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Struggles of being and becoming: A dialogical narrative analysis of the life stories of Sami elderly ☆

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ABSTRACT

The Sami are an indigenous people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Historically, national states have made strong efforts to assimilate the Sami people into the majority populations, and the Sami have experienced stigmatization and discrimination. However, after World War II, there has been a revitalization process among the Sami that was pioneered by the Sami Movement and gradually adopted in broader spheres of Norwegian society. The lifespans of the current cohort of elderly Sami unfold throughout a historical period in which contrasting public narratives about the Sami have dominated. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between elderly Sami's individual life stories and contrasting public narratives about the Sami. Nineteen elderly Sami individuals in Norway were interviewed. This article is a dialogical narrative analysis of the life stories of four elderly Sami. The article illuminates how individual life stories are framed and shaped by public narratives and how identifying is an ongoing process also in late life. A dialogical relationship between individual life stories and public narratives implies that individual stories have the capacity to shape and revise dominant public narratives. To do so, the number of stories that are allowed to act must be increased. A commitment in dialogic narrative research on minority elderly is to make available individual stories from the margins of the public narratives to reduce narrative silences and to prevent the reproduction of established "truths".

Introduction

The intention of the present article is to explore how minority elderly are working their identities in the stories they tell about their lives and how their individual life stories are framed and shaped by broader historical and social contexts. The primary focus of the article is the relationship between individual life stories and public narratives, "narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions" (cf. Somers, 1994: 619).The article is based on the life stories of four elderly Sami individuals as related in the context of qualitative research interviews. In line with Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010: 2), the narratives are not perceived as "a transparent window into people's lives as they age, but rather as an on-going and constitutive part of reality". We agree with Yuval-Davis's (2006: 202) argument that identity is always in transition, "always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong", and we argue that this is indeed a lifelong process. Hence, the present article is situated within the domain of *narrative gerontology* (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011; Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001).

Background

The Sami: evolving public narratives

The Sami are an indigenous people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. A modest estimate of the Sami

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population is between 50,000 and 80,000 individuals (Sámi Instituhtta Nordic Sami Institute, 2008). Historically, the Sami were reindeer herders and small-scale farmers and fishers. Today, approximately 10% of the Sami in Norway are occupied in traditional ways of living (Statistics Norway, 2010), and estimates suggested that there were approximately 25,000 Sami-speaking persons in Norway in 2000 (Ministry of Local Government & Development, 2001).

The lifespans of the current cohort of elderly Sami unfold through a historical period in which contrasting public narratives about the Sami have coexisted. It is reasonable to assume that to various extents, the different public narratives are echoed in individual life stories. We presume that a Sami identity that has been contested throughout a lifespan is significant for identity and well-being in late life. In this article, we illuminate how two contrasting public narratives about the Sami are negotiated in the individual life stories of elderly Sami and how they provide possibilities and constrictions for identity work in late adulthood. For simplicity, we use the terms *the public narrative about Sami inferiority (the inferiority narrative)* and *the public narrative about Sami unity and pride (the pride narrative)*. In the following section, we provide an outline of these two public narratives.

The national states have made strong efforts to assimilate the Sami into the majority population. From the middle of the nineteenth century until World War II, "Norwegianization" was the official Norwegian minority policy (Niemi, 1997: 75). Proficiency in the Norwegian language was a criterion for buying or leasing state land until the 1940s (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2001). The school system was a central instrument in the assimilation policy, through both strict legal regulations of the use of the Sami languages in schools and extensive use of Norwegian teachers from southern Norway (Eriksen & Niemi, 1981; Minde, 2003). Furthermore, the residential schools were powerful arenas for the Norwegianization of Sami children (Eriksen & Niemi, 1981). The assimilation process was paralleled by individual experiences of stigmatization and discrimination (Minde, 2003). To a large extent, the assimilation policy was based on a *public narrative about Sami inferiority* in which the Sami were depicted as "a weak and dying race" that could be "elevated to a higher level" (Eriksen & Niemi, 1981: 56) only by "Norwegianization".

After World War II, there was increased national and international focus on the human and political rights of ethnic minorities, which implied new opportunities for Sami self-organizing initiatives (Eidheim, 1997). During the 1950s, a growing Sami movement initiated a process of ethnic and cultural revitalization. A Sami identity was articulated based on the "self-concept of the Sami as being a distinct people who had lived in the area before the present states came into existence" (Gaski, 2008: 220). The recodification of the Sami minority culture played an important role in the process of ethnic revitalization, for instance, by labeling the stigmatized Sami languages as the *mother tongue* (Eidheim, 1992). The establishment of general education based on Sami languages and culture was of considerable importance to the Sami movement (Eidheim, 1997). Increased educational standards among the Sami resulted in Sami people filling positions that had previously been occupied by Norwegians in health care, the media, and school systems. During the 1970s and 1980s, an aboriginalization of Sami ethno-politics and self-understanding occurred (Eidheim, 1992; Thuen, 1995). The Sami movement established contact with organizations representing indigenous people in other parts of the world, and "it became increasingly common for ordinary Sami people to view their existence and cultural survival in terms of an *indigenous people's perspective*" (Eidheim, 1997: 37). The general increase in living standards and improvements in the welfare and health care systems in Norway during the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the ethnic revitalization process. In the 1960s and 1970s, the "dialogue" between the Norwegian State and the Sami movement revealed what was perceived as a disparity between Norwegian international involvement in the rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples and the lack of such rights for the Sami in Norway (Eidheim, 1997). Around 1980, this disparity became dramatically evident in "the Alta affair", in which the Norwegian state decided to dam the Alta-Kautokeino watercourse despite considerable protest from the Sami, who argued that the damming would impose a threat to the grazing areas and calving sites used by the reindeer-herding Sami. This dispute brought national and international attention to the rights of the Sami, and it produced a change in Norwegian government authorities' view of the Sami question (Selle & Strømsnes, 2010). In 1989, the Sami Act was enacted (Ministry of Government Administration Reform & Church Affairs, 1987). Its purpose was to enable the Sami people in Norway to safeguard and develop their language, culture, and way of life. The Sami Parliament was subsequently established in 1989. In 1990, the Norwegian government ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 169 (International Labour Organisation, 1989).

The Sami "'awakening', which implies that the Sami reappraise their self-image, invents a new context for unifying cultural fraternity, and, gradually, also becomes a new political power element on the Nordic stage", has been conceptualized as *the invention of a new master paradigm for Sami self-understanding* (Eidheim, 1992: 3–4). The invention of the new master paradigm transformed "central aspects of Sami history, language, folklore and life style […] into signifiers of ethnic distinction and communality" (Eidheim, 1997: 50). These processes, referred to by some as *the creation of an official Sami past* (Schanche, 1993), involved the use of symbols such as reindeer herding, traditional Sami costumes, music, handicrafts, ecological sensibility, spirituality, and, above all, the Sami languages. The dominance of symbols associated with certain aspects of Sami culture has been demonstrated in several contexts, such as Sami politics (Kramvig, 2005; Olsen, 2010; Øverland, 2003), teaching materials in public schools (Andersen, 2003), museums (Olsen, 2000), tourism (Olsen, 2010), the media (Skogerbø, 2003), and policy documents concerning Sami elderly and care services (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2013). We conceptualize this process as an evolving *public narrative about Sami unity and pride*, which originated in the Sami movement and certain academic circles and was gradually adopted by ordinary Sami people and society in general. This public narrative contested *the public narrative about Sami inferiority*. However, for a considerable number of Sami, especially those residing outside the *Sami core areas*, the ethnic boundaries between Sami and Norwegian were blurred (Kramvig, 2005; Olsen, 2010). The coastal Sami population was strongly affected by assimilation and stigmatization. In these