

# Methodological Reflections on Being an East Asian Researcher Researching the White Majority

**Sayaka Osanami Törngren**

---

*Criticisms have been cast toward researches concerning race and ethnicity being traditionally dominated by middle class white men, and different responses and positions to the criticisms have emerged. However still, the methodological discussions of the social positions of the researchers are circled around the issues of white researchers' challenges in approaching the minority population, or concerns among researchers of ethnic and racial minority background in studying their own groups or other minority groups. I believe that there is an obvious lack of attention in the current methodological consideration in the field of ethnic relations: What happens when a researcher who is of ethnic and racial minority background researches the white majority population? The paper attempts to open up a methodological discussion that is missing in the field today. As a researcher of East Asian background in Sweden, interviewing white Swedes generates possibilities to observe how white Swedish interviewees interact with and communicate the racial and ethnic differences between the researcher and the interviewees. This paper will draw examples from the qualitative interview materials from my doctoral dissertation on Swedes' attitudes toward interracial relationships.*

*Keywords: Interracial research, race of interviewer effect, non-white researcher*

---

## Introduction

I heard a young, female, white European researcher working with a research on an immigrant community presenting her work and her methodological perspective on being an Insider and Outsider at an international conference. She said, 'It is important that you are liked by the ethnic minority community members and it is very important that you become accepted and become a part

of the community'. I was one of the few who objected to her simplistic idea of becoming an Insider as a matter of being 'liked' by the community members, nor did she seem to question the impact of her whiteness, an Outsider status with power and access to resources.

There are different positions within the methodological question of knowledge production; nevertheless, the existing methodologi-

cal discussions on the social positions of the researchers are centred around the issues of white researchers' challenges in approaching the minority population, or concerns among researchers of ethnic and racial minority background in studying their own groups or other minority groups (e.g. Adamson and Donovan 2002; Sands, et al. 2007). There is a limited number of methodological discussions and literatures specifically addressing non-whites researching the white majority. As Hoong Sin states, there is a great imbalance in the published literature on interracial and interethnic research and the focus has primarily been on white researchers' challenges in approaching the minority population (Hoong Sin 2007, 489). Furthermore, Gunaratnam asserts that researchers in ethnic relations construct the non-white respondents as racialised others (Gunaratnam 2003). Whiteness and otherness is rarely problematized and looked at in a 'reversed gaze' (Hoong Sin 2007, 490), and the form of researches and the knowledge produced in the field are normalized: race and ethnicity are observed and analysed from a white gaze.

I agree with Hoong Sin's assertion that there is an apparent lack of attention in the current methodological consideration in the field of ethnic relations (Hoong Sin 2007). This article attempts to open up a methodological discussion that is missing in the field today: what happens

when a researcher with an ethnic and racial minority background researches the white majority population? As a researcher of East Asian origin, specifically Japanese in Sweden, I argue that interviewing white Swedes by 'reversing the gaze' generates possibilities to observe how white Swedish interviewees interact and communicate the racial and ethnic differences that may or may not exist between the researcher and the researched. This paper examines 'how' and 'when' race and ethnicity are marked, seen and negotiated within the interview process by sharing examples from the qualitative interview materials from my doctoral dissertation on white attitudes toward interracial relationships.

### **My Research and Position**

#### *My research project*

My dissertation project examines the attitudes of the majority society toward interracial dating, marriage and childbearing. The study was conducted in Malmö Municipality, the third largest city in Sweden, where 30% of some 298,000 residents were born abroad, and 10% of the population has two parents born outside of Sweden (Malmö City 2011). A mixed methodology has been employed as a means of exploring people's attitudes toward interracial relationships. Both the quantitative and qualitative data was gathered in Swedish. The quantitative data was collected by means of a

self-reporting postal survey containing a variety of general statements and questions about different racial groups, including interracial dating, marriage, childbearing and number of contacts with persons of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The postal survey sample was randomly selected from the governmental address registry and consisted of 2,000 residents of Malmö Municipality between the ages of 18 and 78. The data was collected from November 2008 to February 2009 and a total of 622 people responded to the questionnaire.

Among the 622 survey respondents, a total of 194 people, 100 men and 94 women, agreed on the survey to be contacted for follow up interviews. The respondents were first systematically categorized according to gender and place of residence. After this categorization, 27 interview informants whereof 14 women and 13 men were randomly selected. Three female respondents who directly made contact with the researcher and showed willingness to be interviewed were additionally chosen as interviewees. All the interviews were carried out in the fall of 2009. The age of the informants varied from the youngest being 21 years old to the oldest being 71 years old. They had diverse occupations from student, to blue collar workers, as well as highly qualified professionals and retirees. Among the 30 informants, 6 persons (4 women and 2 men) had at least one

biological parent who was of West European, Central/East European or Latin American origin<sup>1</sup>; although during the interviews these persons expressed a shared white Swedish majority culture and social position. A total of eight interviews (4 female and 4 male) were conducted face-to-face and the rest of the interviews were carried out on the telephone. Interviews were semi-structured and questions were constructed based on the survey results. The interviewees were asked to react and respond to the survey results spontaneously, rather than articulate their personal thoughts about interracial relationships. This was an intentional choice and an attempt to eliminate the effect of social desirability needs that can be experienced by the informants. As Ehn writes that when people comment on actual societal questions, such as immigration and immigrants, they tend to give answers based on how others act and think rather than what they think (Ehn 1996, 137). Therefore, formulating questions that put the focus on the survey result and how the interview informants perceived and believed others would react to interracial marriage becomes effective in understanding the attitudes. Ehn states that this enables an interpretation of the interview result that reflects a social construction of meaningful experiences and cultural identity rather than simply being an interpretation of what the informants think and have experienced (Ehn

1996, 137).

*Researchers and the researched*

The decision to utilize a mixed methodology came in part from my awareness of both my research subject and my position. Issues concerning methodology, interpretation and practice in relation to the positions of researchers and the researched involved in qualitative studies are discussed extensively (e.g. Merton 1975; Essed 1990; Holme and Solvang 1997; Punch 2005). The race of interviewer effect refers to the ‘“response bias” and “measurement error” that has been recorded in the “adjustment” that people make to their opinions and attitudes when questioned by an interviewer from another racial or ethnic group’ (Gunaratnam 2003, 54). It is a process of ‘avoiding responses that might offend the interviewer of the “opposing” race, and of being frank (or at least franker) with interviewers of one’s own race’ (Hatchett and Schuman 1975, 527). In response to this a group of scholars, with a belief that interviewees would give more ‘honest’ or ‘accurate’ responses to researchers of a similar social position, advocate racial and ethnic ‘matching’ of the researcher and the interviewees (e.g. Fine 2004; Archer 2002; Essed 1990). The debate surrounding the race of interviewer effect and ‘matching’ the interviewer and interviewee can be linked to the classical conception of the social positions of

researchers and interviewees, insider and outsider perspective. Merton writes, the Insider doctrine claims that ‘the Outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures and societies’ (Merton 1972, 15).

The issue of the race of interviewer effect and matching is widely discussed within the context of white researcher researching minority population or researchers of minority background researching minority population. Limited numbers of studies are available on RIE involving non-white interviewees and white informants in survey situations (e.g. Hatchett and Schuman 1975; Athey et al. 1960; Krysan and Couper 2003; Cotter, et al. 1982), and especially in interview situations and other qualitative inquiries (e.g. Hoong Sin 2007; Kim 1977; Phoenix 1994; Tang 2002).

The race of interviewer effect is noted and exhibited in numerous researches; however, a group of researchers has stressed that the ‘matching’ of race and ethnicity would not necessarily reduce the power relation in an interview situation and lead to a more ‘accurate’ and non-marginalized interpretation of the phenomenon studied (e.g. Gunaratnam 2003; Gallagher 2000; Gallagher 2003; Hill 2002). Phoenix argues that there is no unitary and clear impact of race and gender positions of researchers and interviewees (Phoenix 1994). Rhodes also affirms that even though race

has an effect on interviews and what the respondents may say, it is improper to conclude that such differences account for the 'truthfulness' of the responses (Rhodes 1994). Moreover, as some researchers argue, the idea of 'matching' ignores the dynamic interplay of social difference and is guilty of recreating the simplistic belief of commonality and difference among the members of racial and ethnic groups (e.g. Gunaratnam 2003; Tinker and Armstrong 2008; Hoong Sin 2007).

It is well established that respondents and interviewees have the potential to give socially desirable answers in other qualitative studies and interview settings (e.g. Punch 2005; Holme and Solvang 1997). Therefore, even though race may have an effect on interviews and what the respondents may say, it is improper to conclude that such differences solely account for the 'truthfulness' of the responses (Phoenix 1994). If it is so that different results are produced depending on the different social characteristics of the researcher, Phoenix continues, it is precisely the reason for researchers of varying social positions to carry out interviews across the social differences, since 'it illustrates the ways in which knowledge are "situated" ' (Phoenix 1994, 66). Gunaratnam writes that 'the question then becomes not whether 'race' and ethnicity affect interviewing relationships, but, rather, how and when racialised dynamics are produced

and negotiated within the interview process, and how they are given meaning in analysis' (Gunaratnam 2003, 76). As Gunaratnam indicates, racial and ethnic differences between the researcher and the interviewees and the effect and impact that these might have should not be regarded as a possible bias or obstacle to getting honest answers, but rather as an opportunity for minoritised researchers to explore matters that are of critical significance to our own lives (Gunaratnam 2003). It gives an opportunity for the researcher of non-white background to observe how the categories of race and ethnicity are ascribed and marked within the interview context.

#### *The research context and my position*

Post-war Sweden is a country of immigration, and people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds have become an undeniable part of contemporary Swedish society. The period between 1970 and 1985 is regarded as a turning point in the Swedish history of immigration. During this period, the dominant immigration category shifted from labour migrants to asylum seekers and family reunifications. As the categories of immigration shifted, the country of origin of the immigrants also expanded from predominantly within European countries to outside European countries (Statistics Sweden 2010). As the immigration from outside European countries

increased, discrimination and racialisation are widely documented in researches (e.g. Ahlberg and Groglopo 2006; De los Reyes 2006; Sawyer and Kamali 2006).

The connection between whiteness and Swedishness, or conversely between non-whiteness and non-Swedishness, is discussed by several scholars. Pred argues that visible differences like skin colour or other bodily markers are interpreted as cultural differences in Swedish society (Pred 2000). The perception of culture depends on identifying the difference of the other through those differences that are visible. Hervik states that not only culture but also ethnicity is used to describe 'non-Western' people, and that 'the schematic features evoked by the local terms for "ethnic" and "ethnicity" consists of visible and audible features of minority groups' in Scandinavian countries (Hervik 2012, 14)<sup>2</sup>. Mattsson also argues that the idea of Swedishness is strongly connected to the visible white Europeaness (Mattsson 2005). Even in elementary school settings, Runfors writes that the classifications 'non-Swedish' and 'immigrant children' were based on prejudgments of what Swedes 'look' like, regardless of whether the students were Swedish citizens or not, or whether they had or had not been born in Sweden (Runfors 2006, 115). Studies also show the racialised experiences among international adoptees in Sweden

because of their visible differences from the majority society (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009; Rooth 2002; Signell and Lindblad 2008).

Even though there is an understanding that racism and discrimination exist in Sweden and several scholars point to the connection between Swedishness and whiteness, there is a belief that Sweden is a colour-blind society (Hübinette and Lundström 2011a; Osanami Törngren 2011; Hübinette and Tigervall 2009)<sup>3</sup>. Colour-blindness, 'a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not "see," or at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences' (Frankenberg 1993, 142), can be observed clearly in Sweden<sup>4</sup>. Sweden has not been left out of the history of race and racial thinking, both in terms of the belief in the biological race during the early 20th century and later as a social product. Yet in modern-day Sweden, as in some other countries in Europe, talking about race has become taboo due to the profound history of eugenics and the experience of World War II<sup>5</sup>. Brekke and Borchgrevink write about the ambiguous categorization of people according to the colour of the skin in Sweden and state that '[t]he sensible approach to the issue, which is also the official Swedish approach, is to consider colour irrelevant to the appraisal of an individual' (Brekke and Borchgrevink 2007, 79). Acknowledging the inequality of opportunities in Sweden based on the

colour of one's skin, they write that:

"Dark complexion designates a 'group', probably with a flexible boundary, which is not a group in any other sense than in the eyes of the beholder of native extraction. The group has no official name, yet 'membership' may imply a difficult time in Sweden" (Brekke and Brochgrevink 2007, 80).

My research and my position give me a great opportunity to challenge the idea of colour-blindness and observe how race and ethnicity is communicated and negotiated. I am a young, female academic and a researcher of Japanese origin, permanently living in Sweden. I have visible characteristics such as my non-white appearance, my non-Swedish name, and my language skills, that signal that I do not belong to the majority population in Sweden and I do not share the ascribed characteristic of the majority population, whiteness, which is considered to be the norm of Swedishness. While I speak Swedish fluently and with the southern dialect, as conversation goes on it would not be difficult for a native Swedish speaker to see that Swedish is not my mother tongue. Prior to conducting face-to-face and telephone interviews, I had telephone contact with all the informants and they received written and oral information about the research project together with the information on how the interview

materials will be confidentiality and anonymously treated. My Swedish skills were therefore exposed from the beginning to the interviewees through the initial contact and written information. In the survey, the only visible characteristic of my 'non-Swedishness' would be the combination of my non-Swedish Japanese name and Swedish last name. In telephone interviews, the visible characteristic might be my language use. However, in the face-to-face interview situation, visibility cannot be avoided.

### **Reversing the gaze: Interviewing white Swedes**

This section presents some cases from the qualitative materials that I have acquired, in which my race and ethnicity are implicitly and explicitly communicated. The names that appear in this article are pseudonyms.

#### *Where are you from?*

When conducting the telephone interviews I was careful not to disclose information about my ethnic or racial background. It is perhaps because of this that I was not asked about my origin as much as I initially suspected during the phone interviews. Only 5 out of the 21 telephone interviewees asked me a question concerning my origin. Among these, one specifically asked if I was Japanese because he saw my name on the cover letter. Another telephone interview informant won-

dered whether my personal intention of carrying out research on attitudes toward interracial marriage was to do with me being married to a Swede, because I had a 'foreign name'. These two interviewees interpreted my name as non-Swedish and foreign while it can be speculated that my Swedish skills were sufficient enough for the majority of the telephone interviewees to presume that I was from Sweden and felt no need question my origins.

The question 'where are you from?' should be analysed critically, particularly in face-to-face interviews, in relation to the question of race, whiteness and the norm of what it means to be Swedish. Six out of the eight interviewees that I met face-to-face asked me where I was from, while the majority of the telephone interviewees who did not 'see' me did not ask the same question. As Mattsson argues, the idea of Swedishness is strongly connected to the visible white Europeaness (Mattsson 2005). Asking the question of my origin in face-to-face meetings seems an automatic and natural process for the interviewees because they 'see' that I am Asian, and so according to their belief cannot be a part of Sweden and Swedishness. Asking me about my origins reveals the process of communicating the visible differences and the subsequent need for clarification of my ethnicity. The question 'where are you from' reflects the connection between whiteness and

Swedishness, and the processes of marking me not being Swedish.

#### *Clarification of ethnicity*

Clarification of my ethnicity altered the course of a number of the interviews, moving the interviewees in some instances to be more giving and interesting. When I called Lennart for a telephone interview, he was very dominant and demanding, that I carry out the interview immediately or there would be no interview. He expressed explicitly how he wanted the interview to be done. Towards the end of the interview, Lennart asked me where I was from. When I said that I was from Japan, the tone of his voice changed and became friendlier. He said that his children were adopted from Asia. Lennart referred to his children and compared them to how he assumed I must be. Someone who was unknown to him became familiar: he could visually imagine what I looked like, place me in the category of Asian and could relate to and categorize me through his children. The interview ended on very good terms by Lennart telling me how interesting and important my study is, in contrast to how he had reacted at the beginning.

In the face-to-face interview, the visibility of my Asian appearance, in combination with the ambiguity of my ethnicity seemed to trigger discretion in revealing honest thoughts. Helena first communicated our racial differences by referring to me



specifically as Asian and stating that 'this result is not amusing for you is it?' when I explained the survey results showing that South/East Asian was one of the least preferred groups for a marriage partner. The comment was a clear indication of her recognizing and categorizing me as part of what I defined in the interview context South and East Asian, and also sympathizing and imagining that finding out that Asians were not favoured as marriage partners by white Swedes was not a pleasant thing for me, being Asian myself. At the end of the interview, Helena asked if I had been born in Sweden. When she found out that I was of Japanese origin, her idea of Thai women subsequently came forward. She told me that she had 'totally forgotten' to talk about the marriages between Thai women and European men. Helena told me about her experience of travelling to Thailand and how disgusted she was to see Thai women flocking around white European men. Not only did Helena articulate the stereotypical picture of Thai women and white men travelling to Thailand to meet them, but also the practice of 'importing wives'. Helena told me an anecdote that she had heard about a Thai woman being 'imported' by a Swedish man, learned the Swedish language quickly and when she became fluent in the language, she got a job, acquired Swedish citizenship and then divorced him. She said that the Swedish man was 'her ticket to

Sweden' and that the Thai woman took advantage of him. Helena concluded her story by telling me that 'it would take a long time before this stereotype proves false'. Her opinion about Thai woman was without a doubt strong and concrete. This anecdote itself is very interesting since the practice of 'importing' Thai women is less problematized than the practice of Thai women 'taking advantage of the Swedish men'; the centre of the blame is on the Thai women. When Helena articulated the images of Thai women as well as her strong opinion, it was hard to imagine that she just happened to 'totally forgot' to talk about it. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that her first reservation in talking about Thai-European marriages may have stemmed from the insecurity of not knowing my ethnicity and origin. As the race of the interviewer effect refers to the practice of interviewees making 'adjustments' to their opinions and attitudes when questioned by an interviewer of a different racial or ethnic group in order to avoid responses that might offend the interviewer (Gunaratnam 2003; Hatchett and Schuman 1975), Helena's case, I argue, is an example of the interviewee not revealing real thoughts in order to avoid offending the researcher of a different racial background. Once the researcher's ethnic background was clarified, the interviewee felt secure enough to reveal her thoughts on a specific ethnic group. It is also in-

interesting to observe that Helena felt safe to express her explicit thoughts on Thai women after finding out that I am Japanese, which may reflect the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender, as my position as Asian woman is interpreted and negotiated differently from my position as Asian and Japanese woman, which indicates the ethnic hierarchy that exists within a racial category. When she did not know my ethnicity she put me into the racial category of Asian, while through communicating my ethnicity I was categorized as not belonging to the stereotypical picture of Thai women.

*Gap between the expectation and the reality of who I am*

Through the initial contact by phone and letter, the interviewees seemed to have a picture of who I was and what I looked like before meeting me in person. Even though my name and language skills were exposed before the initial face-to-face meeting, some informants that I met in person never imagined that I was Asian. In this respect the reactions of the informants were very similar to Ann Phoenix's experiences of some white interviewees in her studies being surprised to see her as they did not expect a black researcher (Phoenix 1994). Furthermore, as Kim and Hoong Sin experienced, the surprise also seemed to originate from the association of poor language skills and being Asian. Hoong Sin recounts an

interviewee reacting to his fluency in English by saying 'I didn't know you're Chinese!', despite the fact that initial contact had been made and the interviewees should have been aware of his non-anglicised name (Hoong Sin 2007). A similar response was observed in several incidences in my study.

As Hoong Sin discusses, some of the interviewees had not paid much attention to the letter that I had sent to them, but formed an assumption of me through the telephone conversation prior to our meeting (Hoong Sin 2007). Johanna expressed that she did not initially think that I was Asian, and explained to me that she could hear during our initial telephone conversation that she heard 'something' but not 'Asian' in my spoken Swedish and could not really guess what it was. Helena expressed that she had not expected me to be Asian and in fact was surprised to find out that I was Asian because she did not hear an 'Asian accent' in my spoken Swedish, saying that she did not 'see' or 'know' that I was Asian before she met me. In both cases the interviewees did not expect me to be Asian because I did not have what they imagined to be an 'Asian accent' when speaking Swedish, which implies a stereotype of Asians lacking language fluency or having a distinct Asian accent. Because the interviewees had an idea of how Asians should speak the language, some never imagined that I would be Asian. This indicates

that language as a visible difference functions not only as a marker of Swedishness and non-Swedishness, but also an indicator of Asianness and non-Asianness.

Stereotypes of poor language skills and how it might affect the expectation interviewees have of the researcher is an interesting aspect to analyse. Interviewing in English, Tang, whose first language is Chinese, felt uneasy about communicating in English and received comments of disagreement or specification about her choice of words in interview questions. Tang expresses that she felt an element of British cultural superiority over the foreigner and the cultural assumptions and subjective perceptions embedded in the language (Tang 2002, 715). Unlike Tang, I did not have any difficulty in communicating in Swedish with the interviewees or experienced them correcting or questioning my choice of words. In fact, I received positive comments on my Swedish skills. On several other occasions, both during the face-to-face and telephone interviews, when I answered the question of how long I had been living in Sweden, the interviewees expressed that I was very good at Swedish in comparison to other 'immigrants who never seem to learn Swedish even though they have lived in Sweden for many years,' indicating again that language as a visible difference function as a marker and boundary of Swedishness

and non-Swedishness. Language proficiency can function as a tool to place individuals and groups in relational hierarchy; my position was negotiated according to my language proficiency in comparison to how proficient the interviewees believed other 'immigrants' to be. While it is unclear how my Swedish language fluency affected the interviews and the interviewees, especially on the telephone, one thing became obvious: people think that Asians and immigrants in general speak the language in certain ways. My language skill became something that separates me from the 'immigrants', and in a way positions me closer to 'white Swedes'.

The stereotype of poor language skills might have created a gap between the expectation and the reality of who I was. A more precise example of where the gap between who an interviewee expected me to be and who I really was came from the initial meeting with Peter. I was standing at the meeting point and he passed by without noticing me. He telephoned me to inform that he would be arriving in about five minutes and I stood at the meeting point waiting. The meeting point was an obvious one and I was the only person standing in the area. The distance between me and Peter when he passed by was less than one meter. It was very clear that Peter did not see me since he did not expect an Asian person. During the interview he mentioned that he could

imagine being in a relationship with an Asian person and told me about the good reputation that Asians have in the small town from which he originally came. He told me how the Asian immigrants who he assumed were Vietnamese came to his hometown and 'they worked and they learned Swedish fast'. He continued and said that they gathered by themselves and continued with their lives as if they were living back 'home' not in Sweden, but nobody reacted to it and they were accepted because 'they worked and had a good reputation.' The comment 'continuing with their lives as if they were living back home' is normally negatively laden as a sign of unsuccessful integration, yet in this case it was not articulated as something negative because of other positive aspects such as learning Swedish quickly and working hard. Even though it should be noted that the positive image of Asians being 'hard working' may be stereotypical, Peter was the only interviewee who explicitly communicated that he was positive toward Asians and that he could imagine having a relationship with an Asian. As much as it is possible that Peter was actually positive about Asians, because of the awkwardness of his passing in front of me without giving me a second glance, he may have felt the need to 'recover', and to defend the position that he had nothing against Asians. His comment about Asians learning the language quickly, contrary to the

image of Asians speaking Swedish with certain accent, is noteworthy. His positive ideas about Asians function as a marker of Asians being more acceptable immigrant group compared to others and indicate the racial hierarchy that may exist in Sweden.

#### *Intersection of age and gender*

There were a few instances in which not only my race and ethnicity but also my age and gender seemed to influence the interviews. One of the telephone interviewees, Linnea, assumed that I was a foreign guest student. She expressed that her 'own' people in Sweden have not welcomed immigrants who have come to Sweden in recent years. In explaining this, she excluded me from the category of immigrants by saying: '... and with that I don't mean you because you are one of these guest students, right?' She continued to talk without waiting for my answer and I never had the chance to inform her that I was not 'a guest student'. This comment clearly indicates that she perceived me as not belonging to Sweden; neither a Swede nor an 'immigrant' but a temporary 'guest'. In excluding me from the category of 'immigrants' it seemed as though she did not reflect on the fact that I spoke Swedish and had a Swedish surname. Looking at the transcription, it became obvious that she interrupted me quite a lot and started talking before I had finished my sentence or question. The

power relationship in the interview could be interpreted as unequal, yet the fact that she believed that I was a guest student and that she was telling me things from her Swedish perspective seems to have worked well in the interview, as she was not hesitant about disclosing her own personal thoughts, including her own intimate feelings and views about immigrant groups, and what she considered other Swedes to be like. Hoong Sin refers to this type of situation as the reverse of the 'conventional power dynamics' that benefit researchers (Hoong Sin 2007, 492). The interviewee's perception of me as a foreign guest student and the subsequent power relations worked positively because as Rhodes indicates, the interviewee, a middle aged female Swede, could talk to the interviewer, a female 'student' and a young 'guest' about what things were like in Sweden (Rhodes 1994). Linnea's comment excluding me from the category of 'immigrants' is also of interest as it assumes that the category 'immigrants' and the category 'researcher' or 'Ph.D. student' do not overlap, indicating the intersection of class with ethnicity and race and the inferior position assigned to the category of 'immigrants'.

During our face-to-face meeting, Karl compared himself to me: 'You know, I am big, tall and look at you, you are so small and cute.' Although he expressed his uncertainty about my origin and background, whether

I was an immigrant or a transnational adoptee, he explicitly articulated his opinions about international adoption, stereotypes of Asians and even about Asian-Swedish marriages. For example he expressed that he could never imagine having a relationship with a Thai woman who is half his age because he would 'only be her ticket out of Thailand', and that he thought international adoption carried the connotation of 'buying children'. This is interesting since he still saw me as 'small and cute', and this might indicate that he distanced me from the Thai women that he was talking about. Or it might indicate unequal power dynamics that seems to grant the interviewee a privilege to simply express any kind of thoughts in my presence. He articulated his thoughts about Asians without any hesitation, despite expressing uncertainty about whether I was an immigrant or an adoptee. In fact, during the entire interview he never asked specifically about my origin. At the end of the interview, when I asked if he had expressed his thoughts in a satisfactory manner, he said that the experience of meeting and talking to me had been a positive one, and that he felt it had been a positive experience for me as well. He articulated that he had not felt pressured to answer the questions that I asked, but could remain calm and express his thoughts carefully and clearly in his own way. His perception of me as 'small and cute' was naturally somewhat problemat-

ic from a professional point of view, in that he might not have taken the interview as seriously as he should have, although on the other hand my 'small and cute' appearance may have eliminated the threat and fear of expressing what he thought. During the interview, Karl explicitly stated that he could not imagine having a relationship with a black person, and explained that the differences in the colour of the skin were 'too much', indicating the relational position of race and the racial hierarchy that exist in Sweden. I doubt that he would have disclosed this if he had not experienced the interview situation and my presence as positive, or if I were not Asian. Moreover, this informant's perception of me as 'small and cute', not to mention him telling me openly that I was small and cute, would probably not been expressed if I had been a male or female researcher of white or of another racial background, or if I had been the same age or older than him. Again, the reversed power dynamics seemed to benefit the interview situation, even though his comment about me being 'small and cute' and his honest thoughts about Thai women were discomforting.

### **Concluding remarks**

All interview settings involve processes of negotiating social positions between the researcher and the researched; however, my position as a non-white and non-Swedish researcher examining the ma-

jority population provided a unique opportunity to 'reverse the gaze' that other researchers may not have. This is especially interesting since race and ethnicity is not something readily discussed in Sweden and the idea of colour-blindness is deeply rooted in Sweden. While it was not the aim of this analysis to address the question of whether race and ethnicity had an effect on the interviewees' words, highlighting the incidents and encounters I had with interviewees illustrate that the boundary of race and ethnicity are implicitly and explicitly communicated between the researcher and the interviewees.

Gunaratnam argues that instead of asking if interviewees would give more 'accurate' and 'honest' answers to researchers sharing the same social characteristics, the focus should be on 'how and when racialised dynamics are produced and negotiated within the interview process, and how they are given meaning in analysis' (Gunaratnam 2003, 76). This process does not differ greatly from being self-reflexive in analysing any other interview content and situations. Each researcher has combinations of social positions and characteristics that are unique, and others who do not possess those positions and characteristics may not be able to acquire the same kinds of knowledge. After all, '[t]he role of social scientist concerned with achieving knowledge about society requires enough detachment

and trained capacity to know how to assemble and assess the evidence without regard for what the analysis seems to imply about the worth of one's group' (Merton 1972, 41).

The examples from the qualitative interviews on my research highlight the incidents in which the boundary of race, ethnicity and non-Swedishness in relation to non-whiteness are implicitly and explicitly communicated between the researcher and the researched. The question of 'where are you from' reflects the norm of whiteness in Swedishness and the clarification of my ethnicity could lead to a positive interview situation and revealing of negative stereotypes in some cases. This indicates the relational boundaries of race and ethnicity, and the ethnic hierarchy that exist in Sweden. Stereotypes of Asian not speaking the language fluently led some informants to be surprised to find an Asian researcher. This exhibits that language as a visible difference functions as a marker of race and ethnicity, and an indication of non-Swedishness. Some examples from the interviews also show that boundaries of race and ethnicity are defined and negotiated through intersections of gender, age and class.

The aim of this paper has been to address and open up a methodological discussion that is missing today: The challenges and possibilities of a non-white researcher in interviewing white research respondents.

'Reversing the gaze' enabled the analysis of how the white Swedish majority categorize non-whiteness and non-Swedishness, how the majority sees and communicates racial differences. I hope that this article can contribute to the further development in the methodological discussions and also encourage other researchers of minority background to question the research practice within the field of racial and ethnic studies.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this case, West European refers to someone who has an origin from for example Germany, Great Britain, France, Central/East European refers to someone who has an origin from for example former Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary and Latin American refers to someone who has an origin from for example Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Mexico. These are socially constructed and contested categories in the Swedish context.

<sup>2</sup> Trondman (2006) also discusses the differences between the category 'immigrant' and the perception of 'immigrant' in Swedish context.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussions on the construction of whiteness and the practice of colour-blindness within the Swedish context see for example Hübinette and Lundström 2011a, Hübinette and Lundström 2011b, Tigervall and Hübinette 2010.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussions on the construction of whiteness and the practice

of colour-blindness within the Swedish context see for example Hübinette and Lundström 2011a, Hübinette and Lundström 2011b, Tigervall and Hübinette 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Read for example, Gingrich 2004, Goldberg 2006, Skovdahl 1996, Hagerman 2007, Furuhausen 2007, Gustafsson 2007, Broberg and Tydén 2005.

### References

- Adamson, Joy, and Jenny L. Donovan. 2002. Research in black and white. *Qualitative Health Research* 12(6): 816-25.
- Ahlberg, Beth Maina, and Adrián Groglopo. 2006. *Hälsa, vård och strukturell diskriminering : rapport (My translation: Health, health-care system and structural discrimination: report)*. Vol. 2006:78. Stockholm: Fritze.
- Archer, Louise. 2002. 'It's easier that you're a girl and that you're asian': Interactions of 'race' and gender between researchers and participants. *Feminist Review* 72:108-32.
- Athey, K. R., Joan E. Coleman, Audry P. Reitman, and Jenny Tang. 1960. Two experiments showing the effect of the interviewer's racial background on responses to questionnaires concerning racial issues. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 44(4): 244-6.
- Brekke, Jan-Paul, and Tordis Brochgrevink. 2007. *Talking about integration*.
- Broberg, Gunnar, and Mattias Tydén. 2005. *Oönskade i folkhemmet: Rashygien och sterilisering i sverige (My translation: Unwanted in the People's Home: Race hygiene and sterilisation in Sweden)*. Stockholm: Dialogos.
- Cotter, Patrick R., Jeffrey Cohen, and Philip B. Coulter. 1982. Race-of-interviewer effects in telephone interviews. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 46(2): 278-84. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X%28198222%2946%3A2%3C278%3AREITI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>.
- De los Reyes, Paulina. 2006. *Arbetslivets (o)synliga murar: Rapport (My translation: Working life's (in)visible walls: Repport)*. Vol. 2006:59. Stockholm: Fritze.
- Ehn, Billy. 1996. *Vardagslivets etnologi: Reflektioner kring en kulturvetenskap (My translation: Everyday Ethnology: Reflections on Cultural Studies)*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.
- Essed, Philomena. 1990. *Everyday racism: Reports from women of two cultures*. 1st ed. Claremont, CA: Hunter House.
- Fine, Michelle. 2004. *Off white: Readings on power, privilege, and resistance*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. London: Routledge.



- Furuhagen, Björn. 2007. *Den svenska rasbiologins idehistoriska rötter, en inventering av forskningen (My translation: The Swedish Race Biology's historical roots, a summary of researches)*. 326/2006. [jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X%28197524%2F197624%2939%3A4%3C523%3AWRARE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1](http://www.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X%28197524%2F197624%2939%3A4%3C523%3AWRARE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1).
- Gingrich, Andre. 2004. Concepts of race vanishing, movements of racism rising? Global issues and Austrian ethnography. *Ethnos* 69 (2): 156-76
- Goldberg, David Theo. 2006. Racial europeanization. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29 (2): 331-64
- Gunaratnam, Yasmin. 2003. *Researching race and ethnicity: Methods, knowledge and power*. London: Sage.
- Gustafsson, Tommy. 2007. *En fiende till civilisationen : Manlighet, genusrelationer, sexualitet och rasstereotyper i svensk filmkultur under 1920-talet (My translation: An enemy of the civilisation: Manliness, gender relations, sexuality and racial stereotypes in Swedish film culture during 1920s)*. Lund: Sekel.
- Hagerman, Maja. 2007. *Det rena landet: Om att uppfinna den svenska nationalmyten (My translation: The pure country: Inventing the Swedish national myth)*. Stockholm: Prisma
- Hatchett, Shirley, and Howard Schuman. 1975. White respondents and race-of-interviewer effects. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 39(4): 523-8. <http://links>.
- Hervik, Peter. 2012. The danish cartoon crisis and the discourse of ethnic identity conflict. (Forthcoming)
- Hoong Sin, Chih. 2007. Ethnic-matching in qualitative research: Reversing the gaze on 'white others' and 'white' as 'other'. *Qualitative Research* 7(4): 477-99.
- Hübinette, Tobias, and Carina Tigervall. 2009. To be non-white in a colour-blind society: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents in Sweden on everyday racism. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 30(4): 335-53.
- Hübinette, Tobias, and Catrin Lundström. 2011a. Den svenska vitthetens melankoli (White melancholia: Mourning the loss of "Good old Sweden"). *Glänta* 2(11): 28-35
- Hübinette, Tobias, and Catrin Lundström. 2011b. Sweden after the recent election: The double-binding power of Swedish whiteness through the mourning of the loss of 'Old Sweden' and the passing of 'Good Sweden'. *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 19(1): 42-52.
- Kim, Choong Soon. 1977. *An Asian anthropologist in the south: Field experiences with blacks, indians, and whites*. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press.

- Krysan, Maria, and Mick P. Couper. 2003. Race in the live and the virtual interview: Racial deference, social desirability, and activation effects in attitude surveys. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66 (4, *Special Issue: Race, Racism, and Discrimination*): 364-83.
- Malmö city. [www.malmo.se](http://www.malmo.se). (Accessed November 1, 2011)
- Mattsson, Katarina. 2005. Diskrimineringens andra ansikte - svenskhet och "det vita västerländska" (My Translation: Discriminations' other face -Swedishness and "the white westerner"). In *Bortom vi och dom: Teoretisk reflektioner om makt, integration och strukturell diskriminering (My translation: Beyond us and them: Theoretical reflections on power, integration and structural discrimination).*, ed. Stadens Offentliga Utredningar. Vol. SOU:2005:41, 139-157.
- Merton, Robert K. 1972. Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *The American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1, *Varieties of Political Expression in Sociology*): 9-47.
- Osanami Törngren, Sayaka. 2011. Love ain't got no color? - Attitude toward interracial marriage in Sweden. *Malmö Studies in International Migration and Ethnic Relations No 10*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Science No 533. Malmö: Prinfo
- Phoenix, Ann. 1994. Practising feminist research: The intersection of gender and 'race' in the research process. In *Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective*, ed. Purvis, Mary & Maynard, June, 49-71. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Pred, Allan. 2000. *Even in Sweden: Racisms, racialized spaces, and the popular geographical imagination*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Rhodes, P. J. 1994. Race-of-interviewer effects: A brief comment. *Sociology* 28(2): 547-58.
- Rooth, Dan-Olof. 2002. Adopted children in the labour market — discrimination or unobserved characteristics? *International Migration* 40(1): 71-98
- Runfors, Ann. 2006. Fångslande frihet: Paradoxer och dilemman i den moderna frihetsvisionen (My translation: Prisoned in freedom: Paradoxes and dilemma in the modern vision of freedom). In *Orientalen i sverige : Samtida möten och gränssnitt (My translation: The Orient in Sweden: Contemporary meeting and face).*, eds. Simon Ekström, Lena Gerholm. 1. uppl ed., 329. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Sands, Roberta G., Joretha Bourjolly, and Dorit Roer-Strier. 2007. Crossing cultural barriers in research interviewing. *Qualitative Social Work* 6(3): 353-72.
- Sawyer, Lena, and Masoud Kamali. 2006. *Utbildningens dilemma: Demokratiska ideal och an*

*drafierande praxis: Rapport (My translation: Education's Dilemma: Democratic ideal and the practice of othering: Repport)*. Vol. 2006:40. Stockholm: Fritze.

*Racial Studies* 29(3): 431-51.

Signell, Sonja, and Frank Lindblad. 2008. Degrading attitudes related to foreign appearance: Interviews with Swedish female adoptees from Asia. *Adoption & Forskning* 32(3): 46-59.

Skovdahl, Bernt. 1996. Skeletten i garderoben: om rasisméns idehistoriska rötter (My translation: Skellet in the gardrob: The roots of the idea of history of racism). *Mångkulturellt centrum*. Vol. 1996:8. Tumba: Mångkulturellt centrum.

Statistics Sweden. 2010. Födda i Sverige - Ändå olika? Betydelsen av föräldrarnas fördelsland (Born in Sweden - but Still Different? the Significance of Parents' Contry of Birth). Vol. *Dempgraphic reports* 2010:2.

Tang, Ning. 2002. Interviewer and interviewee relationships between women. *Sociology* 36(3): 703-21.

Tigervall, Carina, and Tobias Hübinette. 2010. Japaner, Japaner, Japaner - Östasiater i Svensk bild- och senkultur (My translation: Japanese, Japanese, Japanese - East Asians in Swedish media and contemporary culture). *Fjärde Världen* 1 (2010b): 22-5.

Trondman, Mats. 2006. Disowning knowledge: To be or not to be 'the immigrant' in Sweden. *Ethnic and*