculturalism in many liberal states, all cultures are not valued equally (Parekh, 2000; Kymlicka, 2001). For instance, educational settings in Sweden are often described as monocultural, with the result that non-Swedish cultural expressions receive little positive attention; the cultural experiences and competencies of students who are foreign born or have foreign-born parents are rarely acknowledged (Ljungberg, 2005). One expression of this is the relatively low status of home language instruction for migrants, which continues to be an easy target of economic cuts (Elmeroth, 2008). Researchers have also commented on the crude distinction that is often made in Sweden between Swedish culture and the cultures of immigrants, where little attention is given to the specificities of other cultures (Brune, 2004). As a result, the category 'immigrant' is construed as a homogeneous negation of 'Swede' and is often judged negatively in public discourses (Ljungberg, 2005; Gruber, 2007). Therefore, it would seem to

require courage and a certain amount of defiance for transnational adoptees actively to aspire to a status other than that of authentic Swedishness.

In addition to being deemed inauthentically American, Asian Americans who have lived in the US for many generations, as a result of their American lifestyles and lack of knowledge about Chinese or Japanese ways, culture and language, are also not seen as Chinese/ Japanese enough. Many resort to an identity as Chinese-American, Japanese-American or even Asian-American (Tuan, 1999). Interestingly, in the Swedish language there is no equivalent to this type of hyphenated identity. While it is possible to speak about svenskamerikaner (Swedish-Americans) when referring to Swedes who emigrated to the US in the 19th and early 20th centuries, there are no commonly used Swedish words for such hyphenated identities, ie Chinese-Swedes or Iranian-Swedes. The alternative label for immigrants in Swedish is *nya svenskar* (new Swedes), which qualifies their Swedishness by stating that it is new or recent and not old, original or authentic, rather than indicating that their Swedishness is added to ‘something else’, a national identity which is valuable.

‘I knocked hard on the door of Swedishness’

Those adoptees who are now middleaged grew up with parents who adopted their child when the dominant message was that transnationally adopted children were as Swedish as anybody else. Although the majority of participants in the focus group discussions conducted for the present study are considerably younger, the discussions contain numerous tales of the ‘you are as Swedish as anybody else’ message that adoptees received from their adoptive parents and other relatives:

Tom: And I was always told at home, but you are Swedish, you are just as Swedish as everybody else. You are a Swedish [Karl: Yes, yes!] citizen, I recall them saying above all. [Karl: Yes, yes!] Yes, I remember that my grandmother always said, ‘You are a Swedish citizen, you are just as Swedish as everybody else,’ like that.

Karl: Yes, my grandmother was also like that. ‘You look like a Swedish man . . .’ but, please . . . I mean, I knew like, of course I don’t.
(FGD, 4 June 2007)

By their way of recounting what they were told by older relatives, we can also tell that neither of the young men considers himself to be as Swedish as anybody else. Other focus group participants, however, claimed that they did see themselves as Swedish. For instance, Sofia, a young woman adopted from Sri Lanka, when discussing the meaning of ‘culture of origin’ (*ursprungskultur*) said:

I think it’s a bit misdirected – culture of origin. If I think for myself, you know, and just as I said before, that I don’t have anything cultural from there. I have, you know, I am Swedish, I have a Swedish culture.
(FGD, 11 November 2007)

Anna, who also referred to herself as ‘always having been Swedish’, explicitly identified the importance of letting transnational adoptees feel Swedish by recounting the experiences made by an acquaintance who had also been adopted:

Well, the way I see it, she was never allowed to become truly Swedish. Instead she was supposed to retain . . . for her adoptive parents it was very important that she continued to hold on to her Thai . . . She was six years old when she came. So she spoke Thai and she has always taken Thai classes in school. They put a lot of effort into serving Thai food at home. And very much like that, so it’s been very difficult for her. She lives in Thailand.

(FGD, 4 June 2007)

'She was never allowed to become truly Swedish,' Anna says and refers to the efforts of this girl's adoptive parents to retain a connection to her birth culture. Thus, for those adoptees who do perceive themselves as Swedish (arguably a majority of transnational adoptees in Sweden; see Cederblad et al, 1999; Irhammar and Cederblad, 2006), the logic that the status of authentic Swede that they so much desire for themselves is nothing to aspire to anyway may have the effect of reinforcing the message that their Swedishness is indeed questionable. Instead of struggling to be accepted as Swedes, the message seems to encourage them to adjust their cultural identification to their 'non-Swedish' appearance.

Whereas the claim to unconditional Swedishness by Anna in the above excerpt was put forward as not only a legitimate claim, but also as a necessary one, other adoptees describe how having made this claim has resulted in many disappointing experiences. For instance, Paula said that:

I tried to be Swedish when I was little but nobody let me in. I knocked very hard on the door of Swedishness . . . yes, what can I say?
(FGD, 29 September 2007)

In line with Paula's account of disappointment, Tom, when asked how transnational adoptees can attain Swedishness, responded that he believed that:

You do yourself a disservice because, well, you can't become 100 per cent Swedish, 'cause it will still be like that when you look at yourself in the mirror and it will always . . . You can choose to see it or you can choose to close that door. And I guess that's when you become Swedish, if you close it and just take no notice.
(FGD, 4 June 2007)

Tom refers explicitly to his appearance as an explanation for why he can never be '100 per cent Swedish'. Both Paula and Tom indicate that their identification as Swedes is dependent on the acknowledgement of their Swedishness by others. This fits with the commonly accepted notion that identities are relational (Wetherell, 2010). Tom refers explicitly to his appearance as an impediment to such acknowledgement. Even adoptees who perceive themselves as entirely Swedish say that they are aware of the fact that they do not look it. For instance, Henrik, adopted from South Korea, said that he had:

. . . always been Swedish, but still it's like you feel Swedish, but every time you look in the mirror you're not Swedish and you're aware of that.
(FGD, 16 April 2008)

'When you walk in you're a wog . . .'

In the US context, black people who identify themselves as Americans react to threats against their status as Americans by reasserting their Americanness in various ways (Cheryan and Monin, 2005). Similar strategies are also reported by Swedish transnational adoptees (Dalen and Saetersdal, 1992). To demonstrate their Swedishness, transnational adoptees must rely on the criteria of Swedishness constituted by citizenship, culture, language, name and having Swedish (adoptive) parents. This is precisely what Caesar, adopted from Chile, does in his description of what it is like to be perceived as non-Swedish in everyday life:

If you enter a shop you're treated in one way before you start talking and say your name. Then you're treated in an entirely different way and that's just the way it is. When you walk in you're a wog [svartskalle] and when you say your Swedish-sounding name you're treated

differently.
(FGD, 23 April 2008)

In the above excerpt, Caesar pointed to the difference his status as an adoptee makes in terms of how he is perceived, as did Sofia:

Well, when there was . . . discussion about new Swedish immigrants, who have come here. This complex of problems . . . the prejudices that are associated with it. And it doesn't like say 'adopted' on our foreheads. No, but when you finally say, Well, I'm adopted' then you rise a step or two again.
(FGD, 11 November 2007)

Sofia summarised the hierarchy of immigrants versus 'Swedish' people pointedly when she said that once it becomes known that she is adopted, and not otherwise migrated to Sweden, the status she is awarded increases considerably.

Transnational adoptees who wish to dissociate themselves from other immigrants may display 'Swedishness' which, particularly in the case of the very young, can also inhibit their acquisition of the kind of language and cultural competencies required for successful identification with their birth country and its culture, for fear of standing out as even more different. Henrik explained that he had had the opportunity to study Korean when he was little, but had not wanted to "because then I wanted to be Swedish; that was more important then. And now I regret that very much" (FGD, 16 April 2008).

Anna, too, recounted being given the opportunity to study Thai when she went to school, but she had not wanted to go to the classes:

. . . and my reaction was like no way, never [. . .] Yes, not a chance that I wanted anything that would make me even more different than I am.
(FGD, 4 June 2007)

She continued by saying that her parents respected her decision – one that she, too, regrets. The accounts provided by Henrik and Anna point to the fact that there was nothing that pulled them towards the culture of their birth countries. To them, any emphasis placed on their cultural background and the language of their birth countries constituted a push away from the Swedishness they so desired.

'I see myself as Swedish because I have nothing else'

For Anna, her lack of knowledge about Thai culture and language has further reinforced her Swedish identity simply because she sees no alternative: "I am . . . I see myself as Swedish," she said, 'because I have nothing else.' (FGD, 4 June 2007).

Simon also said that his lack of knowledge of Spanish makes it difficult for him to identify with his birth country, Colombia, and its culture. In this way, he fails to meet not only the criteria of Swedishness owing to his South American appearance, but also the expectations of others. "With my appearance," he said, 'everybody thinks I know Spanish, you know' (FGD, 28 April 2008). Simon continued by saying that he regretted not having been entitled to home language instruction and that he would have liked to be able to speak Spanish. When asked by another participant whether studying Spanish now would be for himself or to meet the potential expectations of others, he said he was not certain: "I think 50/50 for my own sake. That it's expected somehow." (FGD, 28 April 2008). Simon explained that he is often identified as an immigrant by others, and in the absence of successful identification with his

Colombian origin, the status of immigrant is what, for him, constitutes the ‘something else’ in addition to being Swedish. However, in contrast to many other adoptees, he explicitly embraces this status. In his work in health care, he said his appearance gave him an advantage over his white colleagues when it came to dealing with immigrant patients, because they see him ‘as one of them’, regardless of whether or not he speaks their language. He described his ability to blend into both groups, Swedish and immigrant, as “pretty cool” (FGD, 28 April 2008).

Since successful identification with birth culture and nationality requires certain culture and language competencies, some adoptees invest a lot of time and effort in acquiring them. Tom began to study Spanish when he started upper secondary school and then stayed for a year in Chile as an exchange student. He said he really got to know the culture, made Chilean friends, started to speak Chilean slang and could pass as Chilean even after his return to Sweden:

I can even pretend sometimes, for fun, to be Chilean when I’m in a place where there are . . . And I walk in and talk to them or in a store or like that. ‘Cause people come up to me in the city too; I remember there was a Chilean lady, who asked for directions and . . .
(FGD, 4 June 2007)

Tom continued by describing how he was able to give the woman directions in Spanish. Hence, the fact that he was taken for a Chilean immigrant seems to have made him proud – feelings that seem to be intimately tied to his knowledge of Spanish, which allowed him to meet the expectations of a stranger for whom his presumed Chileanness had a positive value. Despite this, he described the episode as one where he had ‘pretended’ to be Chilean. When asked about his national identification, Tom said he saw himself as 75 per cent Swedish and only 25 per cent Chilean.

Concluding discussion

The consequences of being visibly ‘nonwhite’ are recurrent themes in many accounts by transnational adoptees. It is because of this aspect of their appearance that their Swedishness is often challenged. Even when adoptees feel Swedish, they realise that they are not perceived as such. The strategy to deal with this suggested by the Swedish MIA/NIA is to develop pride in their foreign origin, thereby sending the message that indisputable Swedishness is not worth aspiring to anyway. In one sense, this constitutes an acknowledgement of the positive values of multiculturalism, but it simultaneously reduces its value by making it relevant primarily to those who fail to fit the criteria for being authentically Swedish. Further, for transnational adoptees to embrace their national origins may prove to be a challenging strategy because, despite official discourse on the value of multiculturalism, non-Swedishness in Sweden continues to have predominantly negative connotations. Yet, while their appearance marks them out as not properly Swedish, it does not automatically grant them status as Koreans, Ethiopians or Chileans.

In recommendations regarding the affirmation of the foreign origins of transnational adoptees, the meanings of words like ‘background’, ‘origin’ and ‘roots’ are seldom well specified. However, there is a difference between arguing the importance of information about the details that constitute an individual’s personal life history on one hand and affirming her/ his foreign origin on the other. A ‘foreign origin’, in turn, can also refer to different things: the mere fact that the adoptee was born on non-Swedish territory by non-Swedish parents, a pre-adoption past in a country other than Sweden or the geographically foreign marks on the individual’s body. If pride in one’s foreign origin is to serve as a strategy to deal with the fact that one’s Swedishness is questioned due to one’s non-Swedish appearance, I argue, ‘foreign

origin' should be given the latter meaning. For those adoptees who perceive themselves as culturally Swedish and who wish to be acknowledged as Swedes, the visual effects of having a foreign origin constitute the primary reminder of their foreign origin. For them explicit and positive acknowledgement of their black hair, brown skin or almond-shaped eyes in addition to their indisputable right to be considered as Swedes may constitute a better preparation for questions that challenge their self-perception as Swedes, than does encouragement to feel proud of the cultures of their birth countries and hence to adjust their cultural identification to match the geographical marks on their bodies. Just as transnational adoptees' feelings of pride in their foreign origins would be assisted by a more genuine appreciation of multiculturalism, their sense of belonging in Sweden must be buttressed by a broadened concept of Swedishness that does not only automatically include those who are white.

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