

# Resilience among old Sami women

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is lack of research on old indigenous women's experiences. The aim of this study was to explore how old women narrate their experiences of wellbeing and lack of wellbeing using the salutogenetic concept of resilience. Interviews from nine old Sami women were analysed according to grounded theory with the following themes identified: contributing to resilience and wellbeing built up from the categories feeling connected, feeling independent and creating meaning; and contributing to lack of resilience and wellbeing built up from the category experiencing lack of connectedness. The old Sami women's narratives showed that they were to a high extent resilient and experienced wellbeing. They felt both connected and independent and they were able to create meaning of being an old Sami woman. Having access to economic and cultural capital were for the old Sami women valuable for experiencing resilience. Lack of resilience was expressed as experiences of discrimination, lack of connectedness and living on the border of the dominant society. Analysis of the Sami women's narratives can give wider perspectives on women's health and deepen the perspectives on human resilience and increase the understanding of minority groups in a multicultural world.

**KEY WORDS** – Sami women, resilience, gender, grounded theory, narratives.

## **Introduction**

Indigenous women all over the world have common histories of being colonised and discriminated against by dominant societies and of being subject to other power dimensions such as gender norms and cultural ideals. The indigenous Sami are one of five national minority groups in Sweden. There has been some research on male Sami reindeer herders, but few researchers have focused on the experiences of older Swedish Sami women. The intention of this study was to explore how old women narrate their experiences of wellbeing and lack of wellbeing in relation to the salutogenetic perspective of resilience. The Sami in Sweden have lived through a long forced assimilation policy, characterised by restrictions on using the Sami language and engaging in traditional reindeer herding

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(Amft 2000; Olofsson 2004). These restrictions have led to the Sami people nowadays speaking Swedish and the possibility for herding is limited. About 2,000–3,000 reindeer herders remain in the Swedish Sami population of approximately 15,000–20,000 (Edin-Liljegren *et al.* 2004; Kvenangen 1996; Olofsson 2004). Although most Sami no longer own reindeer, the Sami culture seems still to be permeated by their history as a reindeer-herding people and Sami identity is traditionally based on living in a reindeer-herding group or speaking a Sami language. From the year 2000, a Sami has been defined as anyone with Sami ancestry, for instance parents or grandparents, who wishes to be identified as Sami (Olofsson 2004). Sami people have not, however, been defined statistically as an ethnic group in the way that indigenous peoples have been defined in countries such as the United States of America, Canada and Australia.

Research on Sami people has usually focused on male reindeer herders, and studies of Sami women have been scarce (Amft 2000; Olofsson 2004; Riseth 2001). Sami reindeer herders have been studied for their rates of hazardous drinking (Kaiser *et al.* 2011) and unnatural deaths (Ahlm *et al.* 2010), and other research on Sami populations has focused on cancer in relation to lifestyle (Hassler *et al.* 2008), diet and lifestyle (Nilsson *et al.* 2011), risk factors for cardiovascular diseases (Edin-Liljegren *et al.* 2004), teenagers' psychological health (Kvernmo 2004), risk of suicide (Silviken 2008), and assimilation and ethnic identity (Kvernmo and Heyerdahl 2004). It is remarkable that none of these studies employed a gender perspective. The National Board of Health and Welfare (2010) declares that the Sami people have nearly the same risks of diseases and morality as the Swedish people, but there are few studies focusing on Sami women's living circumstances and experiences of health and wellbeing. Analysis of the narratives of Sami women, who have extensive bicultural experiences and experiences of discrimination, may provide an important broader perspective on women's lives in our increasingly multicultural world.

The theoretical point of departure of health in this study is that wellbeing is influenced by salutogenetic perspectives. People's ways of handling misfortune and retaining their health and strength have been described using the concepts of resilience (Wagnild and Young 1990), sense of coherence (Antonowski and Sagy 1986) and purpose in life (Frankl 1963). Health and wellbeing in this study were viewed through the salutogenetic perspective of resilience, which focuses on people's inherent strengths and ability to recover and survive in spite of losses, physical decline or health limitations (Nygren *et al.* 2005). Resilience has been understood as a kind of plasticity important to the ability to recover from adverse experiences and achieve psycho-social balance (Bonanno 2004; Rutter 1987; Wagnild and Young 1990, 1993). The concept of resilience has been

used in studies of people in situations as various as Russian immigrants to Israel (Aroian and Norris 2002), adaptation and resilience in the elderly (Foster 1997), resilience of elderly Native Americans (Grandbois and Sanders 2009) and resilience in relationships (Hartling 2008).

Being resilient has been described as crucial to health and wellbeing (Aroian and Norris 2002; Lundman *et al.* 2010; Rowe and Kahn 1997; Wagnild and Young 1990, 1993) and can be seen both as influenced by protective factors (Dyer and McGuinness 1996) and as a protective mechanism itself (Flach 1988; Maddi 2005; Rutter 1987; Staudinger, Marsiske and Baltes 1993).

Western European theories of psychological development have historically emphasised individual experiences and have generally focused on individual strengths and resilience, and the goal of healthy development has been seen as becoming an independent, self-sufficient and strong individual (Hartling 2008). Resilience, however, can be interpreted from various perspectives, both as an individual trait and as an ability that can be developed through relationships with family, close friends and society as a whole (Flach 1988; Richardson 2002; Rutter 1987). In this study, resilience is seen as a capability influenced by and developed in historical, social and cultural contexts. This view of resilience is based on an earlier study of the oldest old, in which resilience was found to combine feeling connected, feeling independent and creating meaning (Aléx 2010).

The narratives of the old Sami women in this article have earlier been analysed from discursive perspectives (Aléx *et al.* 2006), showing how they were balancing between various discourses of identity, such as being a reindeer owner *versus* not owning reindeer, being Sami *versus* being Swedish, dreaming about the past *versus* looking forward, being equal to men *versus* living in the shadow of male herders, and continuously changing *versus* clinging to the uniqueness of being Sami. The narratives have also been analysed from the perspectives on wellbeing of old Sami and middle-aged Roma women reported earlier (Aléx and Lehti 2013), showing that belonging to a healthy family, being spiritual, having cultural norms and having a life of one's own contribute to wellbeing in those living subordinate to a dominant society. Living in a hierarchical family, however, was detrimental to wellbeing. Because there are only a few very old Sami women still living, it is important to collect the experiences of this generation while we can. Research on very old indigenous women and their particular experiences of living in a 'roadless land' (area without constructed roads) is limited. Further research with these women should add to our knowledge of life as an indigenous woman and the process of becoming resilient. The aim of this study was to explore how old women narrate their experiences of wellbeing and lack of wellbeing using the salutogenetic concept of resilience.

## **Methods**

### *Sampling and participants*

A modified ‘snowball’ sampling technique was used to identify old Sami women for interviews (Willgerodt, Miller and McElmurry 2001). First a nurse student, grown up in the Swedish mountains, was asked to suggest names of old Sami women who had lived in a traditional roadless setting and who might consent to being interviewed. The only inclusion criterion was being identified or self-identified as an old Sami woman. The suggested women helped to identify other women to be interviewed (Dahlgren, Emmelin and Winkvist 2004). Nine women, aged 75–90, who identified themselves as Sami and with experiences of living in an indigenous culture in a ‘roadless land’, were included. The women’s experiences of living in a ‘roadless land’ were assumed normally to include contact with reindeer owners and the specific Sami herding culture. In this sample, four women had grown up with parents who owned and worked with reindeer, two had grown up with parents who both farmed and owned reindeer, and the other three had not grown up in a reindeer-owning family. Five of the women had lived within a herding district and been reindeer owners themselves, including one who had been a herder; two had been teachers; one had held several jobs in the south of Sweden; and one had worked in a church as a young woman. At the time of the interviews all lived in the north of Sweden, and three were married and six widowed.

### *Interviews*

The Sami women were informed about the study by letter and by telephone, their informed consent was obtained, and they were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymous presentation of the findings. All the women were Swedish speakers, all interviews were conducted in Swedish, and all but one (conducted in a hospital ward) took place in the participants’ homes over the course of two years. The intention was to achieve a conversational interview (Dahlgren, Emmelin and Winkvist 2004) focused on the issues the women considered most important to narrate (Glaser and Holton 2004). To encourage the women to narrate their experiences of living as a Sami woman in their own words, open questions concerning their life situation, and also experiences of health and illness, were asked. The tape-recorded interviews lasted from one to three hours and were transcribed verbatim, including notations of non-verbal expressions such as silence and laughter.

## *Analysis*

The analysis of the data was influenced by Grounded Theory. The intention of the first interviews was to focus on old Sami women's specific experiences of their health and illness, but they seemed not especially interested in these questions. Following the emergent design approach, the original focus of the interviews was changed to accommodate the women's interests (*cf.* Dahlgren, Emmelin and Winkvist 2004). The analysis included experiences of the meetings, the playback and transcripts of the recorded interviews, the written memos and the theoretical concept of resilience (Charmaz 2010; Glaser and Holton 2004; Wuest *et al.* 2002). Substantive codes, based mainly on the particular topic of discussion, were formulated and compared, and codes with similar content were brought together into preliminary categories. The final three interviews with the Sami women revealed no additional substantial information central to the emergent design and theoretical saturation was deemed to have been achieved (Dahlgren, Emmelin and Winkvist 2000).

The substantive coding and the preliminary categories were reflected upon several times and salient excerpts were formulated into theoretical codes that were then grouped according to the concept of resilience (*cf.* Charmaz 2010) into the categories of feeling connected, feeling independent and creating meaning. After that, the analysis focused on what in these categories contributed to or diminished resilience and wellbeing, and the analysis resulted in two themes: strengthening resilience and contributing to wellbeing; and weakening resilience and contributing to lack of wellbeing (Table 1).

## **Findings**

### *Strengthening resilience and contributing to wellbeing*

This theme was built on the categories feeling connected, feeling independent and creating meaning, which contained several theoretical codes illustrated by quotations from the interviews.

### *Feeling connected*

The category of feeling connected encompassed data coded as 'living in a forceful family,' 'practising spirituality' and 'belonging to the Sami culture'.

The old Sami women emphasised that they came from particularly healthy and forceful families. 'You can say we belonged to a healthy family'; 'Our family have all been healthy.' They stressed the importance

TABLE 1. *Themes, categories and theoretical codes*

| Strengthening resilience and contributing to wellbeing   | Weakening resilience and contributing to lack of wellbeing  |
|--|---|
| Feeling connected: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living in a forceful family</li> <li>• Practising spirituality</li> <li>• Belonging to the Sami culture</li> </ul>   | Experiencing lack of connectedness: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living on the border of the dominant society</li> <li>• Feeling subordinated to the reindeer owners</li> <li>• Living in the shadow of a shameful disease</li> </ul> |
| Feeling independent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being economically secured</li> <li>• Stressing gender equality</li> <li>• Getting support from the Swedish society</li> </ul>   |   |
| Creating meaning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrating specific Sami experiences</li> <li>• Finding new ways of participating in herding</li> <li>• Creating handicrafts</li> <li>• Using the mother tongue</li> </ul> |   |

of ‘living in a forceful family’, which strengthened their feelings of connectedness. One woman said, in reflecting upon wearing traditional Sami dress during her childhood, that ‘we were hardly ever ill’. The women remembered having very seldom been sick as children, despite often having been very cold, when living with their families: ‘I was healthy, and yet I was often so cold that I felt that I was freezing.’ Their lives in boarding schools with other children, however, exposed them to diseases such as scarlet fever and measles.

A reindeer-owning Sami woman emphasised the importance of having many siblings and children. ‘If you have many siblings, it is easier to cooperate in the summertime ... you can be [together with your siblings] whether you are angry or happy.’ The occupation of herding was described as requiring and supporting family co-operation. Feeling connected through always being needed by the family, helping reindeer-herding siblings and sons, and taking care of grandchildren was strongly tied to herding and co-operative family life. ‘As an old Sami woman, you never become a pensioner, because you are always needed by your family’ and as a woman with ten siblings said, ‘We became mothers to our younger siblings’.

‘Practising spirituality’ was performed by the Sami women in the Swedish Christian Church. Despite Sweden’s status as one of the most secularised societies, the annual Sami meetings mentioned by the women were always including church services and visiting with the priest who delivered the sermon, which the women described as strengthening their connections

with both the Sami culture and their religious ideals. Spirituality seemed to be both individually and culturally internalised. According to one woman, Christianity had contributed to a Sami tradition of hospitality and offering help to strangers, as exemplified by her mother, who always said: 'I don't deny anyone [food or a place to sleep]. You never know who you are meeting, and if God passes, he walks in disguise.' In the interviews, I was careful to ask the women about their experiences of indigenous medicine, but the women all denied that Sami culture included such treatment. There were, however, some narratives of living with relatives who had 'second sight'.

For the women who had been reindeer owners, 'belonging to Sami culture' meant living close to the reindeer, the mountains and traditional Sami culture. The reindeer were described as central to Sami culture, both spiritually (involving meanings of being touched, supported and consoled) and economically. 'Without the reindeer you were poor, both in spirit and soul ... yes they belonged to our lives.' In their old age the women still dreamt of and felt imbued by the reindeer. Being able to move with the reindeer to the mountains was described as essential, and being old and thus incapable of following the reindeer every summer created a longing for the mountains: 'Yes, you know the mountains were very desirable in summertime for migratory Sami. Yes, it is a longing. It is a terrible longing ... a desire.' Despite their long experience of speaking Swedish and the penetration of Swedish into the Sami language, the women spoke about how speaking the Sami language contributed to their feelings of connectedness with the Sami culture: 'You get closer if you can share and speak the mother tongue.' Meetings with other Sami groups also contributed to feelings of connectedness. One woman, who had worked in mainstream Swedish society, said, 'Perhaps we live as Swedes, but we also have this Sami identity, which I'll never give up'. Another statement was: 'I am very much for the Sami. Yes I feel that ... Yes, those are my roots ... I am very proud of being a Sami.' Another woman said, 'There were sort of two cultures we were brought up in, the Swedish and the Sami ... For me the Sami culture has a more powerful attraction'.

### *Feeling independent*

Feeling independent was constructed on the theoretical codes of 'being economically secured', 'stressing gender equality' and 'getting support from the Swedish society'.

The Sami women recounted the importance of having owned or still owning reindeer or having worked and earned their own money in the

larger Swedish society. As old, they still had their own economic resources. When estimating her own wealth, one Sami woman said, 'My mother-in-law was a reindeer owner, one of the greatest reindeer owners'. Owning reindeer contributed to feelings of strength and pride, and implied that they could be consulted by younger reindeer herders and seemed to be highly respected. One woman who had been skilled in handicraft said, 'I have saved money for old age'. To have been working as teachers or in other occupations in mainstream Swedish society contributed to their feelings of 'being economically secured'. Economic resources therefore seemed to have contributed to these women's wellbeing and resilience.

When talking about their culture, the Sami women were 'stressing gender equality' with Sami men and that equality between men and women was obvious in the Sami culture. One non-reindeer-owning woman, who was now married and had moved back to the mountain, told about the importance of having freedom in her youth, 'I should never marry and never ... oh no, I should be free', 'I simply thought it was so wonderful to live, make my own decisions, do what I wanted and work as I wanted'. One woman who had worked as a herder said: 'I have been nearly at the same level as the men ... You know there are weaker and stronger men .... I really felt how strong I was', 'My father and mother were proud of me ... I had status and still have'. However, the narratives also disclosed that their work serving herders, taking care of children and making handicrafts had not been as highly valued as herding. Sons who worked in herding had more opportunities than daughters to own reindeer, which was considered natural because men were expected to be family breadwinners. One woman said humorously, when reflecting over what her life might have been if she had been a boy, 'Yes, if I had been born a boy, I'd have been able to make a profit (laughing)'.

There were narratives about contact with the Swedish society via the tuberculosis (TB) sanatorium, which was described as supporting. The sanatorium offered an opportunity to learn more about menstruation and to reflect upon their own lives. One of the women said that she learned about menstruation from a person who had been at a TB sanatorium, and one said that while being treated in a sanatorium she had considered pursuing an education to work in mainstream Swedish society instead of becoming a reindeer herder. 'At the sanatorium I dreamt of having the opportunity to study in order to find an easier job.' Despite their experiences of forced assimilation, the women's narratives showed that fluency in the Swedish language had contributed to their access to the dominant Swedish society. 'Getting support from the Swedish society' was also expressed by one woman, who had been very skilled in Sami handicraft that she had been able to become a teacher and a seller of Sami handicraft, and she had



even been introduced to Swedish royalty because of her skills. Another woman had been able to speak up for the Sami on television, and one woman said, 'I have lived a happy and good life ... in a mix of two cultures'.

### *Creating meaning*

Creating meaning was constructed on the theoretical codes 'narrating specific Sami experiences', 'finding new ways of participating in herding', 'creating handicrafts' and 'using the mother tongue'.

'Narrating specific Sami experiences' seemed to create meaning for the women. One woman said: 'When I talk about it, I think I miss that time.' There were lively romantic memories of belonging to the reindeer culture and the ancient Sami society, sometimes expressed in terms of having being born under special circumstances: 'I was born in a tepee.' One woman described having been pulled on a sled by an almost untamed herk (reindeer stag), which became calm when drawing the little child. Another woman remembered and poetically described a childhood night when she 'was standing outside the tepee looking at the stars and hearing the sound of the reindeer pushing their antlers against one another'. Another woman remembered that in her youth she had been selected to learn how to serve important Swedish people (such as royalty) at the table. Recounting their memories seemed to be a way of creating meaning from belonging to an indigenous culture, which contributed to the women's resilience and wellbeing.

The women seemed to be up to date with developments in the reindeer-herding industry and tried to make sense of new ideas. One woman said that she recently had gone together with the herders to attend to rounding up and separating the reindeer herds. She did not want to be a burden to the herders so she took it on herself to collect all the empty soft drink cans. She reflected that in earlier days no one could have seen where the Sami had been after they left. However, she was keen on creating meaning of 'finding new ways of participating in herding' and she stressed that she was aware of changes in Sami culture and the importance of herders following modern demands to make the reindeer industry profitable.

'Creating handicrafts' was described as important both for art creation and for continuing the traditional knowledge of Sami arts and handicrafts. One woman who was very fond of and skilled in creating Sami handicrafts described how she had often worked on her handicrafts early in the mornings, before she had to serve her husband and son.

'Using the mother tongue' in old age seemed to recreate the meaning of belonging to an indigenous minority group and having a common language, which they had long been forbidden to speak. When meeting by

coincidence, Sami women could use a world or two of the Sami language to connect and laugh with each other. 'It is so wonderful! You have no idea!' One woman, who powerfully stressed and called attention to her knowledge of her local Sami language, recreated herself as an important cultural carrier of this specific Sami language and culture, which seemed to contribute to her wellbeing in spite of her deep disappointment with both the Swedish and the reindeer Sami society.

*Weakening resilience and contributing to lack of wellbeing*

This theme was built on the category 'not feeling connected', which was built upon the theoretical codes 'living on the border of the dominant society', 'feeling subordinated to reindeer owners' and 'living in the shadow of a shameful disease'.

'Living on the border of the dominant Swedish society' contributed to feelings of alienation, which seemed to be grounded in experiences of discrimination. One woman said: 'Swedish society is far away. It doesn't really belong to me very much.' The women talked of how greatly their lives had been influenced by Swedish laws mandating the forced removal of Sami people, regulating reindeer grazing and making school attendance compulsory. Sami who owned reindeer and were forced to relocate with them felt like strangers in the new part of the mountains which the state had ordered them to use. Experiences of being discriminated against were illustrated with examples from the women's school years, and there were descriptions of children weeping bitter tears when their parents were forced to leave them at the special nomad school. 'Oh! How many tears we have shed? ... The children cried and the mothers cried and they [the children] held on to their mother's neck and skirt and ... then you had to have a strong mentality.' Being forced to live in boarding schools for months and being forbidden to speak their own language made the women feel that the Sami language and culture were valued less than the Swedish language and culture, 'because I understand that this was a time when it was very dirty to be a Sami; it was degrading'. Not being able to speak their mother tongue at school meant that they hardly used their own language and, more importantly, that they had not encouraged their children to learn a Sami language. They felt that they not could use the Sami language in the presence of Swedes, as expressed in the old saying: 'Never talk Sami, the Swedes will think you are making fun of them.' Another expression was: 'It is poverty not to be able to speak your mother tongue.' One woman who described being viewed by Swedes as exotic from the moment she was born said that the midwife who participated in delivering her wanted to adopt her because her parents seemed to have a miserable

life. Another woman told how she had been rejected by a photographer who wanted to take photographs of old indigenous people because he found her too young and good looking. Her interpretation of this was that the photographer wanted to portray old indigenous women as wrinkled and ugly.

One of the Sami women who did not own reindeer was 'feeling subordinated to reindeer owners', and said 'I think we are discriminated against and treated unfairly both by the Swedish state and by the reindeer-owning Sami'. Her parents had owned a small cottage in the mountain and some reindeer, but the reindeer were too few, so her parents were not allowed to continue to work as reindeer owners. As an old woman she wanted access to her parents' cottage in the mountains, but neither the Swedish government nor the Sami village would allow it. She felt that she and her family were excluded from the reindeer culture and that made her feel bitter.

Despite describing themselves as extremely healthy, the old Sami women disclosed that they had been 'living in the shadow of a shameful disease': TB. They revealed the experiences of sisters, brothers and school friends who had contracted TB or even died of it. Some women admitted that they themselves had had a 'spot on the lungs', but others seemed to find it difficult and even disgraceful to mention the disease. It seemed important to them to stress that they had not been carriers of the disease.

## **Discussion**

### *Findings*

This study focused on exploring how old women narrate their experiences of wellbeing and lack of wellbeing using the salutogenetic concept of resilience. The analysis resulted in two themes labelled 'Strengthening resilience and contributing to wellbeing' and 'Weakening resilience and contributing to lack of wellbeing'. The themes were built upon several theoretical codes assigned to passages in the interviews, sorted according to their relevance to resilience into the categories 'feeling connected', 'feeling independent' and 'creating meaning'.

The old Sami women in this study were shown to have been exposed to discrimination by mainstream Swedish society, which contributed to their feeling of disconnectedness from the dominant society and a subsequent lack of resilience. However, these women did have strengthened resilience through their connection with Sami culture and their access to economic opportunities. The Sami women described feeling connected with their culture and their family as important for experiencing wellbeing and being resilient. They were eager to emphasise the strength and health of their families and they were aware that the Sami culture as a whole, with its opportunities for

contact with reindeer and the mountains, had influenced them positively. This stress on the strength and uniqueness of their culture can also be seen as a way of expressing their feelings of connectedness. Connectedness with culture and family was shown in earlier studies to be important to resilience (Al  x 2010; Wagnild and Young 1990, 1993). Thus, connectedness and belonging to an indigenous culture seem to have contributed to resilience and experiences of wellbeing.

In contrast to that of people living in a nuclear family, Sami women's resilience seems to be linked to inter- and intra-dependent connections with family and community rather than being an individual trait (Grandbois and Sanders 2009). In a study of Native American elders, the concept of resilience was described as embedded within the culture, and shared experiences and history were found to have helped not only to ensure cultural survival but also to have helped inculcate resilience into the culture (Grandbois and Sanders 2009). Miller (1986) suggests that instead of focusing on the 'self', it may be more useful to think of this concept in terms of 'sense of worth', which she says is an outcome of participating in growth-fostering relationships, which benefit all participants.

Lack of connectedness seemed to be the main reason for lack of resilience and wellbeing. Feelings of being discriminated against were stressed in the narratives and experiences of being forced by the Swedish state to conform to the dominant culture's expectations of how to behave, dress and speak weakened their resilience and wellbeing through engendering feelings of being disparaged and alienated. Even though the women stressed that they belonged to very healthy and forceful families, they disclosed the influence that TB had had on their lives. Their experiences of living in the shadow of the disease, a disease connected to poverty and lack of hygiene, were interpreted as showing their feelings of subordination and experiences of being an outsider. Stories of lack of connectedness with Swedish society are comparable to the Sami woman Selma's narrative of inferiority in the study by Blix, Hamran and Normann (2013). However, the old Sami women in this study seemed not to have experienced the degree of historical trauma suffered by other indigenous people such as Native Americans (Yellow Horse Brave Heart *et al.* 2014). Hartling (2008) says that relationships are the most important primary sources for developing and maintaining resilience and recovering from personal and social hardships or traumas. Furthermore, she argues that a cultural context can facilitate or obstruct opportunities to participate in the relationships necessary for strengthening resilience.

Despite the importance of belonging to a forceful Sami family, the old women also described a life characterised by feeling independent. They had had working lives of their own as reindeer owners, makers of handicrafts, teachers or company employees in other parts of Sweden. Thus,

the women had had their own economic resources and had not been dependent on their husbands' income. For women in this area born at the beginning of the 20th century this was unusual, because until later in the century women were generally engaged in domestic work. Most women in this region and at that time had few opportunities for an income of their own, usually limited to owning some cows and selling the milk or cleaning for others (*cf.* Forssen and Carlstedt 2001).

The Sami women gave the impression of having developed abilities of feeling both connected and independent. The Sami women's feeling of independence in this study can be viewed as a contrast to traditional feminist perspectives, according to which women were described as weak, objectified and obliging (de Beauvoir 1949; Haavind 1984). However, although stressing the importance of gender equality in the Sami culture, the women also made statements showing that gender inequalities did exist in the Sami society; *e.g.* sons who worked in herding were said to have had more opportunities to own reindeer than women who worked at home serving the men and taking care of the children. The dominant discourse in Sweden is that equality between women and men ought to be obvious and the popular idea seems to be that Swedish people are on an equal footing. As in the dominant Swedish culture, the Sami women probably wanted to stress the discourse of gender equality to the interviewer and to themselves.

The category 'creating meaning' can be considered in light of the feminist philosopher Butler (1990), who stated that identity is a construction. As individuals, we create our identity through various performances. The Sami women's narratives can be seen as ways of constructing and reconstructing themselves as indigenous women, *e.g.* by creating romantic and idealised pictures of Sami life in the past. Creating meaning by using their mother tongue included summoning their reserves of humour and resistance; these strategies were also reported by Rose (1990) and Foster (1997). Sami culture has the status of an indigenous culture, and as such it has been positively highlighted in various national events. In this study, women recounted having had the opportunity to meet with royalty, which probably strengthened their self-image of being special through belonging and feeling connected to the Sami culture. Sami handicrafts were also described as important to upholding the Sami culture. These narratives of experiences unique to living in the Sami culture and of contact with royalty can be seen as pride narratives as described by Blix, Hamran and Normann (2013).

From the perspective of Bourdieu (2001), the women's experiences of weakened resilience could be attributable to their lack of dominant Swedish cultural capital and their experience of being seen as 'the other'

(Mead 1934) and not taken seriously. Belonging to a subordinate, marginalised group increases the risk that one's relationships will be chronically disrupted by adversities such as poverty, lack of educational opportunities, institutionalised discrimination and insufficient health care (Hartling 2008). However, the Sami women in this study seem to have had access to economic capital such as reindeer ownership or paid work in mainstream Swedish society, which probably compensated to some degree for their feelings of discrimination. In their old age, they seemed to have been and to remain financially secure. In contrast, most non-Sami women in the same age group and geographic region would have had no or very limited opportunities for education and lives of their own. The Sami women also stressed that equality between women and men had always been important in the Sami society. Thus, the Sami women seemed to have had access to Swedish social capital, as well as to Sami, economic and gender capital. Swedish feminist researchers have stressed the importance of women's own economic resources for being and feeling of equal value to men (Göransson 1999; Stark and Regné 2002).

This study illustrates how gender and other socio-cultural power dimensions, *e.g.* ethnicity, age and social class, are bound to each other and construct and reconstruct each other in a dynamic interaction (Hammarström *et al.* 2013; Hankivsky *et al.* 2010; Lykke 2003).

### *Methodological considerations*

Nine Sami women were interviewed, usually in their homes, which probably contributed to their feeling safe and in control during the interview. As a researcher I strove for a relaxed interview situation, to make the women feel secure and relaxed, and as the interviews proceeded the women's responses became more narrative and more reflective. In the interview situation, the interviewer was conscious of the power hierarchy that can exist between interviewer and interviewee (Aléx and Hammarström 2008; Campbell and Bunting 1991; Fahy 2002; Wuest *et al.* 2002), and tried to limit the risk of a hierarchical encounter. This interview method evokes the 'yarning' described by Walker *et al.* (2014), a relaxed and interactive conversation built on relationship and focused on the interviewee.

One limitation of this study was the difficulty in contacting and recruiting participants due to geographical challenges and the very small number of old Sami women still alive in Sweden. Another limitation could be that because the interviewer was a Swede, her life experience and immersion in the dominant Swedish discourse could have influenced the interviews. After one interview the woman remarked, 'You were a nice Swede'. This statement was surprising and has earlier been reflected upon from

various perspectives (Aléx and Hammarström 2008). As an interviewer, I saw the Sami women and myself mainly as fellow Swedes; this statement made me aware, however, that the women viewed me as belonging to ‘the other’ (Goffman 1990). As an interviewer, I think I was projected by great interest in their stories, but perhaps they experienced my interest as ignorance of the Sami culture, which probably influenced the narratives in both positive and negative ways.

This analysis was performed with the intention of approaching the data with openness, using sensitivity, creativity and insight (Morse 2002). The data were systematically checked and the analyses and the interpretations were constantly monitored and confirmed (Morse 2002; Tobin and Begley 2004). Illuminating women’s own experiences can be an opportunity to understand better the world around them (DeMarco, Campbell and Wuest 1993; McCormick and Bunting 2002) and the factors that contribute to their resilience and wellbeing.

## Conclusions

The Sami women stressed the importance of family and cultural connectedness, which contributed to their resilience and wellbeing. Feeling independent through experiencing gender equality and being economically secure were also important to their resilience. Narrating cultural memories was especially meaningful for the old Sami women. Despite their experiences of having been disparaged, discriminated against and coerced by the dominant Swedish state, which weakened their resilience and wellbeing, the Sami women seemed to have access to both the Sami and the Swedish society.

Cultural and gender research is increasingly devoted to intersectional perspectives, and minority women’s narratives are important because they show the complexities of culture, gender, age, economic status and place (Hernández-Avila 2002; Östlin *et al.* 2006; Ramirez 2002). Examining the complexity of belonging to an indigenous people and of being an old woman in relation to the concept of resilience, informed by both the women’s early experiences of life in a ‘roadless land’ and their bicultural lives in Sweden, may not only contribute more knowledge and deeper understanding of old Sami women, but also help to improve interactions between help-seeking women from other minorities and health-care personnel. Further research is needed into gendered experiences of minority peoples such as the Sami in order to take into account their unique life experiences, to deepen our perspective on human resilience and to increase our understanding of various groups in a multicultural society.

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