

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

### **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".

## Keywords

Narrative identity, Sami, elderly, life stories, public narratives, narrative gerontology

## 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’ (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, Clark, and deVries 2001; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall 2011).

## 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 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 and Regional 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 and Niemi 1981; Minde 2003). Furthermore, the residential schools were powerful arenas for the Norwegianization of Sami children (Eriksen and 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 and 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 and Strømsnes 2010). In 1989, the Sami Act was enacted (Ministry of Government Administration Reform and 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 (Øverland 2003; Kramvig 2005; Olsen 2010), 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, and 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 areas, fewer people speak the Sami languages, people may not possess or identify with the dominant symbolic expressions of a collective Sami cultural heritage, and people from these areas have experienced being judged as “second-rate Sami” (Eidheim 1997: 45). In this manner, the evolving pride narrative “create preconditions for cultural insecurity, personal frustration and the generation of new categories of social winners and losers” (Eidheim 1997: 54). The current cohort of elderly Sami has lived their lives in this area of tension between assimilation, revitalization, and ambiguity.

## Literature review: Research regarding culture, health care, and the minority elderly

Over the past decades, matters of culture, health, and health care have been discussed extensively in the literature (cf. Vandenberg 2010). There seems to be wide agreement regarding the significance of “cultural competence” in interactions between health care providers and “minority patients”. Theories of *culturally competent*, *culturally congruent*, and *culturally sensitive care* call for “culturally based care knowledge, acts, and decisions used in sensitive and knowledgeable ways to appropriately and meaningfully *fit the cultural values, beliefs, and lifeways of clients*” (Leininger and McFarland 2006: 15, italics added). Such theories have informed policy documents (e.g., US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health 2001; Romanow 2002; Joint Commission on Hospital Accreditation 2008), the education of health care providers (e.g., Ring, Nyquist, and Mitchell 2008; Like 2011; Mancuso 2011), and research on the minority elderly (e.g., Heikkilä and Ekman 2000; Heikkilä, Sarvimäki, and Ekman 2007; Parker and Geron 2007; Andrews 2012). It has been argued that much literature regarding how health care providers should encounter the *minority elderly* in a culturally *competent* or *congruent* manner rests on the implicit presumption that by the time individuals reach old age, they have fixed identities and solidified relationships with their “cultural backgrounds” (Blix et al. 2013). These presumptions resonate with a tendency in developmental psychology, noted by Andrews (1999), to assume that by the time people reach old age, their development has ceased. Although this idea has been contested for many years in social gerontology (e.g., Friedan 1993; Ruth and Kenyon 1996; Andrews 1999; de Lange 2011), it seems to persist as an underlying assumption

in theorizing regarding the minority elderly. Among some psychologists, ethnic identity is considered as a component of the self, and the development of ethnic identity is considered to be a process that is associated with adolescence and early adulthood (Phinney 1993; Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts, and Romero 1999; Syed and Azmitia 2010). For example, Phinney's (1993) three-stage model for ethnic identity development in adolescence depicts the development as moving through stages starting with an unexamined identity, followed by a stage of search for identity (moratorium), and ideally terminating in a stage of ethnic identity achievement characterized by "a clear, confident sense of one's own ethnicity" (Phinney 1993: 71). A well-documented tendency is also observed in the literature of lapsing into *culturalist discourses*, in which stereotyped, popularized representations of culture are used as the primary analytical lens for understanding presumed differences between various groups of people and people's behavior is explained in terms of cultural traits (cf. Duffy 2001; Gustafson 2005; Gray and Thomas 2006; Gustafson 2008; Browne, Varcoe, Smye, Reimer-Kirkham, Lynam, and Wong 2009). Within these discourses, culture is understood as part of an identity that is common to members of a group and maintained in a continuous form because of its foundation in shared experiences (Williams 2006: 211). We argue that both the assumption that identity work has ceased by the time people reach old age and the tendency to explain people's behavior in terms of cultural traits are inherent in much research on the minority elderly.

A considerable amount of research on minority elderly populations stresses the importance of *culturally competent care*. Burchum (2002: 14) stated that because "culture is inseparable from the person and because nursing incorporates a wholistic

[sic] perspective, cultural competence has important implications for nursing practice, education, administration, and research”. Knowledge of people’s cultural backgrounds has been conceptualized as essential to “effective and safe nursing” (Tervo, Muller-Wille, and Nikkonen 2003). Spira and Wall (2009: 120) emphasized the importance of cultural competencies “because they are a means to achieve an effective approach to health care for the older adults and their families”. Parker and Geron (2007) stated that because “cultural issues” pervade care for aging persons, organizational cultural competence is necessary. According to Shaw (2010: 524), “After linguistic access, ethnic resemblance between minority patients and their health care providers is the most frequently cited aspect of culturally appropriate health care in the public health policy and advocacy literature”. Several scholars have emphasized the value of being cared for by members of one’s own ethnic group (Ekman, Wahlin, Norberg, and Winblad 1993; Emami, Torres, Lipson, and Ekman 2000; Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, and Li 2003; Heikkilä and Ekman 2003). Cultural congruency, “based on the residents’ mother language, a shared ethnic background with the staff, and shared customs”, is assumed to create “a common ground for communication and understanding”, which, in turn, “enables caring relationships” and “increases the residents’ well-being” (Heikkilä et al. 2007).

A considerable amount of research on Sami elderly is informed by similar ideas. Efforts are made to “find culture-specific features of the Sámi experience of well-being to use that information in the development of social and health care services” (Tervo and Nikkonen 2010: 13). The “culture-specific features” and “the Sámi experience” seem to resonate with the public narrative about Sami unity and pride described above, which

emphasizes the Sami language, and those aspects of the Sami culture that appear to differ most from the majority culture, such as traditional costumes, traditional music, handicrafts, ecological sensibility, and spirituality. The Sami “original culture” (Hanssen 2012: 1) is assumed to influence communication and interaction with elderly Sami. The “[t]raditional Sami cultural aspects” (Hanssen 2012: 2) that are emphasized are the Sami language, “traditional foods”, the “rhythm of life”, “spirituality”, and “Sami singing traditions”. The importance of the traditional Sami music, *yoik*, in the care of elderly Sami suffering from dementia has been emphasized elsewhere (Hanssen 2011). Such studies could be criticized for inherently defining culture in narrow, prescriptive terms and for their basis in culturalism. A recent study demonstrates how policy documents regarding care services for Sami elderly are based on essentialist assumptions about Sami culture (Blix et al. 2013). Such assumptions have at least two possible implications. First, a strong focus on certain cultural traits and the importance of cultural competence may result in ignorance of the needs of elderly Sami with more ambiguous or fluid identities. Second, viewing individuals as “products” of their culture may lead to the neglect of other aspects of life that are significant for identity, such as gender, religion, and class, as well as the intersection of such factors. For example, research has demonstrated that being female and being Sami are both relevant to “the art of being old” (Alèx, Hammarström, Norberg, and Lundman 2006). Furthermore, perceiving people as “products” of culture involves the risk of ignoring their agency. It is crucial to consider indigenous people as active in response to their (post)colonial situation rather than simply considering them as passive victims (Adelson 2005; Blix, Hamran, and Normann 2012). In light of histories of colonization, migration, and assimilation, culturalist assumptions are insufficient to grapple with the complex issues of identity and minority

elderly persons. We agree with Dreher and MacNaughton (2002: 182) that humans are indeed “culture carriers”, but “most are born, live, and die having assumed only some features of their reference culture. Some members of a culture may embrace its traditional norms, others may reject them, and still others may deploy cultural values situationally”.

### **Theoretical considerations: Narrative gerontology and narrative identity**

During the 1990s, the growing field of social gerontology led to increasing awareness of the relationship between socio-economic and cultural factors and personal narrative as influences on social identity in later life (Phillipson and Biggs 1998). Narrative gerontology conceptualizes life as storied. From the stories people tell, we can learn about personal experiences of aging as well as the social nature of aging (Phoenix and Smith 2011). Fundamental to narrative gerontology is the assumption that “life is a biographical as much as a biological phenomenon” (Randall 1999: 12). A core assumption in narrative gerontology is that identity development does not stop at any age but continues throughout life (Kenyon et al. 2001; Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, and Kenyon 2011). Bohlmeijer (2011) stated, with reference to Freeman, that narrative development is potentially an infinite process. People do not *have* a life story; we are *many* stories, and the stories we are do not necessarily merge into an overall coherent life story. Yet, we cannot become whatever story we want. Stories are always told in social, historical, political, cultural, and interpersonal contexts. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) described this as a *narrative interplay* between *discursive practice* and *discourse-in-practice*. *Discursive practice* is “the interactional articulation of meaning with experience” and “the artful procedures through which selves are constituted”

(Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 94). *Discourse-in-practice* is “the discursive possibilities for, and resources of, self construction at particular times and places” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 94). Acknowledging that our stories are told, sustained, and transformed by public narratives is crucial in narrative gerontology. Stories are subjective accounts, but they are always told “at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations” (Riessman 2008: 8), which influence what can and cannot be told in individual stories. Hence, storytelling is both actively constructive and locally constrained (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Narrative identity is a concept implemented by various scholars in different ways. The present study is informed by insights from theories conceptualized by Smith and Sparkes (2008) as *dialogical* and *storied resource perspectives*. Dialogical perspectives are inspired by the works of the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 20f), individuals exist through their relationships with others, and these constitutive relationships are characterized by “unfinalisedness, openendedness and indeterminacy”. Frank (2010) pointed to Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophical account of narrative identity. On the one hand, narrative identity is what a person may be taken to be in the course of living out a story that runs from birth to death. On the other hand, the narrative of one’s life “is a part of an interlocking set of narratives”. To know the narrative of oneself, one has to see it against the background of the stories a culture makes available (Frank 2010: 199). As human beings, we are, however, only partially conscious of these stories (Freeman 2010). Narrative identifying is a reciprocal process of narratives making possible identities available and people identifying themselves through narratives.

## Methods

### Participants and recruitment

The nineteen participants in the study (eleven women and eight men) were between 68 and 96 years old and considered themselves Sami. The participants were living in two municipalities in the two northernmost counties of Norway. Both municipalities have ethnic composite populations. One municipality is part of the Sami *core area* where the Sami constitute a considerable proportion of the population. The other municipality is not considered part of the Sami core area, and the Sami are a small minority in the community.

The participants were primarily recruited in two ways: through local nursing homes and home care services, and through local senior associations. Information letters and consent forms in the Sami and Norwegian languages were distributed by managers of the local nursing homes and home care services and at meetings in the local senior associations.

### Interviews

All interviews were conducted by the first author (BHB). The interviews began with the interviewer inviting the interviewee to talk about her or his life in the manner of the interviewee's choice. The interviewees varied in the manner in which they told their stories; some spoke almost continuously without solicitation, whereas others needed prompting, including more or less specific probes to help them continue with their stories. The interviews moved thematically back and forth between stories about the past, reflections on the present, and thoughts about the future. The interviews were

conducted either in the homes of the interviewees or in the nursing home or assisted living facility where they lived. The interviews lasted between 45 and 150 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded.

## Ethics

The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics. Participants were limited to persons capable of giving informed consent. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study without stating a reason, and they were assured confidentiality.

All of the interviews were conducted in the Norwegian language. Three of the interviewees voiced concerns about whether they would be able to express themselves satisfactorily in Norwegian. In these cases, the interviewer offered to use an interpreter, but the interviewees all chose to conduct the interviews in Norwegian. We have reflected on how interviews not conducted in the first language of some of the interviewees might have affected the material. This shortcoming might have influenced *how* the interviewees told their stories because one's first language is usually richer in detail and nuance than languages acquired later in life. The language might also have affected *what* was told. A Norwegian-speaking interviewer might be perceived as a representative of the majority society, which could contribute to distancing between the interviewer and the interviewee and could prevent the interviewees from addressing issues such as assimilation and minority experiences. Although this problem might have occurred, the interview material, which was rich with descriptions and stories concerning these issues, suggests that the language might not have had a significant impact. The interview material indicates a considerable willingness among the interviewees to share

their life stories. During or after the interviews, all of the interviewees expressed appreciation for being interviewed on these matters.

### **Dialogical narrative analysis**

The digital sound files were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Field notes were recorded and used at several stages in the research process. Following the transcription, the tapes were replayed, and the transcribed texts were re-read several times to allow the researchers to become reacquainted with the material. We worked with a single interview at a time in a process involving a purposeful search for stories. As noted by Riessman (2008), the stories in a text often do not have clear-cut borders, and the researcher participates in the creation of stories rather than “finding” them in the interviews by deciding what to present as stories. As stated by Josselson (2011: 38), “Every aspect of narrative work is interpretive, as everything implies meaning. [...] We, as researchers, ‘coproduce’ the worlds of our research. We don’t simply ‘find’ these worlds. Truth is primarily a matter of perspective...”. Furthermore, the researchers’ participation in the creation of the life stories in the present article could be described as “reconstructing the told from the telling” in which they “reconstruct an order of the told from the telling(s) [which] becomes the ‘narrative’ for further analysis” (Mishler 1995: 95). Hence, the life stories presented in this article are constructed from the researchers’ retellings of the interviewees’ stories and quotations from the interviewees.

Choosing stories for focused attention is a crucial task in dialogical narrative analysis. In this approach, it is crucial to consider each story as a whole; methods that fragment stories serve other purposes (Frank 2012). Choosing four life stories from a material consisting of nineteen does not imply that fifteen of the life stories in the material are left

unanalyzed. Choosing stories for focused attention is, according to Frank (2012: 43), based on “practical wisdom gained through analytic experience”. This judgment is based on what has been learned throughout the research process. From this perspective, the interpretation and discussion of the four stories is informed by the knowledge developed through engagement with the stories of all of the participants in the study. Furthermore, the four specific life stories discussed in the present article were not chosen because they were considered as particularly representative of the sum of the interview material, but rather because of their particular distinctness and clarity with regard to the phenomena to be explored. The four life stories were chosen because they represented diversity with respect to how contrasting public narratives are negotiated in the elderly Sami’s individual life stories. Frank (2012: 50) described the possibilities and limitations of narrative analysis as follows: “Narrative analysis gives increased audibility to some stories, recasts how other stories are understood, and necessarily neglects many stories. But one analyst’s neglect is another’s possibility – less cause for criticism than for appreciation. The dialogue always continues”.

Given the scope of the study of how Sami elderly work their identities within broader socio-historical contexts while telling their life stories, a dialogical narrative analysis, as suggested by Frank (2005; 2010, 2012), appeared to be a suitable approach. Dialogical narrative analysis “studies the mirroring between what is told in the story – the story’s content – and what happens as a result of telling that story – its effects” (Frank 2010: 71). Its purpose is not to locate themes as finalizing descriptions or statements about who the research participants are; rather, its purpose is to represent “individual struggles in all of their ambivalence and unfinalizability” (Frank 2005: 972). Frank (2012)

suggested that dialogical narrative analysis begins with questions. In particular, three of the types of questions proposed by Frank were pertinent to the analysis. Resource questions (Frank 2012: 44) are questions about what narrative resources are available and to whom. Questions about what is at stake (Frank 2012: 46) focus on how the storyteller holds her or his own in the act of telling the story and in the way it is told. Identity questions (Frank 2012: 45) are related to how stories teach people who they are and how people explore who they might become by telling stories.

### **Four Sami life stories**

In the following section, we engage with the stories of “Johan”, “Anders”, “Selma”, and “Svein”; four elderly Sami individuals’ personal narrations about their lives.

#### **Johan: The full-blooded Sami, the real Sami**

Johan was born in the 1920s as one of five siblings growing up in a municipality in the core Sami area. His father was a reindeer owner. Both of his parents spoke Sami. His father learned to speak Norwegian by subscribing to the Saturday issue of a Norwegian newspaper, and he eventually mastered Norwegian well enough to act as an interpreter in court. Johan described a childhood of poor conditions. His family was poor, but they never had to starve:

“There was little food from time to time, but it always turned out well because my father was on good terms with the police and the municipal administration. ... My mother sewed clothes from reindeer fur and sheep fur.”

Johan described the local community of his childhood as one of unity. The Sami were a majority in the community. Some Finnish families lived there, but they “merged into the

Sami ... into our little community”. However, there were some families of Norwegian military officers in the community, and there was “an evident class distinction” between the officers’ families and the rest of the community. Johan said,

“They didn’t exactly look down on us or something like that. They just didn’t want to have anything to do with us.”

While attending school, Johan knew almost no Norwegian.

“It was difficult, but there were some Norwegian kids in school too, so we managed to pick up some words and in that way learn some Norwegian.”

Johan was educated and ended up working in the military throughout his occupational life.

“Even though I am a Sami ... All that time, I never heard a bad word about me being a Sami. They knew. I told everybody I was Sami, that I spoke Sami.”

Johan laughed at how some people, in his opinion, have made Sami identity into a question of feelings.

“I can’t figure out what it is to *feel* Sami. I put ... people are people. But *feeling* Sami, I have never experienced that. All the time, I have felt like a human, nothing else.”

However, he was aware of Sami identity as a problematic issue.

“Nobody ever said anything bad to me. ’Cause I have acknowledged it all the time. I think it is fairly important to do that. I think so. We have people around here that know, but they don’t even want to get into it. No! Then they stop. They stop immediately when [someone is] addressing that issue. Then they say nothing.

They have no opinions on that, when we start discussing it. Don't want to speak about it. Just let them be like that!"

Johan pointed to the difference between his generation and what he called "the new generation in universities and high positions": "They have no difficulties speaking Sami no matter where they are, if they can only find someone to talk to." These were the people with whom Johan identified.

"All my days, if I have had the opportunity, or if I saw someone speaking Sami, I have done it too. Once, on a trip to Spain, I suddenly saw someone from [home]. I went straight over to her and she started talking Sami immediately. *(laughs)* So all the Norwegians around us were gaping, wondering what language we were speaking. They asked me afterwards, 'What on earth, what language were you speaking?' I spoke Sami. They wondered if I knew Sami. Of course I know Sami, I said. I am Sami! Full-blooded. A real Sami, I said. Then they turned awkward. *(laughs a little)*"

In many respects, Johan's life story possessed many of the central idioms of the public narrative about Sami unity and pride: Sami was his mother tongue, his father was a reindeer herder, and his mother was occupied with traditional Sami handicrafts. The pride narrative was a resource for Johan's individual life story. This impression was strengthened by his use of words such as "real Sami" and "full-blooded Sami".

Throughout Johan's story, his Sami identity was never at stake. His story did, however, hold potential threats to his identity and dignity. Traces of the public narrative about Sami inferiority were echoed in the way Johan emphasized how he and his family had managed in spite of their Sami heritage: his father's job as an interpreter in court and

good relationships with authorities, the Norwegian officers' families who did not want to have anything to do with the Sami, and, eventually, his own career in the military although he was a Sami. In this respect, Johan's personal story negotiated contrasting public narratives about the Sami. Furthermore, others' Sami identities were at stake in Johan's story. Wordings such as "real" and "full-blooded" opened a possibility for others being "unreal". Furthermore, he ridiculed the idea of "feeling Sami". To Johan, Sami was something you are, not something you feel. To paraphrase Frank (2010), Johan was, by holding his own in the story, making it more difficult for others to hold their own by restricting what others are entitled to aspire to. In this sense, Johan's story, probably unintentionally, represented what has been conceptualized as the "dirty business of boundary maintenance" (Yuval-Davis 2006: 204, citing John Crowley) or "the dark side of narrative imagination, which is its exclusivity" (Frank 2010: 159). Johan's story was about *being* a Sami and *belonging* in the Sami community.

### **Anders: The prodigal son**

Anders had lived all his life in a fiord outside the Sami core areas where the Sami were a small minority. "It's hard being a Sami in this fiord. You become very lonely being one." He was born in the 1930s outside of marriage and grew up as "an illegitimate child". Anders' stepfather, a small-scale farmer and fisherman, "was not of a nice caliber". His mother was tremendously important to Anders. She used to take him with her when she worked in the barn to protect him from his stepfather's abuse. Anders had to endure his stepfather calling him "bloody Lapp" and "Lapp child", invectives referring to his Sami background. Anders was the only "Lapp child" in the family; his stepfather was from a family of "more prominent people". Anders' mother spoke Sami, but she did not want

Anders to learn the language. She used to say, “Anders, you should not ... You have no use for Sami. You don’t have to learn.”

Anders experienced being called names such as “Lapp child” and “bastard” in the local community as well. He described his childhood local community as “a strong community”, but his own family was not part of this community. Laestadianism, a conservative Christian movement, dominated the community. Having children outside of marriage was not accepted. “It was terrible. Cruel! I experienced Laestadianism at its harshest,” Anders said.

Anders described his education as “poor”. He soon fell “off the bandwagon” and “out of the entire system”. He suggested an association between his poor education and his Sami background with statements such as, “I guess it was easier to teach the merchant’s daughter than me”. The teacher made Anders run errands for him instead of allowing him to participate in lessons.

Early in Anders’ life, “Sami” was a label other people put on him that he himself “disliked”, and it was a category in which he did not recognize himself. “When I grew up, you had to herd reindeer to be a Sami. Otherwise you weren’t [a Sami].” However, later in life, Anders became interested in his Sami background. He began inquiring into the origins of his father’s ancestors. Anders said that by doing so, he “attended to where he came from”. Anders was passionate and ended up occupying important positions in Sami politics. “It has given me a lot. ... I was in the Sami politics, and there I had pals. I really appreciated that.” During the time when Anders was filling a political position, his fellow politicians threw him a birthday party with traditional Sami food. This was an excellent experience for Anders. During the interview, Anders’ wife, who had been sitting

quietly in the background throughout the interview, interrupted the dialogue and stated, “Today you are very proud to be a Sami. You have told me so, repeatedly.” To which Anders replied, “Yes, I am. Yes, I really am.”

As an adult, Anders got to know his father. They spent some years together before his father passed away. Anders developed a close relationship with his half-brothers and half-sisters. He summed up the significance of getting to know his father and half-siblings in one sentence: “You have to know who you are.”

Anders’ life story was in the margins of the public narrative about Sami unity and pride. Substantial parts of his story involved being left out; being the only “Lapp child” in the family, being the “bastard” in the Laestadian community, and falling off the bandwagon in school. Anders’ mother, although most likely driven by the best intentions, kept him out of the Sami community by not allowing him to learn the Sami language. Up to a point in his story, Sami was an identity ascribed to Anders by others, and in his childhood he “disliked” being perceived a Sami. The public narrative about Sami inferiority is clearly echoed in these parts of Anders’ personal story. Simultaneously, when referring to the difficulties he had recognizing himself in the category others ascribed to him, he was referring to the association between Saminess and reindeer herding. With his background in small-scale farming and fisheries and a Norwegian mother tongue, he appeared no different from those considered Norwegian in the community. The public narrative about Sami unity and pride was not a resource for Anders’ personal narrative; his story did not possess any of its central idioms. However, there were other narrative resources available that changed his sense of possibilities. The entry into the Sami political movement and the reunion with his father and siblings were significant turning

points in Anders' story. He was entitled to his Sami heritage through his welcome into the fellowship of Sami politics and his Sami family. The embrace by his "pals" was vivid in the story about the birthday party, and even more so in the story about how he got to know his father, brothers, and sisters as an adult. Anders' story, probably unintentionally, echoed a story from his more or less conscious inner library: the Christian biblical parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-31 (The Bible)). Returning after years spending his advancement, the prodigal son was embraced and kissed by his father, who even slaughtered the fattened calf for a celebratory meal. In Anders' story, the celebratory meal consisted of traditional Sami food, and the fatherly kiss was the embrace from his father and siblings. Anders' Sami identity was at stake throughout his life story. Although he "disliked" being a Sami early in his life, he reclaimed his Sami identity later in life. In light of the narrow representations of the Sami inherent in the public narrative about Sami unity and pride, the stakes on his identity were high. Claiming a Sami identity made him vulnerable to the risk of being judged as a "second-rate Sami" (cf. Eidheim 1997). However, the stakes on Anders' *struggle of becoming* were lowered because of the narrative resources available to him.

### **Selma: The reluctant Sami**

Selma lived in a small community outside the Sami core areas, in a fiord where the Sami were a small minority. Selma was born in the 1920s outside of marriage and grew up as an "illegitimate" child. Her mother remained unmarried, and Selma had no siblings.

"I had no father. I was a bastard. That is what they called it back then. ... Yes, that's what they called us, everyone that was born like me."

Selma told about a childhood moving around with her mother, living with relatives, surviving on what other people gave them. Selma's mother, described as "very kind", died from cancer when Selma was in her twenties.

Selma never enjoyed school. She described her teacher as a "so-and-so". She said,

"You know, in a crowd of children, you can't be kind to everyone. ... The ones coming from bad families were kept out."

She says, however, that the teacher treated her "fairly well".

After completing school, Selma obtained work as a domestic servant for a man twelve years older than herself. They began "fooling around", got married, and had six children.

Selma concluded, "Yes, I ended up here."

Selma's mother spoke the Sami language, as did the relatives with whom Selma and her mother lived during her childhood. Selma herself, however, never learned to speak Sami. Selma said, "I am a Sami!" However, she also stated, "I don't feel Sami." When asked to elaborate on this, she said, "Because I don't *want* to be a Sami!" Following this statement, she non-verbally made it clear to the interviewer that she had no intention of delving further into the issue.

The public narrative about Sami unity and pride was not a narrative resource for Selma's life story, which did not possess any of its central idioms. Selma's story was about being a Sami, but it was not about belonging: "I am a Sami" but "I don't feel Sami". It was as if her Sami heritage stuck to her regardless of what she felt. According to Yuval-Davis (2006: 202), "the emotional components of people's constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they feel". The

emotional component of Selma's story was fundamentally different from Johan's ridiculing of people "feeling Sami". Whereas Johan had never "felt Sami" because he was a Sami, Selma did not feel Sami because she *did not want* to be one. Selma's acceptance of the poor treatment from the teacher ("The ones coming from bad families were kept out") echoed the contemporary public narrative about Sami inferiority. However, it may also have been a reference to her mother's marital status or to the fact that she was an "illegitimate" child and a Sami. From this perspective, Selma's story was a taciturn but expressive account of "the Sami pain" (Nergård 1994; Minde 2003) that "may have been widespread among those who were in opposition, but probably even more deep-felt and traumatic among those who tried most eagerly to adapt to the assimilation pressure" (Minde 2003: 141). Her reluctance to elaborate on her Sami background may have been a response to restricted narrative options (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 2000). However, her non-verbal closure of the conversation was indeed a narrative act. According to Georgakopoulou (2006: 127), "refusals to tell or deferrals of telling are equally important in terms of how the participants orient to what is appropriate a story in a specific environment". We perceive Selma's reluctance to talk about her Sami identity both as a consequence of the internalized inferiority narrative and as a response to the constraints imposed by the pride narrative. Her story about not being a proud Sami was inappropriate in a social setting dominated by the pride narrative, and it was not appropriate to tell a researcher who was interested in "Sami life stories".

### **Svein: The proud father of a Sami**

Svein was born in the 1930s and grew up as one of fifteen siblings in a fiord outside the Sami core area. His parents were small-scale farmers, and his father was also a

fisherman. Svein described his great-grandparents as “real Sami who wore *kofte* [traditional Sami costume]”. His grandparents, however, “were Sami, of course, but they never wore *kofte*”. His parents spoke Sami. Svein commented, “It was natural, when neighbors were chatting, to speak Sami. But we [the children] never understood. No. We never learned Sami.”

Svein related that Sami was a term of abuse when he grew up. “Bloody Sami! Mountain Lapp! It was allowed to say so, back then, with blessings from the police, teachers, and everything.”

On several instances, Svein used the term “real Sami”, and he associated the term with wearing a *kofte*. Svein said that he himself could never wear a *kofte*. “I couldn’t imagine myself ever wearing a *kofte*.” However, he was proud of his son who did wear a *kofte*.

“Our son, he wears *kofte*. He even wears it on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May [the Norwegian National Day]. In the middle of the city [in the south of Norway]! I think it is really bold to come forth like that, ’cause that’s what they do, come forth ... They are entitled to. Even though some generations have passed since his forefathers wore a *kofte*.”

Svein tried to explain why he himself could never wear *kofte*:

“We, who grew up with the Norwegianization, ended up agreeing with those who denied us being Sami. ‘Of course, we are no mountain Lapps!’ But the young people today, you see it all the time, they say it openly and honestly: ‘Yes, of course, we are Sami!’ That’s a little odd to us, who have been in this conflict all

this time. How come they are not ashamed? / don't think so, but there are many who say, 'They ought to be ashamed!'"

When asked about whether he was ashamed, Svein replied that he was very proud of his son.

Svein's life was a story from the margins of the public narrative about Sami unity and pride; it lacked most of its central idioms except one, the traditional Sami clothing, *kofte*. In Svein's story, *kofte* was a central actor, a narrative resource, placing him between ancestors and descendants who wore it, although he could not imagine wearing it himself. In his personal story, Svein negotiated contrasting public narratives about the Sami. The statement about how he and others who "grew up with the Norwegianization ended up agreeing with those who denied us being Sami" echoed the inferiority narrative at the same time that it was actively contrasted by the reference to the young people today who "say it openly and honestly: 'Yes, of course, we are Sami!'". As noted by Yuval-Davis (2006: 202), "identity narratives can shift and change, be contested and multiple". Svein's Sami identity was at stake throughout his life story. Although renouncing his Sami heritage early in life, he reclaimed it later. However, the stakes were high. Like Anders, Svein risked being judged as a "second-rate Sami" because he did not fit into the narrow representations of the Sami in the pride narrative. In that respect, the ancestors and descendants wearing *kofte* were a narrative resource in Svein's *struggle of becoming*.

## Discussion

The four life stories presented in this article demonstrate to the fullest the basic assumption of narrative gerontology that identifying is an ongoing process that continues

throughout life. Furthermore, the stories demonstrate how individual life stories are framed and shaped by dominant public narratives. Moreover, the four elderly Sami's individual struggles of being and becoming demonstrate the insufficiency of assumptions pervading the literature on culturally competent care of the minority elderly, and about people having fixed identities and resolved relationships with their cultural heritage by the time they reach old age. We are concerned that the strong focus on cultural competence can overshadow the individual struggles of being and becoming of minority elderly with ambiguous and fluid identities.

Public narratives are parts of the *discourse-in-practice* that provide possibilities and resources for the *discursive practice* of self constitution (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The life stories of minority elderly are particularly interesting as sources of insight to the narrative interplay between *discursive practice* and *discourse-in-practice* because the lifespans of the elderly unfold over lengthy historical periods, with shifting and contrasting public narratives that to various extents are reflected in these people's personal life stories. According to Frank (2012: 45), "Stories provide an imaginative space in which people can claim identities, reject identities, and experiment with identities". The four life stories presented in this article demonstrate the limitations inherent in the imaginative space of stories. Dominant public narratives can impose such limitations on individual life stories. While telling their individual stories, the Sami elderly actively engaged with contrasting public narratives about the Sami by situating themselves at the center of these narratives, working their way into them, or fighting them.

Crucial to telling one's life story is what Freeman (2010) has conceptualized as hindsight: "the process of looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing 'connections' [...] that could not possibly be drawn during the course of ongoing moments but only in retrospect" (Freeman 2010: 4). The four life stories presented in this article vary in respect to how hindsight is practiced. Anders and Svein were both quite explicit about how they personally had internalized the inferiority narrative. Johan's life story also echoed the inferiority narrative, although he claimed that he had opposed it all his life. Freeman has referred to the process of becoming aware of the stories one has internalized as *demystification* (Freeman 2010: 139). According to Freeman, making the narrative unconscious conscious is also a process of *reconstruction* or refashioning of the past (Freeman 2010: 140). The process of demystification and reconstruction of the inferiority narrative, particularly evident in Anders' and Svein's personal stories, was essential to their struggles to enter the pride narrative. However, the very existence of the pride narrative made this process possible. The dominant public narrative about the Sami in the present made it possible for Anders and Svein, late in life, to see earlier phases in their lives anew and to draw connections that they could not have drawn earlier in life, while other public narratives were dominating. This illustrates the point made by Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 116) that "[n]ew narrative resources develop and are reflexively employed both to story selves and to revise expectations about the acceptability of accounts". In this respect, Selma's life story differed markedly from the other stories. Her story was strongly framed and shaped by the inferiority narrative, and she never actively challenged it. Her story was characterized by an acceptance of things the way they were; acceptance of being called "bastard" ("That's what they called us"), of the poor

treatment from the teacher (“You can’t be kind to everyone”), and of marrying the man to whom she was a domestic servant (“Yes, I ended up here”). Selma’s story can be perceived as an expression of *narrative foreclosure* (Freeman 2010; Bohlmeijer et al. 2011), “the conviction that no new experiences, interpretations, and commitments are possible that can substantially change one’s life-story and the meaning of one’s life as it is told now” (Bohlmeijer et al. 2011: 367). Freeman (2010) stated that the expectations about how to live and who to be, our possibilities and limits, imposed on us by history and culture can be paralyzing, especially when unacknowledged. It might seem that the stronghold of the inferiority narrative had such an impact on Selma’s life story. Consequently, she did not oppose the inferiority narrative by actively negotiating the pride narrative in her personal story.

The life stories presented in this article demonstrate what has been referred to as *the poetics of aging* (Randall and McKim 2004, 2008). The Greek verb *poiein* means to make or create, and speaking of the poetics of aging enables a focus on the active quality of *growing old as a process of becoming*. According to Randall and McKim (2004), narrative imagination is crucial to the poetics of aging. Narrative imagination involves the process of transforming “the stuff of our lives into the stories of our lives” (Randall and McKim 2004: 241). This process works both retrospectively toward the past and prospectively toward the future. We make sense of our past in light of our expectations for the future, and our anticipations for the future influence our reflections on past experiences. Furthermore, our orientations toward the past and the future are affected by and affect our perceptions of the present. This “curious backward-forward process” (Randall and McKim 2004: 242) is vivid in the four stories discussed in this

article. References to the past, for example, Johan's reindeer-herding parents, Anders' Sami father, and Svein's ancestors who wore *kofte* and spoke the Sami language, are resources for the three men's constitution of Sami identities in the present.

Simultaneously, references to the future, represented by "the new generations in universities and high positions", the son wearing *kofte*, and "the young people today [who say they are Sami] openly and honestly", open new possibilities for making sense of the past. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that the public narrative about the Sami dominating in the present provides possibilities and limitations to the poetics of aging as a Sami.

"Stories revise people's sense of self, and they situate people in groups" (Frank 2012: 33). We would like to add that stories also situate people outside of groups. In this article, we have focused on the dialogic relationship between individual life stories and public narratives. We are aware that culture makes available an immense body of stories, framing and shaping individual life stories. Public narratives about the Sami are only a few of many circulating narratives. However, not all circulating stories have the capacity of dominant public narratives to frame such a wide range of social phenomena. The inferiority narrative, to a large extent, framed the Norwegian assimilation policy and individual experiences of stigmatization and discrimination. Furthermore, the public narrative about Sami unity and pride has the capacity to provide the framework for research, politics, teaching materials, tourism, the media, and policy documents regarding the Sami. As noted by Loseke, public narratives "are useful precisely because they simplify the complex world [but] the same simplicity and clarity makes such formula stories of less than obvious use as individual sensemaking resources" (Loseke 2007:

674). Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 105) stress that although membership in groups shapes storytelling by providing resources for self-narration, it is important “not to essentialize the narratives that result from them”. In the life stories discussed in the present article, the four storytellers’ Sami heritages provided different resources for their narrations about themselves. The storytellers’ Sami heritage was significant, not because it implied that they necessarily had certain cultural traits in common, but rather because of the impact the shifting public narratives about the Sami had on their narrative identity work in late adulthood.

### Implications

Insights gathered from this study have relevance beyond the population of the Sami elderly. Other populations of minority or marginalized elderly have experienced changing or competing public narratives about their “peoples” or “groups” throughout their lifespans, for example, the Aboriginal population in Australia (Johnson 2005; Ryymin and Nyssönen 2012), the First Nations populations in North America (Johnson 2005; Ryymin and Nyssönen 2012), and the Maori population in New Zealand (Allen 2002), as well as non-ethnic minorities such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual elderly (Rosenfeld 1999). The study of the life stories of the elderly in various marginalized groups is a fruitful approach to gain insight to the narrative interplay between public narratives and individual stories because the life stories of the elderly unfold throughout lengthy historical periods with shifting and contrasting public narratives. As stated by Rosenfeld (1999: 122), “Elderly members of stigmatized groups in particular have witnessed – and been implicated in – a number of reformulations of their stigma and their subcultures,

and thus have access to an especially complex set of ideological resources through which to construct their identities”.

A dialogical relationship between individual stories and public narratives implies that individual stories have the capacity to shape and revise dominant public narratives. The best way to facilitate this *narrative elasticity* (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) is by allowing more stories to act (Frank 2010). However, Frank (2010: 55) cautioned that “stories not readily locatable in the listener’s inner library will be off the radar of comprehension, disregarded as noise”. Our commitment in dialogic narrative research on the minority elderly is to make available individual stories other than those represented in the research literature based on essentialist assumptions and focused on cultural traits. As researchers, we must be aware of how public narratives affect our own research and how they have the capacity to steer our attention away from individual stories from the margins of the public narratives. To reduce narrative silences (Somers 1994) and to avoid merely reproducing established “truths”, we must dare to listen to the ambiguous and unfinalized stories of the elderly about longing and struggles of becoming.

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