

”In Sweden we shake hands”

– *but are we really?*

Abstract

Motivated by a recent controversy over handshaking, a survey of the personal networks of young Swedes (n=2244) is used to describe greeting practices across social class, gender, immigrant background, and geographic location. While greeting practices in the sample are fairly uniform, there are also important differences. Handshaking is predominantly used by respondents with an immigrant background, men and women distinguish between greetings depending on the gender of the person they are greeting, and greeting practices differ between northern and southern Sweden as well as between rural and urban areas.

Keywords: greeting practice, friendship networks, gender

GREETINGS ARE A salient feature of social life and constitute an important everyday act that anchors cultural practices. Whatever expression it takes, it can be assumed that the flow of every interpersonal social interaction, long and short term, is dependent upon a successful, reciprocal, greeting (e.g., Schiffrin 1977). Because greeting practices are so strongly embedded in social life, both ritualistically and culturally, it is not surprising that greetings are occasionally the source of controversy. One such controversy is what motivates this research note, in which we use a survey of the personal networks of young Swedes to describe greeting practices across social class, gender, immigrant background, and geographic location.

On April 19, 2016, a young male, Muslim, politician from the Green Party sparked a controversy as he refused to shake hands with a female news reporter. Instead he greeted her by placing his hand over his chest. Many observers took this as a scandalous disrespect of women, and the general sentiment was that he breached some Swedish norm of egalitarian greeting practice. An analysis of articles published in the main Swedish newspapers over the two weeks that followed the scandal show that 20 percent of the articles were neutral, 23 percent defended the politician right to choose his way of greeting, while 57 percent criticised his refusal to shake hands (Arnljots 2017). The Swedish Prime Minister and politicians from across the scale, including the Green Party, unanimously joined in the criticism. The debate that followed was chiefly about ”Swedish norms and values”. In fact, there is little doubt that very few were particularly

concerned with greetings as such. At stake in this controversy was the putatively failed integration of immigrants into Swedish society in general and a fear of Muslims in particular. From a sociological perspective however, the controversy highlighted an interesting question about the relationship between shared norms and values (i.e., culture), and social acts (i.e. practices), and the idea that culture is expressed in action (e.g., Swidler 2001).

Swedes consider shaking hands a rather formal form of greeting, to be used particularly in new introductions (cf. Asplund 2006). In informal and more intimate settings other greeting practices are at play. But how do Swedes greet one another? Is there a monolithic repertoire of greeting practices in Sweden? And do different social strata display different greeting practices? Such questions form the basis for an on-going study. Here we present early findings about the greeting practices of young Swedes.

In the winter of 2013, the survey *Social capital and labour market integration* (Edling and Rydgren 2014) collected data on the personal networks of 23-year old Swedes with and without immigration background (for further description of the data and some results see e.g., Andersson, 2017; Hällsten, Edling, & Rydgren, 2017). In the second wave of the survey Statistics Sweden interviewed 2244 persons, of whom 501 had a least one parent born in Iran and 675 had a least one parent born in former Yugoslavia. The remaining 1068 had two parents born in Sweden. The survey used a range of established instruments to collect rich data on individuals and their life context. For the section on personal networks we applied a so-called name generator (Burt 1984) that asks each respondent (or ego) to name those (up to) five persons with whom she spends most of her spare time,¹ resulting in 8688 relations. For each such friend (or alter) we use a name interpreter to probe the respondent for additional information on each of her friends and on her relationship to each of her friends. One such question asked how they would greet this particular friend if they met "in town or on the street".² The response had eight alternatives and the respondents could select more than one alternative. In Figure 1 we report the four most distinct answers: a kiss on the cheek, a handshake, a hug, and simply saying "hej". There are at least two obvious limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting our results: First, the sample consists of 23-year olds, and are thus not representative for the Swedish population at large. Second, the survey asks about greetings between friends, and it cannot be assumed that strangers or acquaintances are greeted in the same fashion.

Focusing on the four distinctive practices reported in Figure 1, the most common way of greeting friends among young Swedes is hug, followed by saying "hej!", handshake, and kiss on the cheek. Thus, contrary to what the Swedish Prime Minister and other leading politicians suggested in April 2016, our results indicate that in Sweden we do not shake hands, at least not in the friendship circles of young adults. This should come as no surprise. As aptly noted by Asplund (2006), shaking hands is by no means

1 "Tänk på de fem personer som du träffar och umgås med oftast på din fritid."

2 "Hur brukar du hälsa på [vän] om ni stöter ihop på stan eller på gatan?"

a universal greeting practice in Sweden. However, we will not pursue the issue of what does and what does not pass for a Swedish way of greeting any further in this note. What really concerns us is whether or not there are systematic differences in greeting practices among friends across four key categories of stratification: (parents') social class, (respondents') gender, (respondents') immigrant background, and (respondents') geographic location.

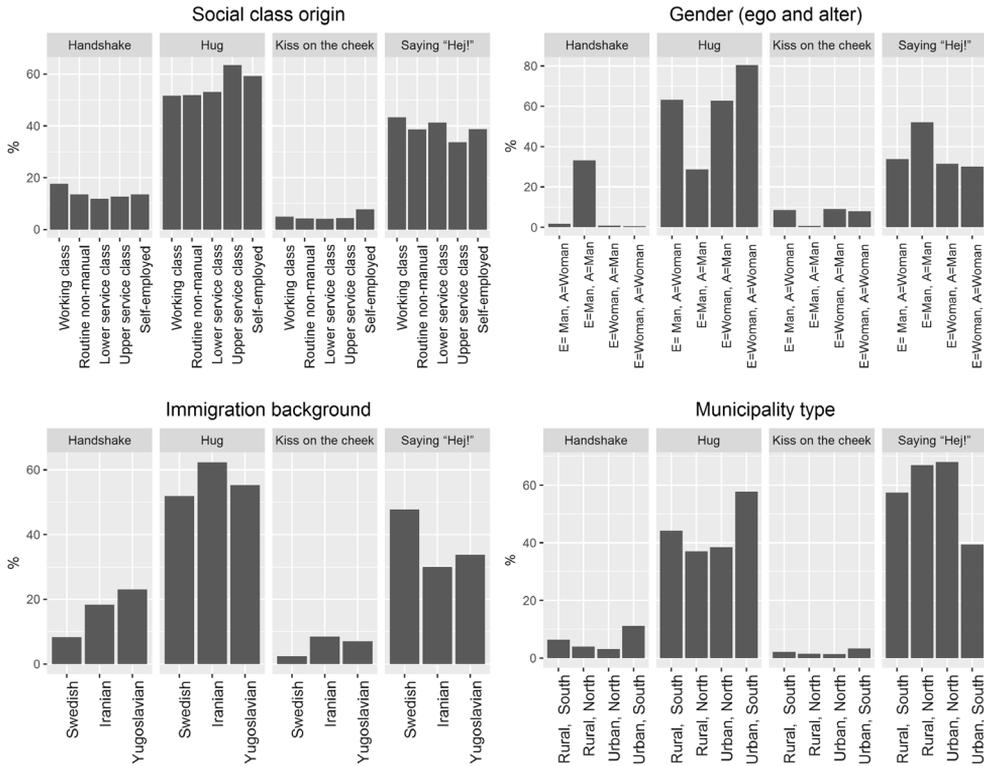


Figure 1. The Distribution of four different greeting practices of young Swedes across social class, gender, immigrant background, and geographic location (n=8611 relations).

Note: It is possible to use several greeting practices for each friend. Analysis is based on mean values weighting each observation based on how common it is in the population taking a number of variables including parents' country of birth and education into account. North refers to Norrland, Urban refers to urban areas and their suburb municipalities (Kommungruppsindelning 2011). E refers to respondent (ego), A refers to respondent's friend (alter). Immigration background: Swedish denotes two Swedish born parents, Iranian denotes at least one parent born in Iran, and Yugoslavian denotes at least one parent born in former Yugoslavia. Parental class is coded with the Swedish SEI scheme. Source: Edling & Rydgren (2014)

The results, in Figure 1, show some differences across social class. Saying "hej!" is somewhat more common among working class youth, and the hug is more common in the upper service class. The most striking differences in greeting practice are observed across gender. Shaking hands almost only occur between men. But while a man greeting another man tends to refrain from hugs in preference of shaking hands or saying "hej!", he prefers hug when greeting another woman. Women on the other hand have a strong preference for hugs both when greeting men and women. Kissing on the cheek is not a common greeting practice and tends to occur only when a woman is involved. As for immigrant background, hugging and saying "hej!" are the most popular greetings. The group with native Swedish parents in particular have a preference for saying "hej!". Respondents with an Iranian background are the most intimate, in preferring hugs and cheek kisses, while respondents with a Yugoslavian background are over-represented in their preference for shaking hands. In fact, the group with native Swedish parents are strongly under-represented when it comes to shaking hands. Lastly, we come to geographical differences. As we see from Figure 1, saying "hej!" is the preferred greeting practice in the north and in rural areas, while hugging is mostly preferred in urban areas of the south of Sweden. The urban south is also where we observe most of the handshaking and the cheek kissing.

Given that shaking hands is a somewhat formal greeting, it is unsurprising that it is in infrequent use among friendship circles of young Swedes and that the more intimate hug or the informal "hej" is much more preferred. Greeting practices in our sample are fairly uniform, although some important differences in particular across gender, but also with respect to immigrant background, and geographic location are evident. The next step of our study is to try and explain these differences.

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