Article

Structural Racism in Sweden: Framing Attitudes towards Immigrants through the Diversity Barometer Study (2005–2022)

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Abstract: This article presents a theoretical framework for analysing the findings derived from the Diversity Barometer, a longitudinal study that collected data on immigration and diversity-related topics in Swedish society from 2005 to 2022. This article examines attitudes towards immigrants and migration in Sweden and how the historical context of Swedish race relations and structural racism shapes these attitudes. Specifically, the article focuses on attitudes regarding immigrants' social rights and responsibilities, workplace diversity, cultural diversity, and spatial segregation. Our findings and analysis demonstrate how structural racism manifests itself through attitudes towards individuals with immigrant backgrounds in Sweden. Research has also revealed the pervasive nature of racial discrimination across various aspects of Swedish society, contributing to a divided society based on racial markers. However, the findings also show complexity in how Swedes' attitudes toward immigrants are to be understood when they do not follow a simple horizontal division between Swedes and immigrants. Instead, it appears as an intricate vertical division where immigrants, their culture and their labour are accepted, albeit in a subordinate manner.

Keywords: structural racism; attitudes toward immigrants; Sweden; diversity; segregation

1. Introduction

Many studies have shown how minorities and non-European immigrants and their children experience racial—including ethnic and religious—discrimination in Swedish society. A recently extensive compilation report of studies on people's experiences of racial discrimination in contact with Swedish public institutions shows that racism in contemporary Sweden recurs at different areas and societal levels and operates through these same institutions (Lundström and Wendt Höjer 2021). The research shows that individuals have encountered suspicion and neglect while interacting with social services and have also observed instances of racist stereotyping and discrimination in, for example, residential care homes (Behtoui et al. 2017; Storm 2018). Similarly, individuals have reported stereotyping and exclusion within higher education and healthcare systems (Behtoui and Høyer Leivestad 2018; Hamed et al. 2020). The literature review indicates that racism persists in Sweden through, but not limited to, the actions of public institutions. Other studies concern people's direct experiences of racism in contact with the police, including racial profiling, harassment and physical violence (Schclarek Mulinari 2020; Atak 2022; Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen 2022).

Most notable is the latest Swedish government inquiry on the issue of structural discrimination against non-European foreign-born persons and their children, conducted between 2004 and 2006. This inquiry published 13 scientific volumes—involving over 120 Swedish and international researchers—on ethnic structural discrimination in Swedish society, from political participation, school and education, the legal system, the labour market, and the health care system (SOU 2006). The inquiry highlights the need for measures to deepen democratic processes, affirmative action and other political interventions

aimed at compensating for the embedded structural ethnic/racial discrimination in the unequal organisation of Swedish society. Further studies on the different situations faced by various immigrant and minority groups, such as discrimination and hate crimes against Afro-Swedes (MKC 2014; BRÅ 2022), hate crimes against Muslims (BRÅ 2021), and discrimination against the Sami (DO 2008) and the Roma population (DO 2011), have been central to the work of anti-racist, immigrant and minority associations, as well as for some authorities. However, these studies have not received much engagement from mainstream political parties or significant attention from the authorities or the media.

Several studies have demonstrated the widening gap in social inequalities in Sweden. They have highlighted not only the increasing socio-economic gap and its correlation to housing segregation but also how segregation is entangled with racial divisions within Swedish society (Molina 1997; Andersson and Molina 2018; Malmberg et al. 2018; Bursell 2021; Gustafsson and Österberg 2023). Socio-economic and racial housing segregation also relate to the labour market segregation in which racial discrimination based on having immigrant background has been extensively studied (Bråmå 2007; Ahmed and Ekberg 2016; Tibajev 2016; Vernby and Dancygier 2018; Hammarstedt 2020). Despite several decades of government initiatives and policies to counter racial discrimination of people with an immigrant background—more specifically from the global south—in the labour market, using the discourse of diversity's positive impact on the national economy, immigrants and their children are still targets of racial discrimination in different sectors of Swedish society. The discrimination is manifest in many aspects of daily life, for example, in housing conditions (Andersson et al. 2010; Andersson and Molina 2018; Mangrio and Zdravkovic 2018; Hansson et al. 2020), salaries, employment and work–life conditions (de los Reyes 2006; Behtoui and Neergaard 2010; Adjei et al. 2021; Fors et al. 2021) and health care (Groglopo and Ahlberg 2006; Hamed et al. 2022; Odzakovic et al. 2023).

In summary, racially discriminatory practices, their effects on society and the widening gap in social inequalities marked by a division between Swedes and immigrants become a feature of structural racism. Structural racism is a pervasive and deeply ingrained problem that affects various aspects of Swedish society, including health and healthcare institutions, housing, labour, segregation, and the justice system. Addressing these systemic issues requires a comprehensive approach that involves several actors, from the government to civil society, regional authorities, and international organisations.

This article presents a theoretical framework for analysing the findings derived from the Diversity Barometer, a longitudinal study that gathered data on immigration and diversity-related topics in Swedish society from 2005 to 2022 (Ahmadi et al. 2015; Ahmadi and Palm 2016, 2018, 2020; Ahmadi and Cetrez 2022). This article examines attitudes towards immigrants and migration in Sweden and how the historical context of Swedish race relations and structural racism shape these attitudes. Specifically, the article focuses on attitudes regarding immigrants' social rights and responsibilities, diversity in the workplace, cultural diversity, and spatial segregation.

2. Structural Racism and the Neoliberal Approach

Many scientists are interested in investigating the widening gap of social inequalities and related problems. However, some are reluctant to acknowledge structural racism as a potential factor in forming power structures, the division of labour and housing areas, life expectancy, health, and the justice system (Bailey et al. 2017). Structural racism is a social system that has developed over time and adapts to and regulates the political and economic structures of liberal democratic societies (Miles 1993; Cuadro 2011; Stovall 2021). The case of Sweden is not exempt from this phenomenon but instead serves as a prime example of how structural racism perpetuates social inequality, politics, housing segregation and the legal system (SOU 2006; Lundström and Wendt Höjer 2021).

In this paper, the concept of structural racism is used to analyse the trends observed in Swedes' attitudes toward immigration and ethnic diversity. Prejudiced attitudes and racial stereotypes that individuals hold are beliefs or opinions about others based on

their social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. These attitudes are often based on preconceived notions or biases that individuals develop over time, often due to their upbringing, socialisation or exposure to certain knowledge—from scientific discourses to media, political and cultural narratives—about those that are understood as not belonging. Prejudiced attitudes can manifest in various ways, such as through discriminatory behaviour, negative attitudes, or biased decision-making. Structural racism, on the other hand, works in complex and indirect ways to create a realm of common-sense understandings and attitudes about who "we" are and who "they" are. Unlike individual acts of racial discrimination, which are often explicit and intentional, structural racism is often hidden in and operates through the policies, practices and norms of institutions and society at large. It means that the negative understanding and beliefs about people seen as not belonging due to their race, ethnicity, or religion, reaching institutional arrangements and settings that generate unequal power relations can become naturalised. The effects can be discriminatory practices, such as limiting access to education, job opportunities or health care. Prejudiced attitudes contribute to structural racism by shaping individuals' beliefs and actions, which, in turn, can influence social norms, policies and practices within societal institutions.

Structural racism is then a system of discrimination based on, for example, culture, ethnicity, or religion, embedded within society's social, economic and political structures (Lynch et al. 2021). Gee and Hicken (2021, p. 293) define structural racism as "a system of interconnected institutions that operates with a set of racialised rules that maintain white supremacy". It operates through singular and collective actions, decisions, political statements, everyday expressions and attitudes that disadvantage certain groups, particularly those racialised as non-white and of non-European backgrounds. This operational work then channels and amplifies through media, politics, education, policies, and other critical institutional arrangements perpetuating inequality and injustice over time. It is a form of systemic oppression that affects every aspect of life. In Sweden, several studies have shown that this systemic oppression affects areas such as education, employment, housing, healthcare, the criminal justice system and political representation (Andersson and Molina 2018; Behtoui and Høyer Leivestad 2018; Malmberg et al. 2018; Vernby and Dancygier 2018; Hammarstedt 2020; Hamed et al. 2020; von Brömssen 2021).

Structural racism is also reinforced by cultural stereotypes and biases perpetuating negative attitudes and beliefs about immigrants, leading to discrimination and unequal treatment. It works even through constructing knowledge on understanding and managing humans through racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious differentiation. Structural racism works through several interconnected processes: (1) the global colonial history and its local legacies of human differentiation; (2) ideology, i.e., ideas about what is good or bad, beautiful and ugly, thereby constructing a set of ideas and principles that legitimise a political–economic system, social traditions, national representations, etc.; (3) practices of everyday discrimination and political underrepresentation (or no representation at all) of the problems and conditions of immigrants and other minorities; (4) the perpetuation of colonial/modern knowledge production about "us and them" through racial categories; (5) the formation of cognitive resources to analyse and reflect about belonging, familiarity, nationhood and, at the same time, creating criteria about who are not part of "us"; (6) the creation of institutional arrangements that socially reproduce, control, refine and redefine those processes.

Western liberal democracies tend to create an ideological realm of exceptionalism based on specific conceptualities of equality, freedom, and democratic values by comparing themselves to other societies not following their paths. In this regard, this exceptionalism, as Cuadro (2011) argues, is part of the way liberal politics and its discourses are grounded in colonial history and its worldview of "the West and the rest" (see Hall 2018; Bryant 2006) have invested as common sense. In other words, western liberal democracies base their political discourses and epistemological outcomes on Eurocentric diffusionism (Blaut 1993), in which Europe and its racial representatives have the "burden to civilise" the rest of the

world by colonising them, developing them and democratising them. This racial doctrine situates the West as the rational universal actor in this "uncivilised world".

We understand that in Europe, racism and its discourses have changed throughout history, from the European colonial expansion to the postcolonial era. Racism has persisted by utilising various racial markers that have evolved over time, maintaining its continuity, and adjusting to the requirements of the political-economic system and its distribution and division of labour and wealth. In contemporary Sweden, these racial markers are based on the conceptions of culture, religion and immigration, denoting persons of non-western origin, non-white or non-Christian as not part of the global North or the West.

Since World War II, Sweden has welcomed immigrants from different parts of the world, sometimes due to the need for the labour force, but most of the time from those areas where imperialist wars, armed conflicts or dictatorships have produced asylum seekers in need of new homes in more politically stable and economically stronger countries. Since the 1970s, however, the core of this immigration tendency has been based on the expansion of global capital, known more specifically as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is based on policies of free movement of capital, global distribution and manufacturing of commodities and access to cheap labour forces. Ideologically, it emphasises individualism, entrepreneurship and competitiveness encouraging the middle classes to believe that they could emulate the rich and become part of it. In this ideology, organisation of economic conditions, cheap labour force and access to the means of production were vital for the accumulation of capital for economically strong actors on the global level. Asylum seekers and immigrants from the global south, whether seeking better living conditions or escaping from political repression, armed conflicts, or economic crises, became an important factor in the evolving need for neoliberal policies in the Swedish labour market to restore a strong class power (Harvey 2005) and consecutively creating the conditions to dismantle—or weaken—politically and economically the welfare state system (Simmonds 2021).

Since the end of the 1980s, immigrants[1] became an accessible cheaper labour force for Sweden's neoliberal transformation and for an ageing population in need of immigrant care and service workers (Segendorf and Theobald 2019). This neoliberal approach is sensitive to the immigrants' skill level, but this varies in different countries and periods depending on the exigence of the labour market and the needs of an ageing population. In general, immigrants and their children in Sweden are not regarded as full members of society like the rest of the population but as individuals expected to contribute economically and culturally to society. They are often politically and socially marginalised, resulting in discrimination in many aspects of society. Additionally, they may be undervalued in the labour market, leading to socio-economic racial differentiation in society (Aldén and Hammarstedt 2015; Hammarstedt 2020; Fors et al. 2021). For example, Aldén and Hammarstedt (2015) point out the differentiation between foreign born and native born regarding employment rates and unemployment. They argue that individuals born in Africa and Asia have generally lower employment rates and higher rates of unemployment.[2] The effects of structural racism are far-reaching and long-lasting, leading to disparities in many important resource areas for people's living conditions and future outcomes that persist across generations.

3. Sweden's Political Economy of Race

Race has a special history in Sweden. Since the beginning of the 20th century, race has been used as part of the scientific categorisation apparatus to hierarchise the Swedish race as the world's highest and purest white race. This situation contributed to the wide spreading of race biology science and legitimising politics of racial hierarchies within Sweden and internationally (Hübinette and Lundström 2014) at least until 1958 when the Uppsala Race Biological Institute closed. Since the end of the 1980s, the Swedish government introduced the category of ethnicity in the legal documents related to the issue of discrimination. In 2007/2008, the Swedish government erased the term "race" from all official documents, as was the case for many other European countries. This decision was made based on the official recognition that the concept of race, in the biological sense, is non-existent and lacks

scientific validity (Carlson 2011). Consequently, race was replaced with ethnicity, which pertains to an individual's cultural, national, linguistic, and religious background.

During this period, Sweden experienced a significant increase in refugee immigration, marking a notable shift in its modern history (Bergmark and Palme 2003). Additionally, it was the decade in which neoliberalism gradually emerged as Sweden's new political and economic ideology. As the new political economy took hold, it created opportunities for new private enterprises and attracted global investment actors. Simultaneously, the influx of immigrants responded to the demand for inexpensive, unregulated labour that arose under neoliberal conditions. This situation led to a widening income gap and disparate labour opportunities between Swedish-born individuals and immigrants (Edin and Åslund 2001).

Although the concept of race was erased and even suppressed, structural racism persisted and continued to regulate the population based on processes of capital accumulation and nationalist interests that were rooted in the factual division of Swedish society between (white) Swedes and (non-white) immigrants. This combination of factors, including capital accumulation and racially based nationalist interests, played a critical role in how Swedish society restructured different segments of the population regarding work opportunities and social rights. As a result, it significantly impacted housing segregation, politics, the justice system and media representations of immigration and immigrants (Strömbäck et al. 2017).

Sweden's political and media discourses today follow other European countries' increasingly radical right rhetoric (Mulinari and Neergaard 2017; Boréus 2020; Ekman and Krzyżanowski 2021). The underlying common denominator is grounded in maintaining structural racial inequality through a silent nationalist ideology of white supremacy and exceptionalism (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020). This is conducted through politically recreating the belief of cultural hierarchy and materialising the outcomes of such a hierarchy socioeconomically. Ultimately, we understand racism as a constitutive and organising principle of capitalism, (de)valuing people in the political economy of the market/country according to the implicit and latent rules of white supremacy's racial hierarchies (Groglopo and Alvarez 2023).

The negative attitudes towards immigrants, especially from the global south, are not simply a result of the influence of radical right-wing parties, such as the Swedish Democrats (SD), which has increased in popularity since the new millennium to become the second largest party in the elections of 2022. Rather, the attitudes stem from Sweden's history of race relations. The national idea of a racial homogenous population was based on pseudo-scientific research. The most prominent case is the establishment of the State Race biological institute in Uppsala (1922–1958), accompanied during that time by national racial policies against minorities such as the Roma and Sami communities. This meant, for example, sterilization programs in those communities and language policies not allowing speaking Sami at schools (Björkman and Widmalm 2010).

It is also worth mentioning the involvement of the Swedish economy and politics at the time of the European colonial power's expansion (Naum and Nordin 2013). For example, during the 17th century, Sweden held a prominent position as the leading European exporter of iron, which was used for the colonial triangular slave trade between Africa, the Americas, and Europe (Müller and Rydén 2009). By the 18th century, the Swedish East India Company accounted for about 10–20 per cent of European tea imports (Müller 2019). The role of Swedish scientism in the formation of research on race biology and race hierarchies during the first half of the 20th century is also another example (see Ericsson 2021). Despite Sweden's current official stance of distancing itself from the concept of biological race, racism continues to function as a structural element, dictating the allocation of resources and power based on cultural, ethnic, or religious distinctions.

Racism expresses itself as material conditions through ethnic, cultural, or religious markers in people's everyday life. It can be grasped through collecting attitudes and expectations, fears, and opinions of people's understandings of ethnic, cultural, or religious differences framed within the socio-political categories of, in this case, Swedes and immigrants. The examination of race relations throughout this short historical and theoretical

framework, in the context of the country's political economy, reveals a system of structural racism. This framework can help us comprehend the aspects reflected, to some extent, in the measurements and outcomes of the Diversity Barometer's data.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Design and Population

The Diversity Barometer is a survey study conducted since 2005 to examine attitudes towards immigration and ethnic diversity in Sweden. Data were collected biennially, except for 2005–2014, when the data were collected annually. The target population was all individuals aged between 18–75 years, registered as residents in Sweden during the data collection period. A new sample was selected for each measurement occasion. This article uses the terms "Swedes" or "the Swedish population" to refer to this target population, and the term "people with foreign background" to mean "immigrants" and "people with an immigrant background", i.e., foreign-born or born in Sweden with one or two foreign-born parents. It is important to highlight that immigrant background is a term used in Sweden to refer mainly to non-European or non-Western born, i.e., immigrants from the global south. In this article, it is used the terms "foreign background", "immigrants" and "immigrant background" interchangeably.

4.2. Sample Selection

Probability sampling was used to ensure representativeness and randomness. Sample selection was based on the Swedish Population Register (SPAR). The sample size was approximately 1000 individuals for each measurement occasion. Since 2005, an unweighted sample was used to ensure that the selection was as natural as possible, without the influence of different weighting principles where the results of some individuals could be overrepresented. The sample at the various measurement occasions corresponded relatively well with the distribution of gender, age and education level of the Swedish population. However, there was a slight over-representation of women, the elderly and university graduates. The last two measurements (2020 and 2022) included political party affiliation as a background and control variable.

On average, 78% of individuals in the sample were born in Sweden, with both parents also born in Sweden. Ten per cent (10%) were born in Sweden with one or both parents born outside Sweden. Eight (8%) were born outside Sweden but in Europe, and 5% were born outside Europe (see Table 1).

As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the respondents (about 88%) were born in Sweden, with only 12% born outside Sweden. The highest percentage of respondents born outside Sweden was 16%, registered in 2016.

Table 1. Respondents' birthplace 2006–2022.

Birthplace (Respondents per Year)	2006 (%)	2007 (%)	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)	2016 (%)	2018 (%)	2020 (%)	2022 (%)	Average
Born in Sweden, with both parents born in Sweden	81	82	81	78	78	78	78	78	78	77	76	76	77	78
Born in Sweden, with one parent born outside Sweden	7	5	6	6	6	6	7	7	8	7	11	10	9	7
Born in Sweden, with both parents born outside Sweden	1	2	3	4	3	3	3	2	3	-	-	-	3	3
Total percentage born in Sweden	**89**	**89**	**90**	**88**	**87**	**87**	**88**	**87**	**89**	**84**	**87**	**86**	**89**	**88**
Born outside Sweden, but within Europe	8	7	6	9	8	9	8	7	6	7	8	7	8	8
Born outside Europe	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	9	5	6	4	5
Total percentage born outside Sweden	**11**	**10**	**10**	**13**	**12**	**13**	**13**	**11**	**10**	**16**	**13**	**13**	**12**	**12**
Grand total	**100**	**101**	**100**	**101**	**99**	**100**	**101**	**98**	**99**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**101**	**100**

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected via postal surveys to obtain the sample's best possible representativeness and randomness. The average data collection period was 11 weeks.

For the measurement in 2022, 1108 individuals filled in and returned the questionnaire. The margin of error for a result of 50% was rounded to $+/-$ 3% units, which means that the true result for the actual population with 95% confidence was within the range of 47–53%. Results around 10 or 90% had a margin of error rounded to $+/-$ 1.8% units, meaning the true result for the entire population with 95% confidence was within the range of 8.2–11.8% or 88.2–91.8%. For example, when a result from 2022 is compared to 2020, it results in 2022 being around 50% should be at least 4% more or less significant compared to 2020. Results around 10% and 90% should be at least 3% more or less statistically significant.

Significant emphasis was placed on acknowledging and mitigating the potential impact of social desirability bias. For example, the anonymity of respondents was ensured, thereby encouraging respondents to provide honest responses. Additionally, indirect questioning techniques were used, and statistical methods were utilized to identify and adjust for potential bias. In the survey questionnaire, five scales with equal weight in both positive and negative directions were used. Respondents were also given the option to choose a middle alternative or indicate that they did not know. However, it is worth noting that the response option "neither agree nor disagree" can be particularly susceptible to social desirability bias. When confronted with sensitive or controversial questions, respondents may opt for this neutral response to avoid taking a definitive stance or revealing their true opinions. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that selecting the "neither agree nor disagree" option does not necessarily indicate social desirability bias in every case. Some respondents genuinely hold neutral opinions or lack sufficient knowledge or information to form a clear position.

To ensure the validity of the answers, we enlisted the expertise of a professional statistician who conducted a thorough check. The statistician verified that respondents' answers were consistent across different questions. Moreover, all the questions were cross-referenced with the political party the respondents voted for, providing ideological context to validate the responses.

5. Results

The results are presented in four themes, namely, (1) social rights and responsibilities for immigrants in Sweden, (2) ethnic diversity in working life, (3) cultural diversity and (4) spatial segregation.

5.1. Social Rights and Responsibilities for Immigrants in Sweden

Since the beginning of the Diversity Barometer study in 2005, there have been positive attitudes towards social rights for people in Sweden with a foreign background, i.e., that they should have the same rights as people born in Sweden, regardless of their background. Despite the dip in positive attitudes toward social rights in 2016, possibly explained by the large Syrian refugee immigration wave 2016, attitudes towards immigrants' social rights have successively improved. As of 2022, 69% of the respondents partially or totally agreed that immigrants should have the same social rights as Swedes. Notably, in 2014, approximately 15% of the respondents disagreed with the positive statement on social rights. However, following the Syrian refugee influx, this number more than doubled in 2016 before decreasing to around $+/-$ 25% between 2018 and 2022.

There seems to exist a tendency of suspicion that people with a foreign background come to Sweden to exploit the country's social welfare system. Since 2005, a relatively stable number of respondents (36–44%) partially or totally agree with the statement that many people with a foreign background come to Sweden to exploit the social welfare system. Moreover, a relatively large number of respondents (24–28%, except for 2020) are indifferent toward the negative statement on the exploitation of social welfare (Figure 1).

This result means that only about 35–38% distance themselves from the negative statement concerning exploiting the social welfare system.
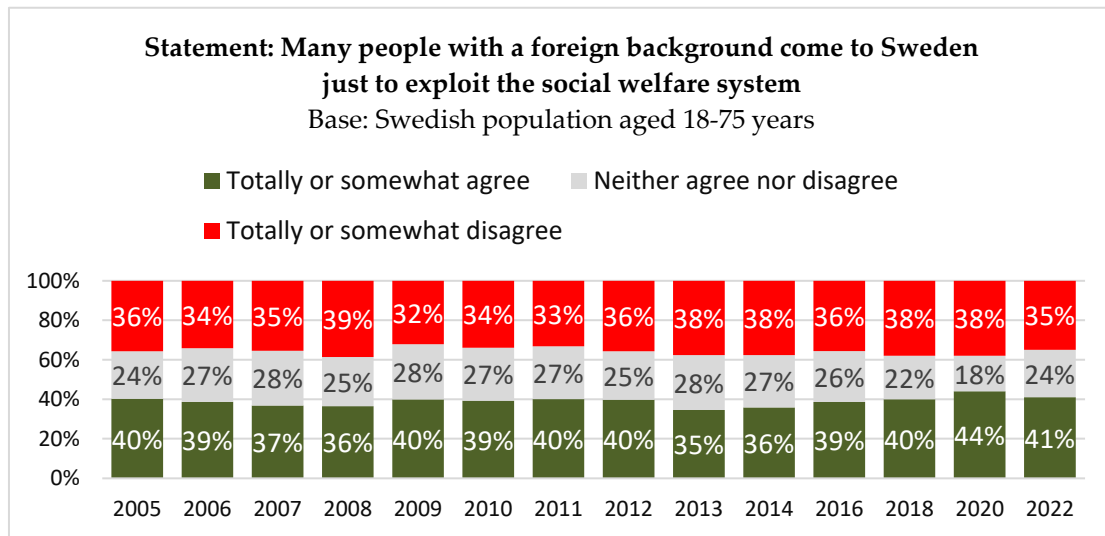

Figure 1. Attitudes about the exploitation of the social welfare system 2005–2022.

We note that in a negative statement, the choice "neither agree nor disagree" can point to a statement of discomfort, suspicion or scepticism against the group in question. Not knowing whether the statement is true or false, this group of respondents ignores the reproduction of the negative statement within a racially polarised society between "us and them". Within a political framework with constant negative rhetoric against immigrants, this group of respondents can represent the apolitical segment of society that does not bother about the immigrants' conditions as long as things work well for themselves unless, of course, when they are personally affected. This segment can potentially emerge as the ideological battleground in political elections, characterised by reluctance to trust or fully accept immigrants as equals. These findings (Figure 1) suggest a contradiction in attitudes regarding social rights.

Implicitly, there seems to exist a perception that people with an immigrant background living in Sweden must earn access to social rights, which indicates systematic differentiation that puts immigrants at a disadvantage. In Figure 1, the percentage of positive answers to the negative statement is around +/− 40%, which seems to be a high percentage of mistrust. If we add the respondents indifferent to the negative statement, the number surpasses 60% of respondents confirming or unsure about the negative statement. Another related example in the Diversity Barometer data indicates consistently high support for conditional residence and citizenship based on how immigrants and their children behave. Over 60% of respondents agree with the statement that people with a foreign background who commit crimes in Sweden should be deported (Ahmadi and Cetrez 2022). An exception is noted between 2012 and 2014, when the percentage was 55–59%. Over the years, only 22–32% of the respondents have disagreed with the statement on crime and deportation. There is an indication of the perception that only people with a foreign background who get a job, do not engage in crime, and do not overexploit the social welfare system should be granted residence or citizenship in Sweden. However, it appears that this possibility exists only under the condition that immigrants demonstrate their worthiness and productivity for Swedish society.

5.2. Ethnic Diversity in Working Life

The involvement of people with a foreign background in working life seems to be appreciated, given that immigrants contribute the labour necessary for the economy. There has been a successive increase in the percentage of Swedes who believe that people with

foreign backgrounds enrich Sweden's economy, from 38% in 2016 to 56% in 2022. However, the percentage who completely or partially disagree has been constant between 22% and 25% (Figure 2).
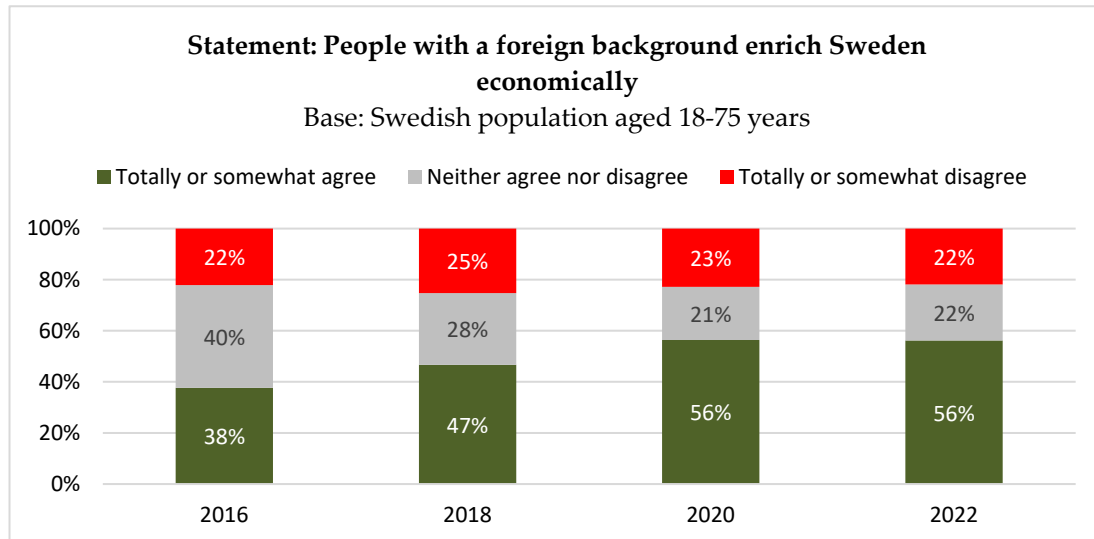
Statement: People with a foreign background enrich Sweden economically
Base: Swedish population aged 18-75 years

■ Totally or somewhat agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Totally or somewhat disagree

	2016	2018	2020	2022
Totally or somewhat disagree	22%	25%	23%	22%
Neither agree nor disagree	40%	28%	21%	22%
Totally or somewhat agree	38%	47%	56%	56%

Figure 2. People with a foreign background enrich Sweden economically 2016–2022.

The relatively positive attitudes towards immigrants' ability to enrich the Swedish economy are also evident in other attitudes related to working life. For example, over 80% of the respondents believe that immigrants should have equal working conditions as Swedes in the labour market, while over 50% believe that immigrants are necessary to secure an adequate level of service within the Swedish welfare sector (Figure 3). Relatively fewer respondents believe immigrants are exploited by doing the worst jobs that Swedes would otherwise not take on. This result can be interpreted in multiple ways, for example, that immigrants deserve the low-paying jobs they get, or that they do a worthy job and are not exploited, or that there is a common understanding that immigrants are more exposed to becoming exploited as a labour force than their Swedish peers. Thus, although highly needed in the labour market, they must become "more competent" to secure the "same working terms".

Having in mind that almost half of the respondents agree, at least between 2018–2022, with the positive statement about immigrants enriching the Swedish economy (Figure 2), there is a significant perception, between 33–43% of respondents during 2018–2022, that immigrants are exploited and given the worst jobs (Figure 3). Adding those respondents that are indifferent or do not know or probably suspect it, the number of respondents increases to over 60%. Suppose we contrast that result with the statement that all immigrants should have the same working terms as Swedes, it can be possibly discerned that the responses are based on the self-image of Swedes as just and rightful.

At the same time, there is a consistent acknowledgement of immigrant exploitation and a hierarchical racial division of labour. However, respondents with indifferent attitudes towards ethnic diversity in working life form a significant group. This group represents a big percentage that, together with respondents with openly negative attitudes, seem to indicate the undesirability of immigrants within the Swedish work life (Figure 4). The fact that they do not actively support positive statements or distance themselves from negative statements about immigrants suggest a lack of interest in the involvement of immigrants in working life. For example, between 27–35% are indifferent towards having a Swedish or immigrant work colleague, which, together with respondents who actively indicated that they prefer a Swedish work colleague, form a majority.
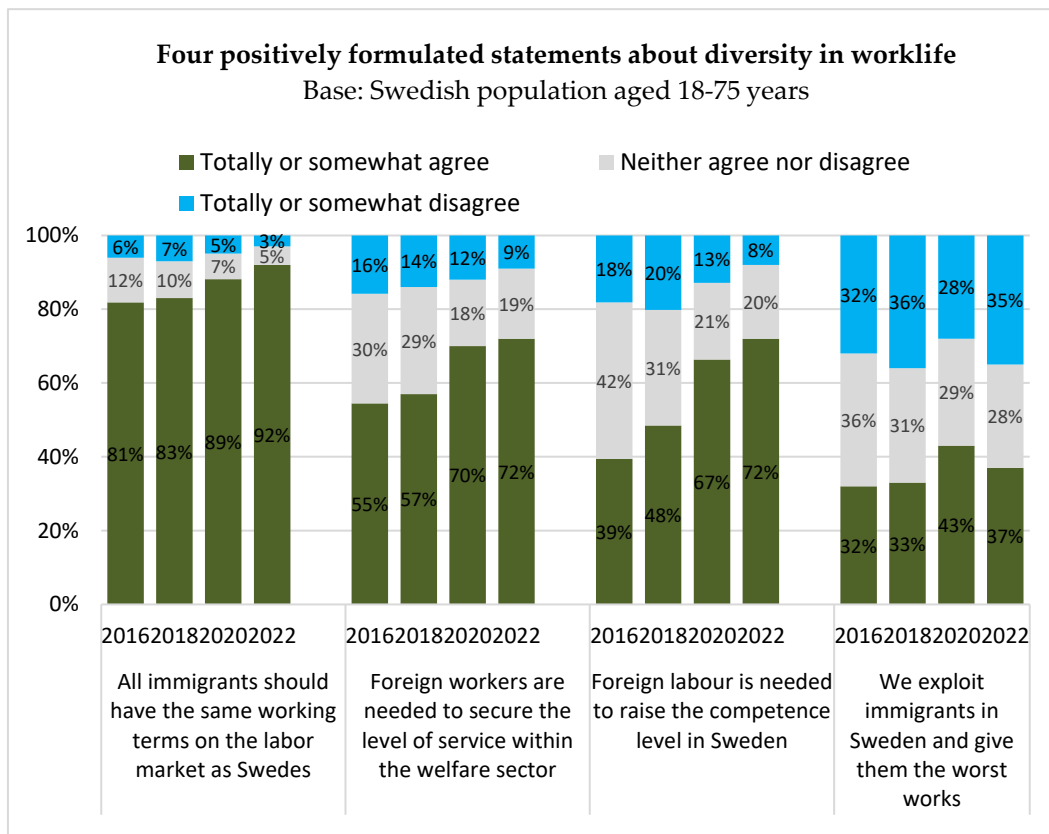
Figure 3. Positive attitudes about ethnic diversity in working life 2016–2022.
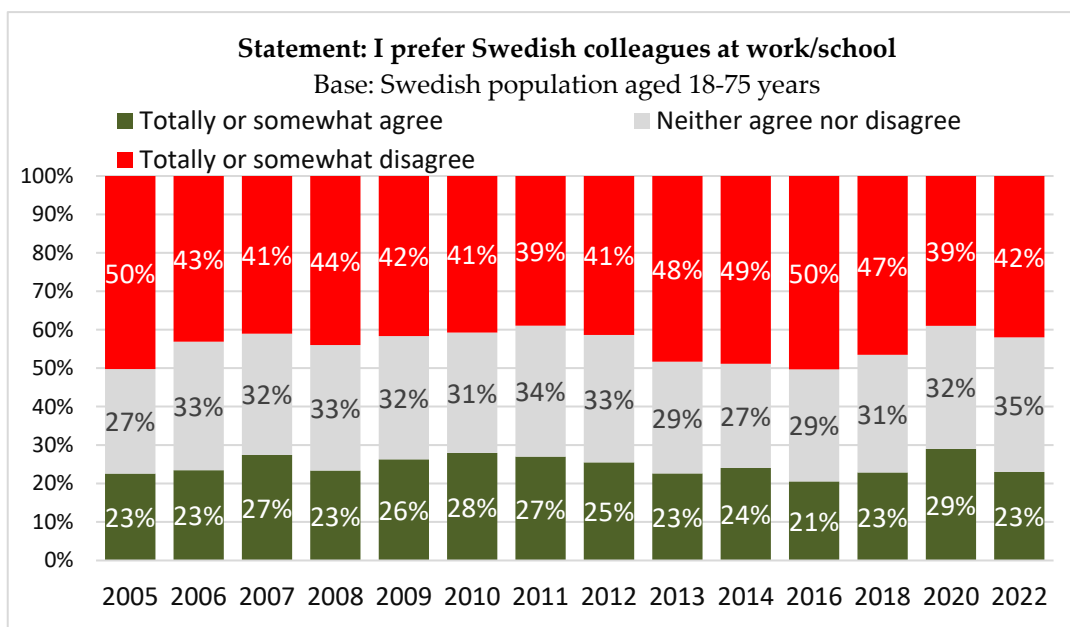

Figure 4. Preference of Swedish colleagues at work or school 2005–2022.

The contradictory attitudes towards immigrants' involvement in working life can indicate a commodification of immigrants whereby they are perceived as beneficial in the form of labour required to sustain the economy. However, they may not enjoy the same desirability or opportunities as citizens or human beings. Figure 3 shows, for example, that over 80% of the respondents perceive that people with a foreign background should

have the same working conditions as Swedes, yet only up to 50% (from 39–50%) in Figure 4 actively distance themselves from the statement that they prefer Swedish colleagues at work. This contradiction could be due to cultural, ethnic, or religious stereotypes about people with foreign backgrounds that inform Swedes' attitudes even when they have no experience working with immigrants. This last point can be sustained by other results in the Diversity Barometer data, for example, when asking if there is a value collision between religion and human rights. In this statement, most of the answers between 2016 and 2022 pointed to Islam as a religion having values that somehow conflict with human rights (from 93–99%) (Ahmadi and Cetrez 2022).

5.3. Cultural Diversity

Most Swedes believe that people with a foreign background enrich Sweden culturally (74%, 2022). These results generally indicate that Swedes are primarily positive about cultural diversity. Simultaneously, there is a perceived requirement that immigrants must adapt to Swedish culture and traditions. Over the years, between 80–87% of respondents believe that it is the responsibility of immigrants to adapt to Swedish culture and traditions (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The requirement to adapt to Swedish culture and traditions.

This contradiction about cultural diversity can be interpreted as positivity towards the addition of foreign culture to the already existing Swedish culture insofar as the foreign culture is compatible with Swedish values and traditions or that the concept of culture is understood as enriching Sweden with exotic food, music, or cultural expressions, e.g., foreign food markets or carnivals. However, it can also point to a rigid cultural view of what is to be the dominant culture. While being positive about other cultures enriching Sweden, holding a core understanding of what the dominant culture must be constructs other cultures and people with a foreign background as non-belonging to the nation and consequently as non-equals.

It appears that immigrant cultures are mostly accepted as long as they are compatible with Swedish cultures or contribute to areas of society that do not challenge dominant views and structures within the country's political economy, such as food, music, etc. (Figure 5). These statements can mean cultural, social and political subordination for people with an immigrant background, including those born in the country with foreign-born parents.

Persistent negative attitudes towards cultural diversity seem to exist among a stable percentage of the Swedish population. Between 26–40% of the respondents from 2016 to

2022 do not perceive that immigrants enrich Swedish culture. Moreover, only 30–37% of Swedes distance themselves from the statement that cultural diversity leads to the loss of Swedish values and traditions (Figure 6).
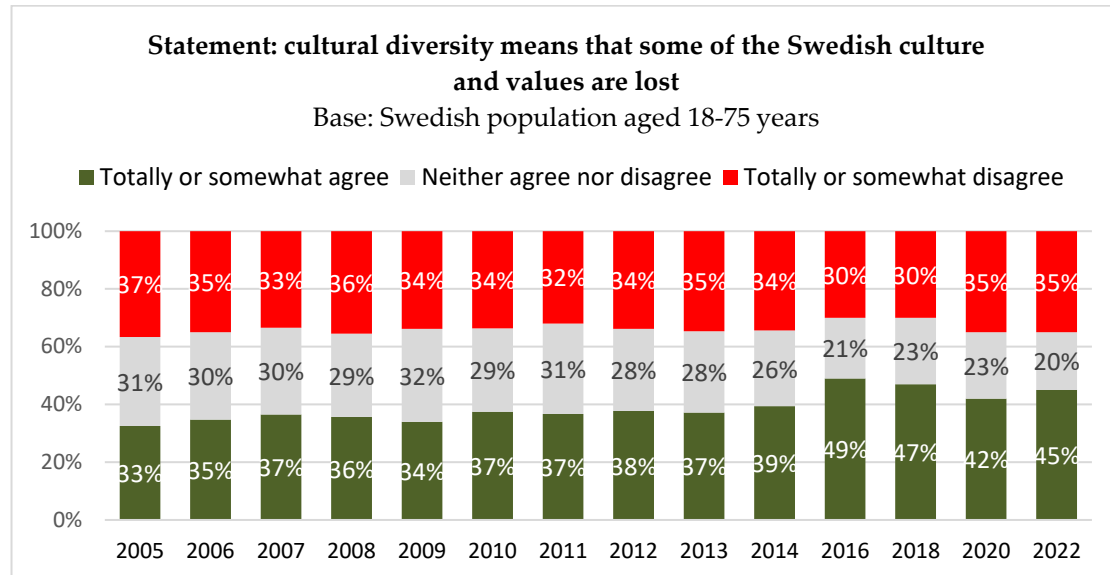

Figure 6. Cultural diversity leads to the loss of Swedish culture and values 2005–2022.

5.4. Spatial Segregation

Spatial segregation is important when considering the dynamics of structural racism. By spatial segregation, we mean both geographical and relational division of the population and isolation of some groups (immigrants in this study) from the rest of the population and resource areas, including the workplace, residences, and social life. We posit that spatial segregation is racial and works in two ways to influence attitudes toward immigration.

Firstly, Swedes with less social interaction with immigrants are less positive towards diversity, which could be explained by their lack of lived experiences with immigrants. Swedes develop negative attitudes based on stereotypes or prejudices about immigrants and immigration. Findings show that 67% of people who never interact with immigrants from non-European countries are negative or indifferent towards diversity compared to 37% who interact with immigrants weekly (Figure 7). Additional findings from the Diversity Barometer indicate that younger people and those with higher education, i.e., groups with a higher chance to interact with immigrants have more positive experiences of working or studying with immigrants (Munobwa et al. 2021). The younger generations and people who have studied at university seem to base their attitudes on their lived experiences rather than stereotypes and prejudices.

The second influence of spatial segregation is observed insofar as negative attitudes towards immigrants hinder further socialisation, entrenching and reproducing the negative attitudes and spatial segregation based on ethnicity, religion, or culture. As indicated in Figure 8 below, for example, only 28–37% of respondents disagree with the statement that they prefer to have Swedish neighbours; the majority are indifferent or agree with the statement. Indifferent respondents are culpable since they do not explicitly take a stance against the negative statement towards having immigrant neighbours. Similarly, indifference or negativity is observed in relation to having immigrant colleagues at work or school (Figure 4 above).
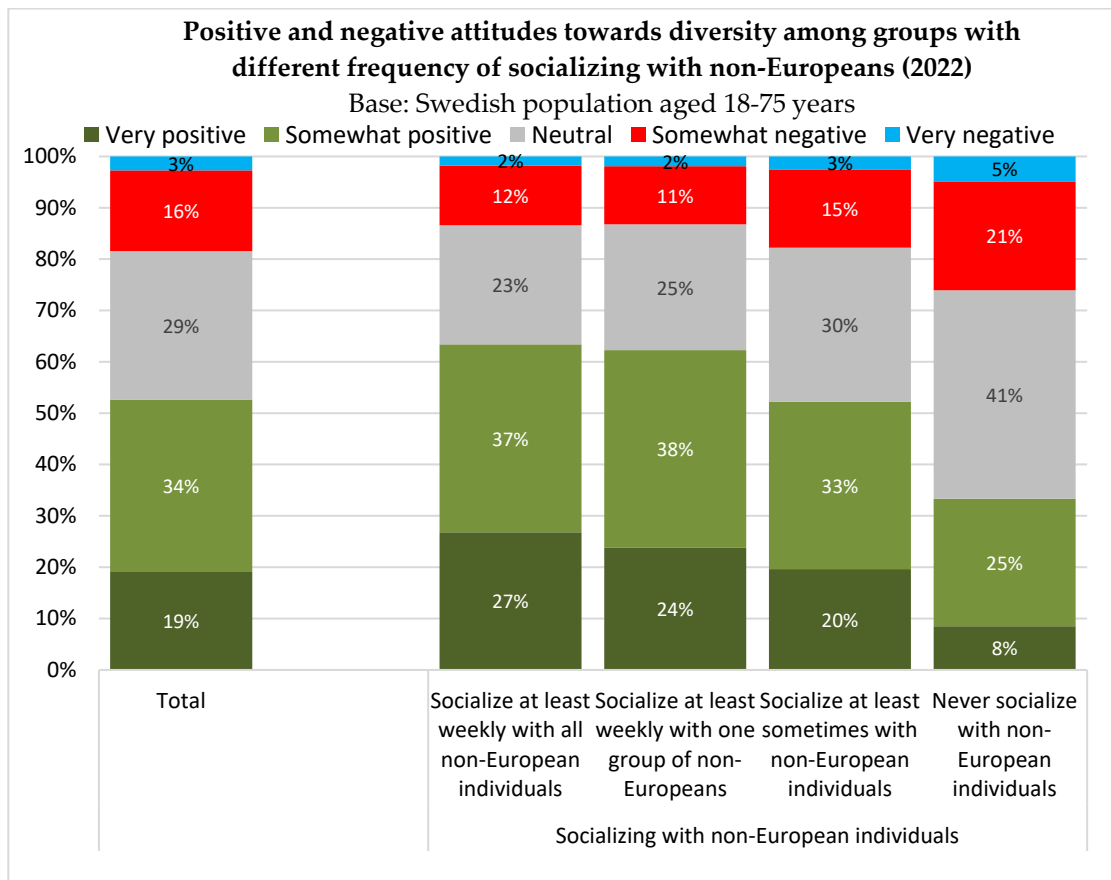
**Positive and negative attitudes towards diversity among groups with
different frequency of socializing with non-Europeans (2022)**
Base: Swedish population aged 18-75 years

Figure 7. Attitudes towards diversity among groups with different frequencies of interaction with non-Europeans.

Statement: I prefer Swedish neighbours
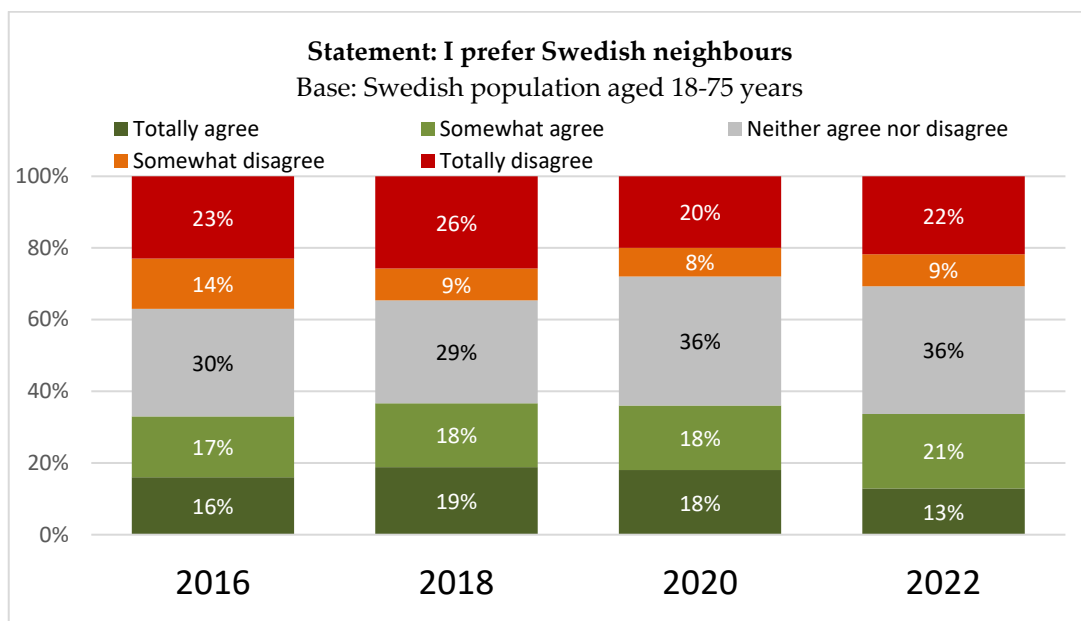Base: Swedish population aged 18-75 years

Figure 8. Preference of Swedish neighbours.

Indifference or negativity towards immigrant neighbours or work colleagues potentially affects the extent to which people with an immigrant background access the social, residential and workplace spaces occupied by the rest of the Swedish population. This

is a result of layered attitudes and structural practices that make it hard for immigrants and their children to earn the right to the spaces mentioned above through (1) constant suspicion about the capacity and intentions of people with an immigrant background and (2) demands of higher diligence from immigrants and their children. The desirability of people with an immigrant background in the workplace, residential areas and social interaction spaces seems connected to their ability to contribute positively, even when no demand for positive contribution is put on the rest of the population.

A probable indication of immigrants' undesirability is shown by Swedes' readiness to exit if immigrants join the spaces the Swedes occupy. For instance, Figure 9 illustrates that while the majority of respondents in 2022 would not contemplate relocating to another residential area if a substantial number of immigrants, irrespective of the country of origin, moved into their residential building, a noteworthy 49% expressed openness to relocating. The figure further suggests an embedded ethnic and religious hierarchy of immigrants' desirability and tolerability depending on their place of origin, with immigrants from the Middle East and Africa being the least tolerable or desirable.
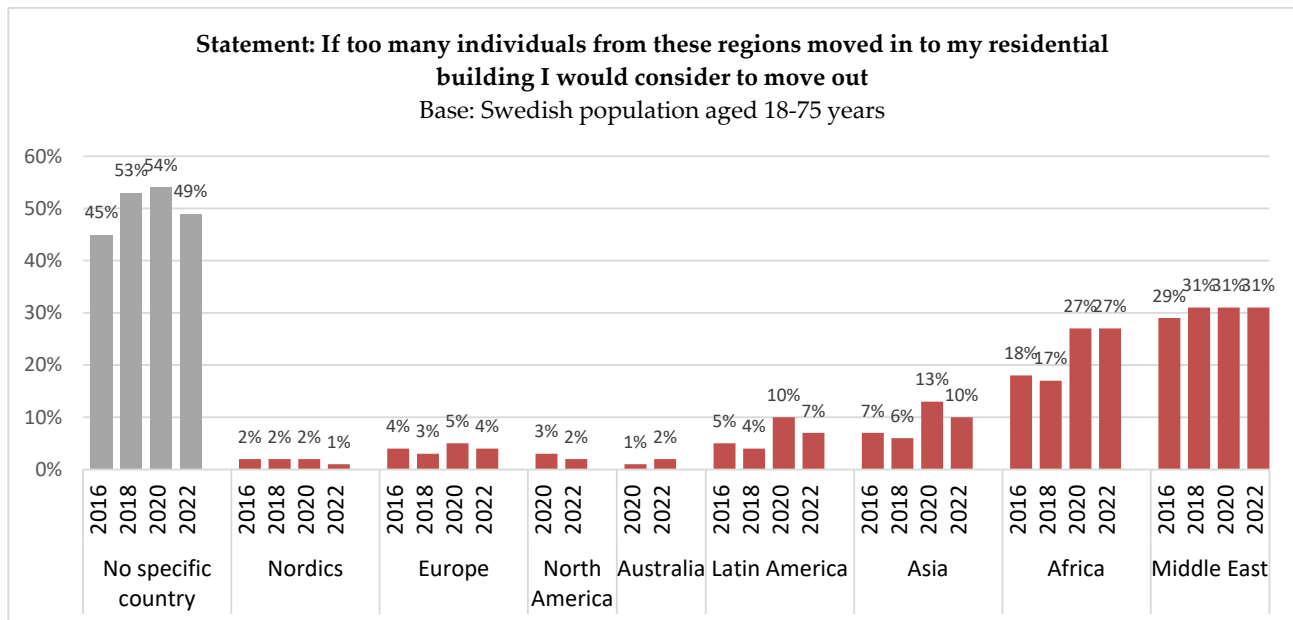

Figure 9. Moving out due to people's backgrounds.

While the level of desirability can be influenced by the frequency of interaction with immigrants, with Swedes finding immigrants they interact with more often more desirable in social, residential and work settings, we can also observe a positive correlation between the ranking of (un)desirability, as shown in Figure 9, and other demographic factors of the immigrant population in Sweden, such as unemployment and income. For example, the unemployment rate by 2022 was 4.7% for Swedish-born persons, 16.1% for foreign-born persons and 46% for non-European-born persons (Statistics Sweden 2023). Thus, being a person with an immigrant background, on its own, may shape the chances for an individual to access housing, job opportunities and the social scene and may risk entrenching immigrants' spatial segregation.

6. Discussion

Our primary objective in this article was to examine the enduring nature of negative attitudes towards immigrants, as evidenced by the Diversity Barometer Study spanning from 2005 to 2022. The article was not intended to demonstrate the existence of structural racism in Sweden using the Diversity Barometer Study. Throughout the data analysis, challenges were encountered in verifying specific hypotheses proposed to explain the

persistence of racism in Sweden. For instance, some of the hypotheses suggested that limited efforts to promote cultural integration and inclusion, as well as economic instability and perceived threats to job opportunities, played a role in fostering racism. However, it was difficult to definitively verify these hypotheses. Nevertheless, the data obtained from the Diversity Barometer Study indicate support for the hypothesis of structural racism. This highlights the need for further research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Additionally, the results suggest that structural racism may contribute to the persistence of negative attitudes toward immigrants in Sweden over the past few decades.

Our results illustrate an ongoing racial division in Swedish society, whether through the categorical realm of Swedes and immigrants, the way racial discrimination affects immigrant groups in their daily lives or through the expressions of attitudes toward immigrants and migration. We frame these attitudes within the theoretical concept of structural racism to understand what these attitudes tell us about social inequalities and racial prejudices. The findings seem to indicate how structural racism is reflected in some of the attitudes the study highlights. The study does not aim to prove through these attitudes that structural racism exists or does not exist, but rather to connect through a theoretical framework and previous research, how social inequalities in Sweden, based on immigrant background, can be manifested.

Having said that, our take is that prejudiced attitudes can contribute to structural racism by shaping individuals' beliefs and actions, which, in turn, can influence social norms, policies and practices within institutions. When individuals in institutional power structures, creating practices and policies hold prejudiced attitudes, they are more likely to discriminate against marginalized groups in various domains of life, such as education, employment, housing, criminal justice, and healthcare. However, as mentioned earlier, discriminatory practices can become naturalized in institutional settings. This discrimination perpetuates and reinforces existing structural inequalities, as mentioned in the previous research. Structural racism, in turn, perpetuates and reinforces prejudiced attitudes. When marginalized groups consistently experience discrimination and unequal treatment due to their ethnicity, culture, or religion, it can lead to negative social, economic and health outcomes. These negative outcomes are often falsely attributed to the characteristics of the marginalized group rather than the structural barriers they face. This attribution tends to reinforce prejudiced attitudes and stereotypes and further entrench structural racism.

Previous research has shown the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in most areas of Swedish society, which constructs a divided society through racial markers and where marginalization and racial segregation are produced. However, the findings seem to suggest a complexity in how Swedes' attitudes toward immigrants are to be understood. The attitudes do not follow a simple horizontal division between Swedes and immigrants. Instead, it appears as an intricate vertical division where immigrants, their culture and their labour are accepted, albeit in a subordinate manner.

One of the striking aspects of attitudes towards immigrants in Sweden, as revealed by all measurements of the Diversity Barometer, is the positive perception of immigrants as workers. This perspective portrays immigrants as useful and productive citizens rather than individuals with negative attributes. In essence, it reduces immigrants to commodities that, due to their non-belonging and the Swedish history of race relations, can be devalued according to the needs of capital accumulation and of an ageing population in need of an immigrant labour force to keep the standard of living.

Such devaluation of immigrants in the labour market can be supported by discriminatory practices restricting immigrants' access to education, healthcare and other fundamental services or policies rejecting their legal status or citizenship. These policies and social practices tend to maintain the marginalisation and exclusion of immigrants and contribute to reinforcing structural racism. According to Swedish law, society must acknowledge the humanity of all individuals, regardless of their immigration status, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or cultural background and promote policies and practices that treat individuals with dignity, respect and fairness. However, this perspective often shifts regarding

immigrants, as they are expected to be viewed solely as "good productive citizens". This expectation pressures immigrants to conform to the dominant culture and assimilate rather than allowing them to express their cultural identity and diversity. Additionally, this perspective can result in stereotypes and biases towards immigrants who do not fit the idealised image of the "good citizen."

Immigrants and their cultures are often only accepted when they do not challenge the dominant culture and are willing to subordinate themselves culturally, economically, and politically. This limited perspective results in policies and practices that undervalue immigrant labour and restrict or diminish their access to basic services. This perspective discriminates against immigrants based on their background, often perceived through racial markers, even when born in Sweden. This tends to reinforce racial stereotypes and prejudices and may contribute to the continuing marginalisation of immigrant communities. As a result, it perpetuates social strata and the socialisation of social relations mediated through structural racism as a constitutive principle for the country's political economy.

The spatial division of race that leads to housing and labour segregation limits opportunities for interaction and perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices among immigrants and Swedes. However, our study also found that negative stereotypes and prejudices depend not solely on encounters and interactions. There is a persistent belief that certain population segments require a hierarchical division as long as nationalist declarations of equality reinforce this division. This apparent contradiction can be understood as a nuanced interplay between ideological expectations and material outcomes, where there is a desire for a dominant perspective on immigrants while simultaneously advocating for equality. Structural racism creates and reproduces a system of beliefs, attitudes and practices that affect immigrants, limiting their chances to achieve equality. Even though the dominant perspective claims to value equality, it remains implicit and hidden, perpetuating social power dynamics that reinforce racial hierarchies. This leads to the reproduction of racial power dynamics and further entrenches inequality.

Notes

[1]　"Sweden has one of the fastest-growing populations in the Western world. At the start of 2017, Sweden's population passed 10 million people and, according to Statistics Sweden's population forecast from 2019, the population of Sweden will increase by just over 17 percent by 2050, from 10.2 million to 11.9 million. Population growth over the next few years will largely be driven by immigration [. . .] In the 1990s, foreign-born people made up about 10 percent of the population. At the end of 2018,

this proportion had increased to almost 19 percent and Statistics Sweden calculates that, by 2050, almost 23 percent of Sweden's population will have been born abroad." (Segendorf and Theobald 2019, p. 11). In a report from *the Swedish Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy* the following is stated: "Those born outside Europe have, on average, a lower salary than those born in Sweden. Engdahl and Forslund (2016) estimate a difference of just under 9 percent in the probability of having an earned income of at least a basic amount at the age of 30, after taking into account other background factors. Wage differences decrease with the length of stay in Sweden, but it is very slow (Eliasson 2013). Those with a post-secondary education have the largest wage gap compared to Swedish-born people with the same level of education. They also experience the highest relative wage increase, from minus 19 percent of Swedish-born wages to around minus 11 percent in 30 years." (own trasnlation; IFAU 2022).

2   "Foreign-born people from Africa and Asia have a lower employment rate and a higher percentage of unemployment than other groups of foreign-born and native-born people. They are also over-represented in temporary employment and under-represented in managerial positions. Highly educated people from these regions more often than other people have jobs that require lower skills than their formal level of education. Furthermore, highly educated women from Africa and Asia stand out through a low labour force participation rate" (own translation; Aldén and Hammarstedt 2015, p. 77).

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