

“Am I a Migrant?”: Experiences of Return Migration and (Re)integration in Sweden

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Abstract *This article examines the underexplored phenomenon of return migration among Swedish citizens and their families. This group is often excluded from the public debate on migration and integration, despite constituting a significant share of recent arrivals to Sweden. The article draws on an ongoing research project that uses narrative interviews to explore the experiences of members of 18 families who have returned after periods of employment abroad. Here, we focus specifically on adult returnees who have grown up in Sweden. The article shows that return and (re)integration is not a straightforward process, challenging assumptions of a privileged, insider status among returnees. Returnees frequently encounter discrepancies between expectations (of an easy return) and lived experiences across domains such as employment, education, social networks and culture. By illustrating that return migration involves complex negotiations of home, identity and belonging, the article highlights the need to challenge underlying assumptions relating to the category of migrant and the concept of integration in Sweden.*

INTRODUCTION

In times of increased politicisation of immigration to Sweden, it is interesting to note that the largest group of incoming migrants to the country in recent years are in fact Swedish citizens who are returning after having spent some time living abroad.² By virtue of their status and background, they tend, however, not to be seen as migrants in Swedish society.³ In turn, their (re)integration into society is assumed to be straightforward due to their privileged and insider status in the country many consider their home. However, findings from existing studies in other country contexts indicate that return migration for seemingly privileged groups is “far from smooth or straightforward”⁴ and may involve a clash between the expectations associated with return, and the actual experience of returning.⁵ This raises interesting questions about integration: a term that has come to be used almost exclusively to refer specifically to the incorporation of foreign-born individuals into society. By designating Swedish returnees as *migrants* and conceptualising the everyday implications of their

return in terms of *integration*, our research challenges some of the underlying assumptions within the contemporary debate on migration and integration.⁶

In this article, we present findings emerging from an ongoing research project entitled ‘Coming “home” in times of uncertainty: Return experiences and constructions of home among Swedish mobile families’.⁷ The project explores return migration to Sweden from a family perspective, and at the centre of the empirical study are narrative interviews with several members of 18 returning families (57 interviews in total; 33 parents and 24 children).⁸ The interviews explored participants’ experiences in a number of areas, including formal rights and entitlements, schooling and education, work and career, housing, language and culture, family relations, and social networks. All the interviews were done in Swedish or English, depending on participants’ preferences. A key criterion for participation was that one parent is a Swedish citizen and has grown up in Sweden. In order to capture the heterogeneity found in the population studied, the sample includes families where the whole family moved abroad and then returned, as well as families that were created abroad, where one or more children were born abroad, and where one parent may be from another country. Family constellations vary within the sample and it includes several single-parent families. The recruitment of participants took place through multiple digital channels, whereby the families who took part in the study are located in different places in Sweden, including in towns and cities of different sizes in both urban and rural areas.

Aside from the family's prior connection to Sweden, important sample criteria for the research were that the move abroad had been related to the parents' employment, that the family had children that were of school-age at the time of return, and that the (most recent) move to Sweden had been between 1 to 10 years ago at the time of the interviews (December 2024 to October 2025). This means that the interviews involve retrospective narratives, and they have a different focus depending on how long it has been since the family's latest return to Sweden. This article focuses exclusively on adult participants who have themselves grown up in Sweden (although some of them have partners from another country) and considers how they reflect upon their own and other family members' experience of returning to what many of them see as their 'home'.

In what follows, we start by providing a brief overview of previous research on return migration and discuss the Swedish context, including a reflection on aspects of the current policy and discourse on (return) migration. After that, we present some of our research findings, and explore returnees' interaction with and reflections upon the local social context they return to, in order to critically engage with the category of the migrant and the concept of (re)integration.

ON RETURN MIGRATION

While limited attention had been paid to return migration in the migration literature before the 2000s⁹ there has been a growing interest in the topic more recently. Pauli¹⁰ links this development partly to the fact that policy makers in both origin and host country contexts have come to pay further attention to return migration, both as a tool for development and as a solution to a perceived problem of high numbers of immigrants. The existing research on return migration has explored various motivations for and experiences of return,¹¹ yet at a general level, we can observe a significant focus on flows of return migration from the global north to the global south.¹² Parallel to that, some research has explored return migration in the

context of high-skilled migration/mobility¹³, which brings additional insights into experiences of return in the global north. However, this research tends to be conceptualised differently, in terms of high-skilled mobility, transnational elites, expats, etc., which raises interesting questions about how different forms of migration tend to be understood, and who is considered to be a migrant.¹⁴ When it comes to Sweden specifically, the few studies that have been done have explored specific aspects of the return process and/or looked at specific groups.¹⁵ In this context, our project contributes to a more comprehensive exploration of return migration to Sweden, from a family perspective.

While research on return migration to Sweden has been scarce, we see a revived interest in returnees in policy circles, especially when it comes to those who hold desirable skills. One example is the recent government initiative 'Work in Sweden': a collaboration between ten government agencies that aims to attract highly skilled migrants and promote their recruitment on the Swedish labour market. In this context, so-called *hemvändare* (in English: those who return home) forms a particular group of interest. Related to that are recent efforts to establish a 'fast-track' route into the Swedish system for returnees.¹⁶

The category of *hemvändare* stands in stark contrast to the population in focus when it comes to *return* as a feature of the current Swedish migration policy. Key aspects of this policy include increased restrictions on the right to reside in Sweden, financial incentives for voluntary return, and deportation of migrants who are considered 'unwanted' or do not hold residence permits.¹⁷ As such, where the term return appears in the political debate, it is almost exclusively in the context of efforts to make immigrants from third countries leave Sweden. While these aspects of the Swedish migration policy lie beyond the scope of our current research, it is important to reflect upon the hierarchies produced between different forms of migration and categories of migrants, which we see clearly in the public discourse on return. We argue that these hierarchies, and the social construction

of the migrant that are central to them, significantly shape perceptions and expectations of internationally mobile individuals. In turn, only those who are considered migrants tend to become the subjects of integration efforts and policies.

"AM I A MIGRANT?": REFLECTIONS ON THE CATEGORY

A question that frequently emerged while we were recruiting participants and doing interviews is whether our participants are perceived, and perceive of themselves, as migrants (or immigrants) in Sweden. We did not include direct questions about the migrant category in the interviews, but several narratives include (implicit or explicit) reflections upon this. Where some participants prefer to think of themselves in terms of e.g. expats, others see no reason why they should not be considered migrants, as they have in fact moved between different countries. And while many of our participants identify strongly with their Swedish background and identity, and in some cases question the label migrant, several of them also highlight their ambiguous position: they emphasise what they have in common with foreign-born people who have migrated to Sweden and/or highlight how they see themselves as different from non-migrant Swedes.

Suvi followed her husband who worked on a state contract abroad for four years. They had their two young children with them, and it was mainly Suvi who took care of them, while her husband worked long days during their stay abroad. When talking about migration in relation to her own experience, she starts reflecting:

"I don't think I have ever thought about that word [migrant] or know the definition of it. Is it that you have lived in another country and then moved to Sweden? [...] I don't know if you would call me a migrant really. I don't know what legally it stands for [...] I have been Swedish but just in another place. [As state employees] we have had the same legal space as at home."

Another example comes from Edgar, who travelled a lot internationally together with his wife before Edgar accepted a generous so-called expat contract in an Asian country. The couple had two children in Asia, and the family lived in two different Asian countries as well as another European country before they returned to Sweden. When reflecting upon the return experience, Edgar says:

"We think it's important for the children to learn both Swedish and English. But the children never moved back to Sweden, they moved to Sweden. They had never lived in Sweden before and they didn't speak Swedish either. So when they came to Sweden, they were like any other immigrants, you could say."

Edgar and his wife have both grown up in Sweden, but they are born in another country and moved to Sweden when they were children. This means that the parents share another language, which is part of the reason why they have not spoken Swedish to their children extensively when living abroad; in turn, Edgar thinks that the fact that the children had limited Swedish language skills upon return is one reason why they feel less of a connection to Sweden. Many reflections upon being a migrant in Sweden amongst returnees focus on their perception of what things have been like for their children, who in many cases are not as fluent and/or comfortable speaking Swedish, who may not have many prior friends or contacts in Sweden, or who do not have the same connection to the country. This is particularly the case for children who were born abroad, but also some of those who were rather young when the family moved abroad.

Some participants use the term expat instead of migrant to talk about their position and experiences abroad, but also about how they see themselves in Sweden upon return. They refer to their work abroad in terms of expat contracts, and have often enjoyed privileged arrangements through their employment, including high incomes, housing, relocation services, and international schools for children. Many of these participants highlight a

distance to Swedish people who have not lived abroad and do not have the same international experiences or outlook. At the same time, using the term expat becomes a way of distinguishing oneself from other migrants, both abroad and in Sweden.

On a general level, returnees who grew up in Sweden appear to have had the expectation of a smooth process of 'coming home', but their experiences have often turned out to be more complicated, as we explore further in the next section of the article. Reflecting on this, some have come to consider themselves on different terms: from being a Swede who returns home with ease, to feeling excluded or under-valued. Some respond with disappointment at being treated like other migrants, for instance when experiencing difficulties and delays in accessing the Swedish system regarding registration, access to welfare, etc. Others begin to realise that the fact that they encounter challenges upon returning means that they have something in common with other migrants, which in some cases imply feelings of empathy and solidarity. In turn, for some, this is extended to forming personal relationships with people from other countries.

EXPERIENCES OF (RE)INTEGRATION IN A SOCIALLY CLOSED SOCIETY

As noted earlier, the concept of integration has come to be used almost exclusively to refer to migrants' incorporation into the societies they have moved to. This is certainly the case when it comes to public policy, but it is also to a great extent reflected in social science (and migration) research. In the sociological tradition, however, integration holds a broader meaning, linked to concerns with social order, stability and cohesion¹⁸. In a socially integrated society, all individuals and groups are well connected, and integration is a matter for society as a whole. Viewing integration from this perspective enables a shift in focus from specific individuals or groups towards social structures, and whether they enable or hinder the integration of all members of society. By considering Swedish returnees' experiences as a process of

(re)integration, our research contributes to disrupting the political and societal assumption that integration is solely an 'immigrant-issue', while problematising the perception of a clear boundary between migrants and Swedes. This also helps bring the relational aspect of integration into focus: the fact that integration processes are shaped by the social contexts, networks and relationships in which individuals are embedded in everyday life, but also by how they are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to others.

One area where many participants highlight (often unexpected) challenges upon return concerns the labour market and the workplace, where a common experience is that the international experience that is often presented as an asset is in fact not recognised, or is undervalued. Different organisational cultures, limited access to professional networks, and lack of knowledge and/or interest on the part of Swedish employers are all factors that have been highlighted in interviews. Beyond the labour market and the workplace, most participants also recount difficulties in re-connecting with their previous social networks, and in making new friends. This is a particular challenge for families who have moved to a place in Sweden where they have not lived before. One example is Kajsa. She is married to a Dutch man and has two children who are both born in the Netherlands, where the family has lived for several years. Here, she reflects upon the difficulties involved in making friends in Sweden upon return:

"This girl I run with has been to our home for dinner several times [...] We have never been invited to theirs. We thought it was (just) them, but when I mention this to other people, they say that you don't get invited home to a Swedish person [...] So we were out running [...] and I said I have never been to your place. And she was just, yes, right. That was what I said to her, and she just 'ok'."

A few of our participants also draw on their own experiences in this area to make links to the public discourse around integration. One of them is

Martin, who has lived with his family in another European country for eight years due to his work. He says:

"You get a bit fed up with Swedes [...] You don't take responsibility for actually integrating, or socialising. Swedes are so bloody difficult to get to know. I can imagine what it is like to come from another country and try to meet someone."

Martin recounts a conversation his wife had at their daughter's school, with a person who had moved to Sweden as an adult and who claimed that it was impossible to get to know people in Sweden. Martin agrees and states that he and his wife have reflected upon what it is like being 'back in this closed country where no one talks [to you]'. The experience of living in other social and cultural contexts leads many of our participants to, like Martin, reflect upon the closed nature of Swedish culture, where people tend to not to be so outgoing, and keep to themselves. Finding it difficult to connect to other people is a personal experience for many, and as we see, some participants extend this to ponder on how challenging this must be for those who do not have prior connections in Sweden. As such, this is an example of the feelings of empathy and solidarity with other migrants that was discussed in the previous section.

CONCLUSION

By drawing attention to experiences of return migration to Sweden, this article has highlighted the need to challenge political and societal assumptions around the category of the migrant and the concept of integration. Through an in-depth exploration of experiences of return migration, our research adds crucial insights into the numerous factors that either facilitate or hinder integration, of relevance beyond the specific group we study in the project. What is specific to the population in focus here is the prior connection to Sweden, and by exploring the relative advantages that it may offer, the study complements other research on integration in a Swedish context. Our findings indicate that

migration (or: living abroad) and subsequent return often have transformed returnees' own perception on who is a migrant in Sweden. Furthermore, their experiences have come to put focus on what they themselves have in common with other newcomers.

Returnees' experiences indicate that integration is not only a matter of language skills or familiarity with local cultural codes, but also about navigating various more subtle and informal expectations and practices. Returning Swedes often find that there is a lack of interest in their experiences abroad, inside and outside of the labour market and workplace. They also encounter difficulties in establishing social connections beyond family and close friendship networks in Sweden, and despite being relatively privileged and often resourceful migrants, they find it challenging to become part of the local community and build meaningful relations with people living there. In such a context, framing integration primarily as a matter of individual willingness or effort (to learn the language, or find employment) risks stigmatising migrants, while overlooking the structural and relational dimensions of integration. By re-directing focus precisely to those dimensions, our research also challenges the dominant understanding of integration as a one-sided adjustment of (non-Swedish) migrants to Swedish society.

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⁶ It is important to highlight that as Swedish or EU citizens, most of our participants would not be considered migrants on legal terms. However, by virtue of their move across national borders, and longer stays abroad, we consider them to be (international) migrants, and we suggest that sociologically, the concept of migrant requires further investigation: who counts as a migrant is largely a social phenomenon, with everyday life implications beyond legal frameworks.

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⁸ While all families had children that were of school age at the time of the return to Sweden, all the interviews were retrospective, and some of the children were of adult age when we interviewed them.

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