

# Considering Silences in Narrative Inquiry: An Intergenerational Story of a Sami Family

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography  
1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/08912416211003145

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## Abstract

Through coming alongside a Sami family, we open spaces to contemplate multiple forms of silence. We argue that rather than the antithesis to narrative, silence is an integral part of narrative inquiry. As narrative inquirers we need to be wakeful to what is told and also untold, often simultaneously. We believe that narrative inquiry is not necessarily about breaking silences, but it is also about honoring silences, as well as the practice of silence. By calling forward one author's intergenerational experiences, we explore different aspects of silence such as silence as text, silence as context for living and telling, and silences following silencing. We explore how we live with, and within, silences, and how our told and untold stories are shaped by silences and, in turn, also shape silences.

## Keywords

narrative inquiry, silence, silencing, intergenerational stories, autoethnography

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## **Introduction**

My paternal grandparents were born in the transition from the 1800s to the 1900s. They were both born into indigenous Sami<sup>1</sup> families living in rural villages on the coast of Northern Norway. They were also born into one of the darkest chapters of Norwegian history characterized by assimilation policies toward the Sami. According to public opinion, the Sami were primitive people, and the best course of action was to make them Norwegian. The school system was a central instrument in the assimilation policies. Children were removed from their families and communities and sent to residential schools where they were not allowed to use the Sami language. In addition to the public policies, the Sami experienced stigmatization, discrimination, and everyday racism.

My grandmother entered school in 1914.

On one of my grandmother's first days in school, the teacher asked if one of the children could lead the rest of the class in our Lord's prayer. My grandmother eagerly raised her hand, knowing that she had learned the prayer at home and knew it by heart. When the teacher pointed at her, she stood up by her desk and proudly started to recite the prayer in her mother tongue. After a sentence or two, she was interrupted by her teacher asking her to stop and go to the "shame corner" of the classroom. She could not quite understand what she had done wrong until the teacher stated, "God does not know the Sami language." My grandmother never said our Lord's prayer out loud again.

The silencing of Bodil's grandmother was literal, immediate, and explicit. The young girl was denied of speaking out loud to her God in her own language and, accordingly, she never did so again. We know very little about how this experience shaped her relationship with God, with her teacher, and with the other students. And we wonder how this experience shaped how she saw herself, her family, and her cultural and linguistic background. However, we do know she learned that day that her language and her culture were of less value. She learned that speaking in her mother tongue warranted "the shame corner." We see the connections between shame and silencing in her story.

## **Opening an Inquiry Space**

For one week, in the summer of 2019, I lived alongside a small group of fellow narrative scholars from many parts of the world in a quiet village in Germany, where we collaboratively co-created a safe space for the sharing of meals, thoughts, readings, writings, and silences. During those days, I was embraced by the quietness in my room, a room furnished by a narrow bed, a nightstand,

and a desk, and a view of the pond in the garden. The quietness, the crucifix above my bed, and the Bible on my nightstand were reminders of how far away from my noisy, secular, everyday life I was. On one of the first days, we were each encouraged to make a timeline, an annal, describing our life. The activity we were encouraged to engage with came with no directions and, as I contemplated my life, I asked myself the questions: When does my story begin?; Where does my story begin?; and Whose story is my story? As I realized that my story is lived in the midst of others and others' stories, and in the midst of their, our, and my, silences, I began my timeline around the transition from the 1800s to the 1900s. Safely embedded in the quietness of the German countryside, I gradually, and not without resistance, started listening to the silences of my familial stories.

As narrative inquirers, we are “attentive to the intersubjective, relational, embedded spaces in which lives are lived out” (Clandinin 2013, 24). Silences are an essential part of these embedded spaces. Rich (1973) helps conceptualize silence, that is, what is not said, as interwoven with lies and secrets while Rogers (2006) writes about the unsayable as another way to conceptualize silence in the experiences of those who are traumatized. However, our aim is to understand how we live with, and within, silences, and how our told and untold stories of experiences are shaped by silences and, in turn, also shape silences. We make visible the ways silences shape experiences, the ways they shape our lived and told stories. Our intent is not necessarily to break silences of Bodil's stories, but to make visible that silences exist in people's lives, in their relationships, and in what they anticipate will unfold. Yet, even in making silences visible, there is a sense that we are breaking them. Perhaps as we acknowledge the silences in lives, shaped by systemic racism, by abuses of power and privilege, we are, in that acknowledgement, breaking a silence, although what the silence holds, what is hidden within the silence, remains silent.

Richardson (1993) draws our attention to the importance of attending to the act of writing itself as an inquiry process as well as to the importance of representational forms that convey a sense of the unfolding inquiry. We take this as encouragement to shape this text in ways that convey our narrative inquiry into Bodil's stories in order to invite readers to experience the multiple ways that silences shape the intergenerational stories.

Our point of departure leans on Clandinin and Connelly's definition (2000), that is, that narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding experience,” “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu” (p. 20). Essential to narrative inquiry is coming alongside, that is, to be part of the lives of participants as they unfold (Clandinin 2013; Clandinin et al. 2016). It is also an

inquiry that is concluded “still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry is always a relational endeavor. Situating ourselves within this view of narrative inquiry is important as it distinguishes what we are doing from inquirers who see stories as data or consider inquiry as textual analysis, or conceptualize the focus of interest as “the substance of stories and the activity of storytelling” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

## Exploring the Silences

As we contemplate the silences in, and within, lives, the term silence can take on different meanings. Silence might signal a quietness or stillness that allows us to turn inward. In this way, silence holds the possibility of a different kind of presence, a presence of possibility that we know from what lives temporally alongside what we understand as stillness. James (1890), who wrote of thunder, seemed to provide a metaphor for helping us think about the quietness, the stillness of this kind of silence.

Into the awareness of thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and contrasting-with-it. Our feeling of the same objective thunder, coming in this way, is quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation of previous thunder. The thunder itself we believe to abolish and exclude the silence; but the feeling of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone (p. 234).

In thinking with James, we recognize this interplay of thunder and silence. The silence that we know because of the metaphoric thunder may be the silence that Neuman (1997) refers to and that is present when stories are lived but not told. She wrote, “[p]eople live their stories as much as they tell them in words. They live them in what they do not say” (p. 107).

Silence can be understood as a practice. In other places, we write about Elder Isabelle Kootenay who calls us to engage in silent walking (Lessard et al. 2020). It is here that silence is a practice that allows us to turn inward and toward the relational space, to listen—seeing silence as a practice, does not define it in relation to words. Silence is taken up as a way of being. Silences shared with others may be a silent attunement (Fivush, 2009). It is here that we might not see the interplay between thunder and silence, where the silence is practiced and embraced as a way of being. It is here where even the sound of thunder remains unheard.

From this point of departure, we explore the potential, and necessity, of being wakeful to silences. Our interest is in ‘the substance of silences’ and

‘the activity of remaining silent’. Clandinin (2013) noted that we live in nested stories. We live in the midst of familial intergenerational stories, cultural temporal stories, institutional stories, and personal stories, and within each of these nested stories we see the resonances of silences. In this article, we explore Bodil’s living in the midst of familial intergenerational silences, cultural and temporal silences, structural and institutional silences, and personal silences.

As Bodil contemplates her grandmother’s experiences as a child entering school, she recognizes that her grandmother’s experience shaped her relationship with her children. It was the profound sense of shame that she experienced as her teacher *pointed at her, she stood up by her desk and proudly started to recite the prayer, in her mother tongue. After a sentence or two, she was interrupted by her teacher asking her to stop and go to the “shame corner” of the classroom.* Kerby (1991) pointed out that “the experience of shame is manifest only against the background of leading a life where one desires a certain respect from others [ . . . ] even though we may be only partially aware of this background” (p. 49). This complexifies the relationship between silencing and shame, by adding notions of desire and respect.

*My grandmother gave birth to 12 children. Most of them died at a young age due to tuberculosis and poverty. However, my father survived as one of five siblings. Most likely driven by the best of intentions and their own experiences, my grandparents never spoke with their children in the Sami language.*

The silence of Bodil’s grandparents who did not speak in the Sami language to their children calls us to think with Arendt (1969) who wrote that the world is full of stories waiting to be told. However, not all stories are told. Some stories remain silent. Some stories are told but never paid attention to; they are silenced, yet other experiences resist telling. Oppression mutes voices, and “[s]ilence is not always the absence of voice, but rather a muting of voice” (Etter-Lewis 1991, 434). These are the silences following silencing, the silences Fivush (2010) refers to as imposed, that signifies a loss of power and self. For Bodil’s grandparents, not speaking to their children in the Sami language was an intentional silencing, an oppression brought on perhaps by the profound shame around the Sami language. Yet, it was more than the language.

*From a very young age, my father and his siblings learned to conceal their Sami family history, and they were all quite successful at becoming Norwegians. Not once during my childhood did my father talk with me about his Sami family history.*

## Contemplating Passing and Silence

Thinking with Bodil's grandparents' efforts to provide their children with a Norwegian story to live by, we are reminded of Heilbrun (1999) as she reflects on Adrienne Rich's father and his "devoted belief in 'passing'"; his firm belief that in order to make it into the gentile world, she would have to be as non-Jewish as possible. "I had never been taught about resistance, Rich wrote; only about passing" (pp. 29–30). The silencing of her Jewish background was also a silencing of her resistance. Bodil's grandparents wished for their children to 'pass' as Norwegians. Those of their children who survived their own childhoods experienced that "passing" rather than resistance was the safest route to managing in the Norwegian society. They learned to story themselves by silencing parts of who they were. And in a way we see that that is what Bodil's grandmother learned in her long ago Grade 1 classroom: Silence your language, your familial and cultural background, and do not resist. This lesson had ripples far beyond the immediate situation, and far beyond Bodil's grandmother. The other children present that day learned the same lesson, and, like Bodil's grandmother, they may have passed on the art of "passing" to their children. The silencing of the little girl's prayer not only created lateral ripples in the classroom and beyond but also temporal ripples in future generations.

*The only recollection of the Sami I have from my childhood is the representations of the Sami as an exotic, reindeer-herding people in my school books. None of which resembled my own family.*

Trying to understand the silencing that occurred within Bodil's family, we turn toward Neumann (1998). Neuman, after reflecting on her parent's experiences of having survived the Holocaust, asks:

How can words begin to capture what is not of this life? And how would those of us who are of this life even begin to comprehend that other place, that other time, that other form of being? How much of the other's experience can we know? How far can empathic imagination stretch? (p. 429)

As pointed out by Clandinin (2013), no story stands on its own. Stories are always personal and never merely personal. All stories are lived and told in the midst of other and others' stories, and in the midst of silences. Our personal stories are made possible or impossible, by the stories and the silences surrounding us. Stories and silences open and close "the imaginative space" (Frank 2012, 45) in which we can compose our narratives. The formula stories of the Sami that Bodil was introduced to in her school books, the

“collective representations of disembodied types of actors [. . .] producing such categorical identities associated with families, gender, age, religion, and citizenship” (Loseke 2007, 663), deprived rather than provided her with the space to story herself and her family. Barrett (1999) points out that

There’s something epistemological about storytelling. It’s the way we know each other, the way we know ourselves. The way we know the world. It’s also the way we don’t know: the way the world is kept from us, the way we’re kept from knowledge about ourselves, the way we’re kept from understanding other people. (p. 5)

As a child, Bodil could not recognise herself and her family in the way the Sami were presented in the Norwegian school system in the 1980s. Knowledge about herself and her family were kept from her by the stories she learned about the Sami. “Othering,” that is, narrow representations highlighting differences and emphasizing the exotic, not only creates a distance between “us” and “them,” between the majority and minorities, it is also exclusive. In that sense, Othering is a form of silencing. This is closely linked to power because the entitlement to tell the stories that define “us” and “them” is not equally distributed.

## Attempting to Break the Silence

*I remember the first time I asked my father about our family history. It was in the early 1980s, during the so-called Alta affair. The Norwegian government had decided to dam the Alta-Kautokeino river, causing the flooding of reindeer herding grazing areas and Sami villages. This caused massive protests from both the Sami movement and the environmental movement. I vividly remember images on television of the hunger-striking Sami outside the Parliament building in Oslo. I was only eight years old but I wanted to be one of them. I felt I was one of them. I remember asking my father about our family history, desperately wanting him to confirm that I was one of them. However, not only did he refuse to confirm that I was, he refused to talk about it at all. As an eight-year-old child, I clearly sensed that this was not a topic of conversation in our family.*

As humans, we are continuously trying to make sense of our existence. And it is through story we make meaning (Caine et al. 2013). This process of meaning making is a relational endeavor. We need someone to co-compose meaningful stories with, and we need someone else’s stories to confirm our own. In that sense, others’ silence can impose silence on us (Fivush, 2010). How, then, do we make sense when faced with the other’s silence—when the

other resists co-composition and the sharing of story? We continue our efforts to make sense

even in the void of not-knowing, we nonetheless come to know, even when we have no interpretation, we nonetheless construct one, gathering wisps of sight and sound that surround us into images that, through the weaving of interpretation, become real for us (Neuman 1997, 96).

*In the early 1990s, I entered university as a student of social sciences. Throughout my years of studies in psychology and social anthropology, I gradually acquired a language to position my family's history in the broader stories of assimilation and discrimination. However, this language was not a language through which I could talk with my father about our history. I remember confronting him, trying to force him to admit that we were Sami. I remember triumphantly asking him "How come we are not Sami when both your parents' mother tongue was Sami?" And I remember his hasty and evasive answer: "Well, everybody spoke Sami back then. Doesn't mean they were Sami."*

Reflecting on Bodil's experience we realize that silencing is also a consequence of a lack of possibilities to tell a different story; a story that was not marked by a shame of being Sami. Thinking about Bodil's insistence that her father speak "a" truth, we became wakeful of how challenging it is to disrupt silences, particularly silences called forth by difficult stories and experiences. Elsewhere we write that, "[a]s narrative inquirers we attend to difficult stories and experiences, we stay with them; we dwell alongside participants in possible ways of retelling them" (Caine et al. 2013). The emphasis is still on telling and we wonder how could we attend to silences, stay with them, dwell alongside participants in silence? In other words—how could we do the opposite of what Bodil did to her father when trying to force him to "admit" that he was a Sami? How do we attend to the possibility that Bodil's father lived his being Sami in silence? Perhaps by acknowledging that his silence could be an act of care. Perhaps his silence was an attempt to protect himself, his mother, and his daughter from the shame his mother had experienced as a young girl. Fivush (2010) noted that silence can be a form of power, and the need to voice represents a loss of power. Based on this perspective, Bodil's attempts to make her father speak could be experienced as disempowering by him.

*After four years and a degree in social sciences, I decided to enter nursing school. Throughout the years in nursing school, I don't think I ever raised the issue of our family history with my father again. However, I did meet Sami*



*patients, and I met patients who shared stories with me. Maybe it was during those years I stopped confronting my father with the stories I believed he was obliged to tell me. Maybe it was during those years I learned to accept his silences and rather started to listen to those stories he chose to share with me.*

In one way of understanding silence, we can understand it as the other side of telling. In order to let the other person's story unfold, we need to remain silent, listen carefully, and resist the temptation to "fill the gaps" with our own interpretations and explanations, as we struggle for what Carr (1991) names as narrative coherence in the stories we hear as well as in the stories we live and tell. For Bodil, searching to create a coherent story, she pushed her father to break his silence and he resisted as he struggled to maintain the coherence in his stories. Carr points out that "[o]ur lives admit of sometimes more, sometimes less coherence; they hang together reasonably well, but they occasionally tend to fall apart. Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us, whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense" (Carr 1991, 97). As we think about narrative coherence in relation to silence, we wonder about the ways in which silence helps us make sense of "what we are about and what we are" (Carr 1991, 97). What happens to experiences that resist telling? For an experience to be had, does it necessitate telling? What about experiences that resist telling because no matter how hard we try we are unable to understand, to comprehend the depth of experience? What happens when we are unable to make sense? Do we fall silent?

*Like my story, my father's story begins and ends in the midst of other and others' stories. Through telling me about my grandmother who never again said Our Lord's Prayer out loud, he told me his own story and he provided me with a familial story to position my own story within. In the story I choose to tell about myself today, the story I choose to live by today, there is a thread linking the eight-year-old girl denied of speaking to her God in her own language, and the eight-year-old, who felt such a strong connection to the hunger-striking Sami outside the Parliament building to the person I am and am becoming today.*

The notions of dwelling in stories and in silences are marked by long term commitments and a sense of lingering. This way of dwelling calls forth a degree of uncertainty and underlines the importance of being open to surprise (Lugones 1987). This openness to surprise can and often does call forth a disease, which further disrupts narrative coherences not only for those who we engage with as narrative inquirers, but also for us as researchers and people in relation.

## Understanding Silence Through Narrative Inquiry

By calling forward one of Bodil's stories, we made visible different aspects of silence: silence as context for living and telling; the silences following silencing; and the breaking of silences by making visible what has stayed silent, and by accepting that something has remained silent. Finally, we explore the room for silence in the relational ethics of narrative inquiry and the call to turn towards moral responsibilities. We situate our interest within the puzzles of Bodil's story. Her story is co-composed from story fragments and silences stretching over four generations, and it is a story still in the process of living and telling, reliving and retelling.

*My daughter is a Sami warrior. It would have fit nicely into the thread from my grandmother, via myself, to her, if I could say that she has been an activist since she was eight. But the truth is, she has been a warrior since she was much younger. Perhaps, she was born one. At a very young age, she insisted that I tell her stories about our family, her great-grandmother, and about the Sami people. And later when she learned to read, she gained access to others' stories. My daughter has worn her traditional Sami costume, the gákti, since the age of twelve. The gákti is a strong visual statement of our Sami heritage, and every time I watch my daughter wearing it, I physically feel a slight anxiety. I worry that she will have experiences similar to those of our fellow Sami who are, still today, bullied and laughed at while wearing their most precious garment. As far as I know, my grandmother never wore a gákti in public, and my father has never worn one himself. However, I like to believe that his tears, every time he sees my daughter and me in our gáktis, are tears of pride and not tears of grief for his own and his mother's missed opportunities.*

Fivush (2010) noted that silences can also provide the space for the creation of narratives of resistance.

When dominant groups impose silence on marginalised groups, these individuals experience a loss of voice and a loss of power within the dominant culture. But when marginalised groups come together, the narratives they tell among themselves may begin to take shape (Fivush, 2010, p. 92).

Throughout the life course of Bodil's father, new and more diverse narratives told by and also about the Sami surfaced. Some of these narratives are marked by pride rather than shame, and some of them carry knowledge "kept from" the Sami for generations (cf. Barrett 1999). Perhaps it was these emerging narratives that helped Bodil's father to slowly and carefully shape a different story to live by?

While we could think about the intergenerational story Bodil tells, as one that works towards reconciliation, and one that allows her and her father to break silences over time to form a narrative of resistance, it is much more complicated. The ripples of the silences that have and in some cases continue to exist shape the intergenerational stories Bodil and her family live. The tears in her father's eyes, each time Bodil and her daughter wear their gákti speak to the continuous impact. The outward identification of being Sami both his daughter and granddaughter live, disrupts his silence and possibly his being silenced. While disruptions carry forward and, perhaps, make reconciliation a possibility, they also disrupt past stories. How might Bodil's father story or (re)story his relationship with his mother? And his relationship with a young daughter who at eight years of age was seeking a story to live by, that was impossible in the world he inhabited.

## **Silence as Text, Silence as Context, and the Silences Following Silencing**

Silence is a form of narration, or in other words, silence is a way to express experience and it is an experience in and of itself. Clandinin noted, "the stories lived and told in a narrative inquiry relationship are always a co-composition" (Clandinin 2013, 24). In line with this, we also understand silence as a relational phenomenon, as co-composed. It is here that we can sense the interplay and connection between silence and thunder, and silence and narration; neither exists in isolation and both profoundly impact how we live our lives and how we engage in relation.

In another way of understanding silence we can see it as the context for stories, perhaps it is the silence that James helps us see with his metaphor of silence that becomes "heard" when the stillness is broken by thunder. While James used a metaphor of thunder as breaking silence, Neuman (1997) used the blank page as a metaphor for silence; it is the blankness of the page that lets the blackness of the print emerge or metaphorically allows the story to be told. Both are powerful but point us in different directions, one to hearing stories being told, one to seeing stories being lived and told. Within both metaphors we are called to understand silence as embedded in a relational context. As Andrews (2010) pointed out, we cannot understand silence without understanding silence within context(s):

Silence always and only exists in relation to that which surrounds it. It is the blank spaces between words, and as such it helps to frame not only the meaning of what is said but that which can be said, a refuge for both the unsaid and the unsayable (Andrews 2010, 161).

Andrews offers us still another metaphor for thinking about silence; the blank space between words. Again it is a visual metaphor, it is the spaces that are the silences.

Silence may be loving and accepting. As narrative inquirers, silence calls us to be careful, to listen attentively, and to attend to our moral responsibilities. Yet, silences may also be painful and agonizing. Neuman (1997) wrote: “to shut a story down is to shut down, as well, the life of which it tells and from which it flows. An untold story, or one that is told unconventionally without words, relates the teller’s continuing struggle to live” (p. 108). We and others have previously written about how the failure to acknowledge embodied experiences expressed in other ways than through the spoken or written word, in a form that is not recognized as ‘narrative’, for example through movements and gestures, may lead to painful narrative dispossession or silencing (Baldwin 2006; Berendonk et al. 2017; Blix et al. 2019).

## Silences and Relational Ethics

In the quietness of the German countryside, Bodil asked herself the questions: *Where* does my story begin; *When* does my story begin; and *Whose* story is my story? These questions resonate with the narrative inquiry commonplaces of place, temporality, and sociality (Clandinin 2013). All stories are lived and told in the midst of time, place, and other and others’ stories. And they are lived and told in the midst of silences. Bodil’s story is also her grandmother’s story, her father’s story, and the Sami people’s story. And it is also her children’s story. By silencing parts of her own story, Bodil’s grandmother strived to give her children a story to live by that was different from her own. A story that perhaps would make their lives a little easier than her own.

*By keeping her Sami story silent, my grandmother gave her children a Norwegian story to live by. By telling my grandmother’s story, I gave my daughter a Sami story to live by.*

Is Bodil, by breaking the silences and claiming entitlement to this story, not acknowledging the efforts her grandmother made to protect her children from the cruelty she herself had been exposed to? Is she not acknowledging the love and care embedded in her grandmother’s silences? Bodil’s life is so radically different from her grandmother’s. She was a coastal Sami woman who lived in poverty, who had to watch several of her children not survive their own childhoods. How could Bodil, a privileged woman, mother, and scholar, claim the entitlement to break her grandmother’s silence? These queries resonate with the questions posed by Neumann (1997, 93): To what

extent should we, as researchers, pursue untold stories? What good or harm might come from such pursuits? According to Clandinin, Caine and Lessard (2018), the relational ethics of narrative inquiry necessitates moving slowly in ways that allow for listening and living, and the necessity of engaging with a sense of uncertainty. These interrelated dimensions of narrative inquiry correspond with silence as the other side of telling, silence as practice, and silence as the context for stories. For Bodil, this engagement with uncertainty and the slow movement into her familial silences has been ongoing for as long as she can remember, and it is still a process of becoming. We believe that narrative inquiry is not necessarily about breaking silences. Narrative inquiry is also about honoring silences, and it is about practicing silence. As narrative inquirers, we must think carefully about which silences to break, which silences to protect, and how we practice silence. A first step in such a direction is being wakeful to the silences in and between people's stories, to the silences in our own lives, and to the functions the silences may serve in both our own and others' lives. We need to consider whether the silences provide us with opportunities or barriers for being and becoming, and the relational coming alongside of narrative inquiry (Clandinin 2013) is essential for making such considerations.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### **Note**

1. The Sami are an indigenous people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The national states have made strong efforts to assimilate the Sami into the majority population. In Norway, this process is often referred to as Norwegianization. The church and the school system were central instruments in the assimilation processes. The use of the Sami language in schools was strictly prohibited until 1959. Moreover, residential schools were powerful arenas for the Norwegianization of Sami children. The assimilation policies were based on a dominant narrative about Sami inferiority.

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