

Defining Swedishness: When Swedes Without a Migration Background Are a Local Numerical Minority

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Abstract

In this study, we examine how people without a migration background living in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Malmö, Sweden, define national identity in daily life. This setting provides a look into the intersection between the dominant position these people occupy in the Swedish national context and the confrontation with ethnic diversity as a result of becoming a local numerical minority. We address articulations of what being Swedish means in interviews with 22 Swedes without a migration background. We find that people mostly reproduce the national identity discourse that is nationally dominant. Most people explicitly articulate an achievable national identity, presenting Swedishness as accessible to everyone, in line with how Swedish integration policy is framed, and the current dominant political discourse. However, when talking about Swedishness as an identity and an attribute, the Swedishness of Swedes without a migration background is taken for granted, which indicates that despite changing local hierarchies, the establishment of the Swede without a migration background as the dominant Swede remains unchallenged. Swedishness might be achievable, but only because the dominant Swede defines it as such. Nonetheless, some respondents engage critically and reflectively with their own position of power as the nationally dominant group. This discourse is mostly expressed by raising the issue of white privilege and acknowledging it as a hindrance to the social positioning of people with a migration background in Swedish society. This reflexivity might be a result of confrontation with diversity and becoming a minority.

Keywords

inclusivity; majority–minority; Swedish national identity; whiteness

1. Introduction

An increasing body of work examines the demographic phenomenon of majority–minority cities, where there is no majority group (i.e., no group that comprises 50% or more of the residents) and the national majority becomes a local numerical minority. Studies on majority–minority contexts explore aspects such as commonplace diversity (Wessendorf, 2014), inclusion/exclusion in ethnically diverse contexts (Crul & Lelie, 2021), problematisation of diversity at the neighbourhood level (Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2018), and more.

Some criticism has been directed at this work for not engaging enough with the national context where people without a migration background become a local minority (Alba & Duyvendak, 2019). As the nation-state remains the main category of belonging in the modern world (Brubaker, 2010), it becomes important to study how the people who become a local minority but remain nationally dominant define and articulate national identity. As Lundström (2017) argues, the national majority still maintains the power to decide what the nation is. Despite their position as a local numerical minority, people without a migration background living in majority–minority cities remain dominant at the national level. In a previous study (Lazëri & Coenders, 2023) we show that Dutch people without a migration background who are a local numerical minority but remain nationally dominant, still define national identity in the same terms as their counterparts who are not a local numerical minority, indicating that the terms of what the nation is still get defined by the national majority.

Nonetheless, a majority–minority situation constitutes a breach of how self-evident the nation-state is. As Verkuyten (2005, p. 12) puts it: “The multiethnic situation confronts people directly with the question of boundary construction and with the value and meaning of what is considered typical of one’s own group.” This breach can lure out reflections on national identity and can change how people give form to it through confrontation (Fox, 2017). Majority–minority settings are often also superdiverse ones, where there is not only increased ethnic diversity but increased diversity across various patterns of demographic compositions (Vertovec, 2007). These changes not only confront people with diversity but with new hierarchical and power relations as well (Vertovec, 2019). The increasing diversity in these majority–minority cities might destabilize the image of the nation-state as a homogenous and self-evident entity. Therefore the question arises as to how this population without a migration background defines national identity in daily life majority–minority settings.

In this study, we zoom in on the city of Malmö in Sweden. Sweden presents an interesting case study for the discussion of national identity. Despite the presence of historical ethnic minorities, Sweden has been historically perceived as an ethnically homogenous nation (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). In the second half of the 20th century, Sweden saw a great increase in the diversity of its population, largely driven by international migration (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). Malmö is a city that has experienced rapid demographic transformation and is currently seen as a cultural diversity hub, with over half of its population having a migration background (see, for instance, the secondary data analysis we conducted on the demographic development of Malmö showing how the share of inhabitants with a migration background in the city reached 54% by 2017, BaM Project, n.d.). For this study, we have interviewed people without a migration background that live in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Malmö. In these neighbourhoods, daily interactions occur with the potential of creating a situation where diversity is the norm (Crul, 2016; Vertovec, 2007), or at the very least, commonplace (Wessendorf, 2014). However, they also remain

nationally dominant and embedded within available narratives of Swedishness. Therefore, we aim to answer the research question: How do Swedes without a migration background living in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Malmö engage with and reflect on available narratives of national identity?

This article uses a descriptive and administrative definition of the nationally dominant group, namely people without a migration background. People without a migration background are born in their country of residence from parents both born in their country of residence. The literature on this topic uses a broad range of definitions aimed at capturing the dominant group, or the non-migrant group. Our choice to use a descriptive and administrative definition instead of an ethnic definition has been made to reflect the demographic shifts themselves, which are expressed in these descriptive terms. However, ethnic and racial discussions around this concept come into play and are treated especially in the analysis of this article.

This study comes at a time in which we see a rise in the importance attached to the nation-state. Discussions about migrants and their role in host societies increasingly take place within the framework of the nation-state and the national imagination of the model citizen. Studying how people without a migration background relate to the nation-state in situations when it is not as self-evident in daily life can help better address issues of exclusion and inclusion.

Additionally, this article brings a new perspective to the literature on superdiversity. Most of this literature focuses on interactions between different groups, while this article analyses the role played by national-level understandings of and discourse on identity in shaping discourses at the local level.

2. Defining National Identity

“National identity,” while somewhat elusive, can be defined in two ways: national identity as identified from within, referencing markers such as characteristics, values, habits, and traditions of the nation-state’s members, and national identity as defined from without, by differentiating the ingroup from the outgroup (Triandafyllidou, 1998). This latter perspective is used to define national identity by looking at how it is demarcated through boundaries, namely who is and is not seen as belonging to the national ingroup. Formulating national identity relies on sustaining a narrative about the “nation-state” (Giddens, 1991) and within this perspective, national identity reflects a narrative of what the nation-state is, a narrative of who is a legitimate part of the nation-state and who isn’t.

Historically, the nation has been perceived as a homogenous ethnic group, aligning fully with the state as an organisational polity (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Brubaker, 2010). From this perspective, only the homogenous ethnic group is seen as having the ability to legitimately claim belonging to the nation-state and the boundaries around national identity are impermeable by the Other. In contemporary Western nation-states, a more civic understanding of the nation-state prevails, whereby commitment to the political community and its values is seen as more important than ancestry (e.g., Halikiopoulou et al., 2013). The boundaries around national identity are permeable, and anyone can achieve this identity as long as people are willing to commit to civic values associated with the country. This can also include other achievable ways of relating to the country, such as feeling belonging to the country, or learning how to speak the language of the country (Pehrson & Green, 2010). The attributes of belonging to a nation-state imagined via a civic identity lens are attainable, in contrast to the more restrictive and exclusive attributes associated with an ethno-national identity.

Most work on national identity focuses on definitions from without—defining identity by drawing boundaries around it. This is consistent with how people construct their social identities. The sense of belonging to an ingroup is based on self-categorisation in social categories and the distinction between the ingroup and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

The conceptualisation of the nation-state on either an ethnic or a civic basis has implications for the inclusion and exclusion of those who do not fit within the idea of the homogenous nation-state (e.g., immigrants or national minorities). Ethno-national identity correlates with negative attitudes towards migrants (Esses et al., 2005; Pehrson & Green, 2010) and radical right-wing voting (Lubbers & Coenders, 2017). When conceptualizing the world through the lens of the ethnically homogenous nation-state there might not be any place for the ethnic Other. Therefore, the very nature of ethnonational identity and a homogenous nation-state might lead to the exclusion of Others. Furthermore, how the national majority itself draws informal ethnic and national boundaries can make people who are not part of the national majority feel unwelcome (Ghorashi, 2017; Simonsen, 2016).

In Sweden, the public discourse predominantly reflects defining Swedishness from without (e.g., Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). Both kinds of boundaries around the nation-state—ethnic and civic—are present in public discourse and in the daily articulations of national identity that citizens themselves (re)produce. The current narrative of Swedishness embraced in public discourse reflects particularly non-ethnic values (Agius, 2017). While the definition of Swedishness remains vague, it entails a rejection of nationalism and patriotism and a focus on values associated with the state, rather than the nation. According to Agius (2017, p. 117), Swedishness is about “aspects of institutions and state-individual relations” rather than ethnic identity. Swedish public discourse is mostly concerned with presenting Swedish national identity as achievable—available to everyone who engages with Swedish society. This is especially visible in the colour-blind ideology of the official Swedish integration policy, connected to principles of liberal modernity (Osanami Törngren et al., 2018). At the individual level, Swedes also subscribe more often to a civic understanding of Swedish national identity (Lödén, 2014), reflecting the dominant public discourse.

Nonetheless, a more ethnic understanding of Swedish national identity is also present in a Swedish context, notably in the public discourse constructed and perpetuated by the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats, which vests Sweden with homogenous ethnic values (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Hellström et al., 2012). It is also visible in the discourse on whiteness in Sweden, which can be seen as an element of ethnic identity. For instance, Hübinette and Lundström (2014) argue that Sweden sees itself as a white nation and has continually done so within any framework of nation-building, even ones in which Sweden defines itself as a multicultural country embracing diversity. Lundström (2017) argues that Swedish national space is often seen as uninhabitable for non-white bodies and only white ones can really be at home in Sweden. By signalling this whiteness in daily discourses on the nation-state, one could perpetuate the exclusion of non-white communities within the nation-state. Nonetheless, most public and academic discussions avoid explicit mention of and engagement with whiteness (Osanami Törngren et al., 2018).

In this study, we situate definitions of national identity within a context where the nationally dominant group is a local numerical minority. Living in a majority–minority context can confront people with difference, with potential new (ethnic) hierarchies (Vertovec, 2019), but can also contribute to diversity being found commonplace (Wessendorf, 2014). At the same time, people without a migration background

remain nationally dominant, and as such not only have more access to material resources, but also have more access to defining, redefining, and perpetuating ethnic boundaries (Simonsen, 2022). Do Swedes without a migration background take up the available narratives of national identity, or do they offer alternative constructions of Swedishness situated within a majority–minority context? Do they reflect on and engage with their own enduring dominant position in Sweden, and their power to define national identity in their own terms as a result of living in a majority–minority context?

3. Method

This study has been conducted within the framework of the Becoming a Minority (BaM) project in which we research people without a migration background who are a minority in six European cities. For the qualitative fieldwork in Malmö, we interviewed people from majority–minority neighbourhoods focusing primarily on two neighbourhoods: Södra Sofielund and Lorensborg. Both neighbourhoods are majority–minority, i.e., Swedes without a migration background make up less than 50% of the population. Nonetheless, the neighbourhoods differ from each other in composition, architectural characteristics, and more.

Lorensborg, situated about three kilometres west of the city centre, consists mainly of large and high flat buildings, a mix of rentals and private properties. The Malmö football stadium is located adjacent to Lorensborg. The neighbourhood itself has few meeting places, consisting of a shopping mall containing a supermarket, a sports pub, and a few other businesses, and a small number of businesses elsewhere. Every Saturday morning the mall hosts a local flea market, where residents of Lorensborg and other Malmö residents put up stands. There are green spaces and playgrounds around the neighbourhood, and a lot of the flats have own courtyards that are not accessible to the public. A popular large public park with walking paths and a small lake is located very close to Lorensborg.

Södra Sofielund, located about three kilometres south of the city centre, consists mainly of smaller and lower apartment buildings, and a few streets of free-standing houses. The apartment buildings are mostly rentals and the free-standing houses are mostly private properties. According to respondents as well as experts in the neighbourhood, some rentals are managed by rental companies, but a lot are owned and managed by private landlords, often labelled slumlords by these respondents. The neighbourhood features a small central square with a corner shop, a playground, and a few other businesses. The neighbourhood is situated very close to other neighbourhoods with more bars, restaurants, and stores. Södra Sofielund has been placed on the list of extremely vulnerable areas by the Swedish police, a term that is applied to areas with high crime rates and social exclusion (Polisen, 2019). We were informed by respondents and experts we spoke with that attempts to help decrease social problems in Södra Sofielund—such as forcing private landlords in the area to improve the conditions of their rentals—have been hailed as positive, but have also sparked concerns about gentrification.

The interviews were conducted between November 2019 and February 2020. Most interviews were conducted in English by the first author, sometimes assisted by a research assistant. A number of interviews were conducted in Swedish by the research assistant, who transcribed and translated them into English. The interview language could have influenced the study. On the one hand, interviewees might not have been able to express their thoughts and feelings as fluently in English. On the other hand, by conducting the interviews in another language, interviewees might take more time to explain certain thoughts, traditions, and experiences that might seem self-evident to them from a Swedish perspective.

Respondents were recruited in different ways. Some were respondents to the BaM survey which took place in spring of 2019, that had indicated interest in participating in further BaM research. We also recruited respondents using snowballing, door-to-door flyers, Facebook groups, participation in neighbourhood activities, and contacts via colleagues in Malmö. We encountered difficulties recruiting enough respondents from these two neighbourhoods and also interviewed a few respondents from similar neighborhoods to Södra Sodelund and Lorensborg in composition, socio-economic status, and location within the city. As the discourse on national identity, the focus of this study, was not explicitly linked by the respondents to characteristics of the majority-minority setting they live in, we asked inhabitants of the other majority-minority neighbourhoods for reflections on constructions of Swedishness. Ultimately, we interviewed 22 respondents without a migration background, 13 women and 9 men, aged 26 to 47 at the time of the interview. The majority have either followed a university or a university of applied sciences educational programme.

We conducted semi-structured interviews asking respondents about living in a majority-minority neighbourhood, with questions on interethnic relations in the neighbourhood and the use of neighbourhood space. Additionally, respondents were asked what being Swedish meant to them, if they felt Swedish, if Swedishness is accessible to everyone or not, and how they relate Swedishness to living in a majority-minority context. We did not specify what we meant by identity, therefore people were free to interpret Swedishness from within or without. This analysis focuses on questions about Swedishness and Swedish national identity, and we also look at how people refer to the Swedes and Swedishness throughout the rest of the interview, for instance when discussing the presence of various ethnic groups in the neighbourhood, or when describing the diversity of their social circles. The interviews ranged from 37 minutes to 1 hour and 55 minutes in length.

It is important to consider the position and background of both interviewers for the study results. The first author of this article is an Albanian-origin Netherlands-based researcher temporarily based in Sweden for the duration of this research. As a foreigner in Sweden, she was assumed by respondents to not know much about the habits, customs, and social discourses in Sweden and in Malmö, which proved useful in getting respondents to articulate thoughts that might have otherwise seemed self-evident to them. The research assistant is a Swede without a migration background, belonging to the same group as all the interviewees. On a few occasions, this facilitated the recruitment of respondents.

We conducted content analysis using Atlas.ti, version 9.0. We used the theoretical framework to formulate code groups and codes regarding categories of national identity and the majority-minority context, and we revisited these codes throughout the analysis, adjusting them based on what emerged from the data. See Table 1 for the definitive coding scheme. All respondents are pseudonymised.

4. Results

During the interviews, respondents shared and reflected on their experiences with living in a majority-minority neighbourhood. They spoke about the local context they are embedded in and explained how it is for them to live in diversity. Further on during the interviews, they reflected on what Swedishness means to them, and the boundaries of Swedishness. While the local experiences with being a minority are not the focus of this article, we were interested in the extent to which people relate the local context they are embedded in, to how they

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Defining Swedish national identity	Within	Feasts	
		Quiet personality	
		Love of nature	
	Without	Civic identity	Language
			Participation
			Feeling
Reflecting on categorisations	Whiteness	Ethnic identity	Ancestry
		Own position	
	Social position ethnic minorities	Position Other	
		Lower societal position	
		Discrimination and marginalisation	
	Rejecting Swedish middle class values	Own position	

construct Swedishness. We note that in general, people do not relate local experiences with being a minority to reflections on national identity, bar a few cases (by describing for instance neighbourhood residents in terms of group belonging, see analysis below). While our respondents came from different neighbourhoods in Malmö, with different characteristics, we see few differences between neighbourhoods in how Swedishness is constructed, indicating the limited role of the local context. Critically reflecting on whiteness (see Section 4.2.1) is an exception to this, as most respondents critically engaging with whiteness as a boundary in Swedish society live in Södra Sofielund. However, given both the limited number of people who reflect on whiteness, and the lack of a reflection on how the local and the national connect, the results do not provide clear insight into this relationship.

4.1. Defining National Identity From Without

When asked to define what Swedish identity is, respondents did not focus their discourse much around Swedishness from *within* (what are characteristics, traditions, behaviours, and habits of those that identify as Swedes). Occasionally respondents did refer specifically to aspects of Swedish identity from within. For instance, some of them see Swedish identity as reflecting particular values such as gender equality. Some respondents also identify a held-back personality and a need to not stick out as a particularly Swedish characteristic, or speak about traditional celebrations such as Midsummer. The discussion mostly revolved around Swedishness from *without*—Swedishness as a collection of conditions that must be fulfilled by those who may claim themselves as Swedes. Therefore, the discussion quickly took the shape of the ethnic/civic distinction—people either spoke of Swedish identity as something only available to those with Swedish ancestry (ethno-national identity) or they spoke of Swedish identity as achievable as long as one puts effort and meets certain conditions (civic national identity).

The prevailing discourse in these interviews is that of a civic construction of Swedish national identity. When explicitly talking about Swedishness, most respondents refer to it as achievable. They highlight the importance

of *feeling Swedish* for being Swedish, an element of civic national identity. For instance, Emma (woman, 29, Lorensborg) said:

While Swedish identity...it can of course be about whether you feel Swedish or not Swedish. Eh but....I...so Swedish identity—if you are Swedish then you are Swedish! If you have citizenship in Sweden, you are Swedish. And that's that kind of.

Jenny (woman, 26, Södra Sofielund) elaborates further on this take: "I think it [being Swedish] is something that you can become because I think it's something that develops overtime and that it's something they self-identify with, and it's something you can choose to identify with."

While being Swedish is made conditional on feeling Swedish, feeling Swedish is not necessarily made conditional on fulfilling any specific characteristics of Swedishness. Often the respondents leave it up to the other to decide in what way they feel Swedish.

Another element of civic national identity that recurs in how respondents speak about who can be Swedish concerns the importance of *participating in and contributing to society* in some way, usually through work. Ferdinand (man, 33, Södra Sofielund) says in response to the question whether the first author of this article, a foreigner in Sweden living there only for the duration of this fieldwork, could ever become Swedish:

Of course you could but you have to be invested in the country, and what I mean by that is that you live here full-time, perhaps you work here or have some sort of activity. You're, like, a part of society, and I mean that could be whatever, but I mean as long as you are part of society.

This sentiment is also echoed by Sofie (woman, 29, Lorensborg), who says: "Yeah, citizenship, yeah, and then it's like okay, I'm Swedish, but if you don't want to pay taxes and help us by doing work and stuff like that, then it's hard to see you as Swedish."

Proficiency in Swedish is also seen as important by many. The role of language in national identity is debated in literature (Oakes, 2001), with some seeing it as tied to ethnonational identity (e.g., speaking Swedish defines the ethnic group) and others as civic identity (e.g., Swedish is the lingua franca of Sweden and facilitates participation in society). Most respondents emphasizing the importance of speaking Swedish generally frame it in civic terms, citing its utility for societal participation and life opportunities. For instance, Emma points out that: "Eh maybe some simple language test [would be important for being Swedish]....But I think it would be good to make it easier to adapt, and especially easier to get a chance in a country, if you have the language."

Ferdinand also says: "But I have to say, you have to have sort of a baseline, you know, in society. At least be able to communicate in the language, because that opens so many doors, work, etc., and like communicating with people around you."

The sentiment is echoed by Edward (man, Lorensborg): "I personally think that it's very important to learn the language, I think that's mostly important and I also think that's the thing the society hasn't been able to accomplish."

However, some respondents approach Swedish proficiency as an ethnic element (of nation building) rather than a purely utilitarian lingua franca. Jesper (man, 29, Södra Sofielund) says about defining Swedish culture:

But....I do believe it [Swedish culture] has a lot of foundation in language of course. That one has a common language. I think that is crucial for the making of a people in some way, that one has a common language one is using.

This sentiment is very rarely echoed among the respondents.

In summary, respondents predominantly adopt and use a dominant and widespread civic discourse on Swedish identity based on civic values and open toward including people from different ethnic groups. However, it is noteworthy that when asked to define Swedish identity, the respondents predominantly engage with Swedishness as a reflection of who the Other is and how they fit within a Swedish identity, rather than a reflection of what makes the Swedish Swedish. The Swedishness of people like the respondents themselves (i.e., Swedes without a migration background) is not only not questioned, but mostly also not described. Furthermore, they take for granted that they have the power to define who is Swedish and do not reflect on their position in making and perpetuating ethnic boundaries. However, while respondents don't reflect on their power to decide what and who is Swedish, they do reflect on the meaning and implications of the categories they talk about, as well as their own dominant position in Swedish society.

4.2. Reflexivity

The reflections people engage in when speaking of national identity occurred rather organically during the conversations. Sometimes this happened when respondents described diversity and the ethnic Other within their neighbourhood or in the city, and other times when they reflected on constructions of Swedishness. Three broad themes emerge from the responses. Some respondents reflect on *whiteness as a boundary marker* in Swedish society, acknowledging their own white privilege and the position of non-white Swedes. Others discuss the *societal positioning of ethnic minorities* as a whole, usually recognizing the marginalised position of ethnic minorities both socio-economically and in terms of discrimination. A third discussion some respondents engage with is *criticism of what they perceive to be the dominant Swedish middle-class culture* and their own positionality therein.

4.2.1. Whiteness

Respondents' reflections on whiteness tend to be centred around identifying whiteness as a boundary in Swedish society and describing the position of those that do not fit in the category of white. For instance, Alice talks about her friends who have non-Swedish Western European backgrounds:

So, like, one parent is British. One of my best friends, her mother is from Iceland. One with two Swiss parents, you know, they will pass as white and they will be like, more privileged, or like be looked at.

Alice also talks more explicitly about how she relates to this herself: "Maybe I have some, like, white shame. So I tried to, like, compensate because I think people get racist attitudes....and that's also a bit patronizing."

Jenny also describes this sentiment:

They [her friends] said they lived in the whitest and most Swedish BRF [house owners' association], which they didn't like because it felt, yeah, a bit disgusting, that yeah...

I: Disgusting how?

Jenny: Because a lot of Swedish and white privileged people bought apartments in, like, a poorer area....It's, like, gentrification and stuff. She [her friend] felt like she added, contributed to the gentrification and stuff.

Notably, these respondents not only reflect on how whiteness acts as a boundary in Swedish society, but also on how the privileges granted by virtue of being white give them a sense of shame and discomfort.

Some respondents mention skin colour and whiteness in an attempt to explicitly describe how they are used in Swedish society to differentiate. For example, Alexander (man, 47, Södra Sofielund) tells about a Quran school near his house in his neighbourhood, and describes how the attendants of this school are seen:

And the people that come there, they are migrants. They fulfil the concept of migrants because they really look like migrants. It's not only about the colour of the skin, it's about how they dress and what colours they can wear.

Alexander reflects on this further when posed the question of whether someone moving to Sweden from abroad can ever become Swedish: "On the other hand, when you speak with an accent or you look foreign, in a lot of people's minds, you would still not be a Swede."

Lilly (woman, 44, Södra Sofielund) talks about her girlfriend, who was adopted as a child by Swedish parents without a migration background, and was raised exclusively with "Swedish culture":

But she's not in the, in the society, she isn't seen as Swedish.

I: Because she has a different colour?

Lilly: Yeah. Right. She's from India. So she gets the treatment of an immigrant person. But she has the culture and the experience of a Swedish-born person.

Lilly's account of how her girlfriend is seen in society touches upon skin colour and appearance as a major element of boundary-making in Swedish society. According to Lilly's interpretation of Swedish society, being culturally Swedish is not enough for most Swedes to see one as Swedish: One must also *look* Swedish (i.e., be white).

Lilly also reflects on her own positionality within whiteness as a boundary in Swedish society. She gives an example of never being stopped in stores by security personnel, while her partner is: "So no one would like [stop me], I think that's also because I'm like, blonde and white and I speak perfect Swedish."

Sometimes respondents use skin colour themselves to differentiate between the in- and out-group but often problematize this use. For instance, Ferdinand uses whiteness to describe the difference between himself and others in the neighbourhood. He hesitates before explicitly mentioning whiteness, in line with a known trend in Sweden to avoid conversations about race. Ferdinand describes how people hanging out in the neighbourhood sometimes scowl at him when he walks past certain areas at night. When asked why he thinks they scowl at him, he responds:

I think it is because perhaps sometimes I look like a police officer, so maybe, because....I don't look like them. But sometimes when I wear more like work pants they don't really scowl but they look interested in like if I want to buy something....So depends a little on what I wear and stuff like that.

I: So how do you not look like them? In what way?

Ferdinand: Ummm [laughs]. I don't want to be like that....Because of my whiteness, I suppose.

When Henrik (man, 38, Södra Sofielund) reflects on walking past groups of young people in the neighbourhood, he acknowledges that whiteness as a boundary is problematic, but uses it nonetheless to describe encounters in the neighbourhood and to describe both himself and the Other:

But it's also my response, if I pass a group that, based on different experiences or aspects, I believe can perform something potentially negative, then maybe they look at me as Swedish because I also look kind of look to them as if they are not Swedes...although they are, they may also have grown up here. Well, it's for them to define I guess...there are, like. The. Yes. Unfortunately, our skin colour creates prejudice.

Thea (woman, 30, Lorensborg) describes her stepdaughter's class by problematizing the use of external characteristics to categorize people, while at the same time employing it herself, like Henrik:

I know there was a girl in the class—if one is to be very...prejudiced, then there were people of colour and mixed appearance in the class but a lot of Swedish names. So there were a lot who had mixed parents.

4.2.2. Reflecting on the Social Position of Ethnic Minorities

Respondents' reflections on the social position of ethnic minorities can be broadly categorised into two streams. Firstly, some acknowledge and problematize that people with a migration background occupy a lower socio-economic position in Swedish society. Secondly, they recognize that, apart from this positioning, people with a migration background face an additional layer of marginalisation, including ethnic discrimination.

For instance, Alexander reflects on the discrimination and other marginalizing experiences that contribute to the disadvantaged position of these groups. He does this in the context of a discussion on what he defines as a culture of violence rather present in Malmö:

These are children of migrants. And these victims and perpetrators as far as we know, they are children of migrants. Which may indicate that it [the culture of violence] can have to do with marginalisation, racism, discrimination. Stuff like that.

Ake (man, 38) lives in Heleneholm, a lower income majority–minority neighbourhood. While describing the conditions of the building he lives in, he reflects on the position of people with a migration background in Swedish society, and the actual access they have to rights which on paper belong to them:

I: Do you think that a lower income neighborhood that has mostly people with a Swedish background would be different?

Ake: Yeah....The situation with the building itself that I live in, quite often the elevators aren't working, quite often the laundry machines aren't working. And there are other issues like this with the building itself. If there were more Swedish people living there, they would find this unacceptable and they would demand their rights with a housing company, for instance, but I think with such a large proportion of the tenants living there being immigrants, they don't know their rights. They don't perhaps know enough Swedish to demand their rights. The expectation is lower. Yeah. Things would work if there would be more Swedish people living there.

Lilly phrases the marginalisation of ethnic minorities in the clearest terms when she reflects on being a numerical minority in her neighbourhood:

I: So we talked about, when we were talking about the project before the interview, we talked about the whole minority idea. And do you ever feel like a minority?

Lilly: No, I had no idea that it was less than 50%. I mean, when you say it, and I think about it's like, yeah, yeah, that would probably be right. But since I, yeah, no, I don't. And I think that feeling, the feeling of being a minority, I know, it's, it means that you're a smaller group. But since the smaller group in our area, has more, has more privileges and has more power, and has more access to things and has more money, then it's like, yeah, being a minority and having access to nothing, that will make it feel more like you're a minority. I mean, if you're the only one, but you have access to everything. That's not a problem. I mean, it's like, yeah. I'm thinking the problem is not being able to make your voice heard. Because you're fewer people. But that small group has access to everything. Is it a minority? I mean, it is if you go off counting people.

By reflecting on how Swedes without a migration background that are a local minority still maintain a dominant position in society, Lilly highlights the disadvantaged and marginalised position of ethnic minorities in Swedish society.

4.2.3. Rejecting Swedish Middle-Class Values

Thirdly, some respondents identify what can be considered a standard middle-class Swedish environment, in which one has to conform to certain mores, such as a focus on appearance. They explicitly value the diverse neighbourhoods they live in for deviating from this culture, reflecting on their own position within this middle-class culture, and their position in the majority–minority neighbourhood.

Tilde (woman, 32, Lorensborg), has this to say when asked whether she feels more at home in Lorensborg than the neighbourhood where she grew up:

Now I feel a lot more at home here...as a grown-up, I couldn't live in a villa quartier, I feel. It would be weird for me, I think, because I don't have that kind of economy, I don't have the lifestyle. I would probably check what clothes I'd be wearing...even just walking through the quartiers here—because you walk through the villa quartiers when you walk to the ocean—it's like watching...you feel like a tourist almost. So now I feel...It's why I like Lorensborg too, I don't have to think about what I put on when I go out. Now I would never like to live where I grew up.

Lilly talks about the neighbourhood she grew up in, which earlier in the interview she identifies as upper-middle-class white Swedish: "I'm much happier living here [in Södra Sofielund]. Because you don't get judged in the same way."

Cornelia (woman, 26, Lindängen) reflects on what she experiences as a closed-off Swedish way of being, which is not appreciated by all Swedes:

I don't know, I sometimes think about why are we like this? Have we always been like this? And I guess my impression is that, the more you care about superficial things like what car do you have? Do you have a dishwasher? Things like that? The more potential for shame there is. And so maybe it's a sense of, a fear of not being enough?

While critiquing middle-class values, respondents do not engage with their own dominant position and its implications in a diverse society. However, they engage with how they relate to some of the dominant values in Swedish society, highlight their discomfort with such values, and express appreciation for their current neighbourhoods. While this does not necessarily reveal resistance to their dominant position as such, it suggests a fluidity in how the dominant group is perceived and who is considered part of it.

5. Conclusion

This article explores how people without a migration background define Swedish national identity in daily life, focusing on majority–minority neighbourhoods where they become a local numerical minority. We posed the question of how Swedes without a migration background living in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Malmö engage with and reflect on available narratives of national identity. We showed that they (re)produce the dominant discourse on civic Swedish identity, while at the same time taking the dominant position of the Swede without a migration background for granted. However, they critically reflect on some aspects of Swedishness that marginalize Swedes with a migration background.

5.1. Swedish National Identity

Respondents were asked to define Swedish national identity, and while some occasionally define national identity from within, in terms of characteristics or traditions (for instance, they highlight Swedes as a quiet and held-back people who enjoy nature and celebrate feasts like Midsummer) most of the discourse on national identity defines it from without, centering on demarcating who is and isn't a legitimate part of the national ingroup (Triandafyllidou, 1998). This is also reflective of the dominant discourse in Swedish society on what Swedishness is, mostly defined in terms of who is Swedish and who is not (e.g., Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). Therefore, our respondents mostly reproduce the available dominant narratives of Swedish identity.

The discourse respondents employ follows roughly the dichotomy made in the literature between ethnic and civic identity, i.e., Swedishness as something ascribed that you have to be born with, or Swedishness as something achievable. Most respondents explicitly frame Swedish national identity in an inclusive way, leaning toward Swedish identity as a civic one (e.g., Agius, 2017; Löden, 2014). People formulate Swedishness as something that can be embodied by everyone, as long as they are willing to take on some civic characteristics. Very few respondents define Swedishness explicitly in ethnic terms. While, to a certain extent, this reflects the current public discourse, a more ethnic discourse of Swedishness is still present in Sweden, partially driven by the right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats (Hellström et al., 2012). This discourse is mostly missing from our findings, while the party has a very substantial following in Sweden and Malmö. Partially this could be explained by the profile of our respondents, who are in general young and higher educated, a group more positive toward diversity (Manevska & Achterberg, 2013).

Our respondents predominantly focus on defining who the Other is rather than defining the Swede as such. The Swedishness of Swedes without a migration background is not discussed, and the conversation becomes about what the Other must do or be to be able to claim Swedishness. Respondents don't engage with the meaning and consequences of this discourse, possibly implying they take for granted the power to decide what Swedishness is (Simonsen, 2022). However, occasionally they engage critically and reflectively with the categories they talk about within the framework of a Swedish identity, as well as their own dominant position in Swedish society.

5.2. Reflecting on Categorisations and Dominant Position

While our respondents, in general, do not engage with their own dominant position in Sweden, some do reflect on the categories they use, and the categories they identify others as using to speak of and relate to people with different backgrounds. These reflections centre on three themes: whiteness and the colour boundaries drawn in Swedish society, the societal position of ethnic minorities, and what can be broadly seen as a Swedish middle-class culture.

When discussing *whiteness as a boundary*, people often reflect on their own positionality, acknowledging and criticizing white privilege in Swedish society, and showing awareness of how they personally benefit from it. Simultaneously, they note the lack of this privilege in some ethnic minorities and highlight the resulting consequences—exclusion and marginalisation. Respondents connect whiteness explicitly to skin colour, including by discussing how some types of migrants can be Swedish passing by virtue of being white, however, as Lundström (2017) points out, not all whiteness is recognised as white capital, and not all whiteness (i.e., non-Swedish whiteness) can confer privilege. These power intricacies of whiteness are not further discussed by the respondents. Nonetheless, this finding is particularly relevant in the context of colour-blindness in Swedish society (Osanami Törngren et al., 2018). Highlighting whiteness acknowledges colour as an ethnic boundary, and moves away from a discourse centred on colour-blindness that dominates the Swedish discourse on boundaries. Respondents broadly perceive Swedishness to be an open and accessible category to everyone, but some acknowledge the barriers posed by ethnicity and race in how inclusive the category truly is. This might indicate that even in its broadest understanding Swedishness remains tied to ethnicity and race. Notably all respondents who showed insight into colour-based boundaries identified the problem as something perpetrated by others, and not them. They see themselves as observers who note the issue with colour boundaries but do not reflect on how they, themselves, might contribute to this.

Respondents acknowledge ethnicity as a more general boundary in Swedish society by discussing the *position of ethnic minorities*. They emphasise the marginalised position of these minorities by pointing out their structural and socio-economic disadvantage in Swedish society, as well as the ethnic discrimination they face. This indicates an awareness of inequality in the extent to which various groups in society can access Swedish society. Despite our respondents defining Swedish identity in inclusive terms, they still recognize existing boundaries and their exclusionary consequences.

The third theme involves reflections on what can be seen as specific *Swedish middle-class values*. Respondents identify these values, promptly distancing themselves from them while explicitly embracing the diversity in their majority–minority neighbourhoods. Their reflections on this theme focus solely on their own positionality regarding these values and how they relate to the values in majority–minority neighbourhoods.

In summary, some of the Swedes without a migration background we interviewed recognize and critique the marginalised position of ethnic others while recognizing their own privileged and dominant position in Swedish society. However, this awareness doesn't necessarily translate to a reflection on their power to define who is Swedish and their influence on drawing boundaries. The terms used to discuss Swedishness remain reflective of the nationally dominant discourse. However, this critique does indicate more insight into the consequences of various aspects of national identity, which might be a result of confrontation with the edges of the nation-state in a majority–minority context. This might be a more genuine effort at inclusion than an inclusive definition of Swedish identity.

While this study turned its gaze to how national identity construction and negotiation unfolds in majority–minority contexts, we noted few explicit references to the majority–minority context itself. Even though we asked respondents to reflect on experiences of Swedishness within the neighbourhood, the discussion on Swedishness remained focused on the national level. Our previous work, which looks at national identity in majority–minority contexts in the Netherlands, shows that the construction of identity is done similarly in majority–minority as in non-majority–minority contexts. This indicates a reproduction of national-level discourse in the local majority–minority context (Lazëri & Coenders, 2023). A similar mechanism seems to be at play here, especially in light of our findings on how the construction of national identity mirrors the national-level discourse. In the local setting where people live, they are faced with and exposed to diversity, yet this local setting seems to disappear as a consideration when people talk about national identity, although it does remain relevant for more day-to-day interactions (see also Kraus & Crul, 2022). We also note that some respondents value the culture of the majority–minority context they live in as opposed to the middle-class values with which they grew up.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited in showing to what extent the engagement with and criticism of the categories used to speak of Swedishness are connected to living in a majority–minority neighbourhood. Partially this could be due to the very broad scope of the interviews, with a variety of questions on the local and national contexts that were not necessarily explicitly coupled. Future research could consider designs that investigate this relationship more explicitly. Future research could also compare Swedes without a migration background living in majority–minority neighbourhoods with those living in non-majority–minority neighbourhoods. This comparison could clarify whether the reflexive engagement of some respondents

results from confrontation with diversity at the local level, or reflects larger societal processes, through which people are more aware of and engaged with issues of (in)equality and ethnic marginalisation.

Further research could also compare different national contexts and investigate whether critical engagement with various aspects of national identity is dependent on dominant national discourses or other specific features of the nation-state.

Lastly, in this research, we did not explicitly engage with intersections of difference. Future research should aim to reach groups with various social and cultural backgrounds, as educational background might influence which dominant narrative people engage with, as well as the language at their disposal for articulating criticism toward these narratives. Future research could also address how ethnicity and migration background intersect with other markers of difference, such as gender or sexual orientation, in affecting how people without a migration background reflect on identity, belonging, and the position of the Other.

5.4. Contribution

We have shown that most respondents subscribe to a nationally dominant civic identity narrative on Swedishness, defining Swedish identity in an inclusive way and making space for the ethnic Other in Swedish national space. Nonetheless, this inclusivity is performed from a place of dominance: Respondents do not reflect on their power to decide and define what national identity is. The inclusivity is therefore limited and bounded by the vision the dominant group—Swedes without a migration background—has on Swedish national identity.

However, respondents reflect on their power and positionality within Swedish society in general, by reflecting on the categories used in the discussion on Swedish national identity. They recognize their own privilege and the marginalisation of Swedes with a migration background. They criticize structural barriers ethnic minorities face, which implies a critique of how Swedish society includes, or fails to include, Swedes with a migration background and other ethnic minorities. In this sense, this can indicate a more genuine effort toward the inclusivity of ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates a critical engagement with the question of colour boundaries in defining Swedishness. Within a Swedish context, this awareness and engagement is unusual, as the discourse remains centred on colour-blindness, and therefore indicates a shift in the conversation toward acknowledging the role of colour in boundary-making with regards to national identity.

This study offers a better understanding of the way in which people without a migration background who are a local minority engage with the national context in which they remain dominant. We show that their dominant position is still visible in the way they relate to diversity, but they are sometimes aware (and critical) of this position.

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Conflict of Interests

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