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Balancing Within Various Discourses—The Art of Being Old and Living as a Sami Woman

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The aim of this part of the Umeå 85+ Study was to explore how indigenous women narrate their lives and their experience of being old as Sami women. Interviews with 9 old Sami women were analyzed using grounded theory. The categories identified were “reindeer as the basis of life,” “longing for significant Sami values,” “feeling valued as a Sami woman,” and “changing for survival;” these evolved into the core category: “balancing within various discourses—the art of being old and living as a Sami woman.” Knowing how to balance provided the ability to make use of available opportunities.

This study forms part of the ongoing Umeå 85+ Study in northern Sweden, which explores the health and outlook on life of the oldest old (Nygren et al., 2005; von Heideken Wågert et al., 2005). Numerous indigenous Sami people live in the area, and the present study explores how indigenous women narrate their lives and their experiences of being old as Sami women.

Indigenous people in different parts of the world, such as the Sami, Innu, Aborigines, and American Indians, have common histories of being colonized by dominating societies (Amft, 2000; Barusch & TenBarge, 2003; Olofsson, 2004). In northern Sweden, where the Sami live, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw a boom in iron ore mining, forestry, and railway

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construction (Henrysson, 1992). At the same period the view of the Sami people was influenced by the Social Darwinist philosophy, and the Sami were seen as being at a lower stage of human evolution and as an inferior race that was doomed to die out (Kvist, 1992; Sabbioni, Schaffer, & Smith, 1998; Smith & Ward, 2000).

The Sami people have a long-standing history of a forced assimilation policy, exemplified by reduced possibilities for reindeer herding and restrictions on the use of the Sami language (Amft, 2000; Olofsson, 2004). When the boundary between Norway and Sweden was closed to reindeer herders in the late 1920s, the Sami in the far north no longer had enough land to support their reindeer. The Swedish state decided to relocate Sami herder families—against their will—to places where the language and the way of herding differed. The major Sami language in the area covered by this study is South Sami, but the North Sami language is also spoken (Olofsson, 2004). The dominant language in the schools was Swedish.

Today, the indigenous Sami people are a minority people mainly living in the circumpolar region of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. The Swedish Sami population is estimated at 15,000 to 20,000, including about 2,000 to 3,000 reindeer herders (Edin-Liljegren, Hassler, Sjölander, & Daerga, 2003; Kvenangen, 1996; Olofsson, 2004). The definition of a Sami person has changed over the years from the earlier identification of someone who either belongs to a herding district or speaks a Sami language; by the beginning of 2000, the main definition was that a person who has a Sami relationship and wants to be defined as a Sami is a Sami (Olofsson, 2004). In contrast to the indigenous people of the United States and Australia, the Sami people have not been statistically singled out as an ethnic group, and therefore epidemiological research into their life experiences is lacking.

Although the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has been ratified all over the world, some people still believe that indigenous people are at a lower stage of progress than people belonging to the industrial world (Coates, 2004). The concept of ethnicity, however, is now mostly defined as divergent and changeable rather than static (Ahlund, 2002; Amft, 2000; de los Reyes, Moliha, & Mulihari, 2005). During recent decades, Sweden has developed into a multicultural society; researchers have illuminated gendered complexities of belonging to ethnic minorities and being bicultural as well as belonging to low socioeconomic classes. Gender research is increasingly devoted to intersectional perspectives, which focus on different power asymmetries based on concepts such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, and age. Power is seen as being constituted from socially constructed differences and as being changeable with regard to different social and historical contexts (George, 2001; Hall, 1996; Hammarström & Ripper, 1999). The intersectional perspective can be understood in light of the theory of Bourdieu (2001), who stated that social life and social processes

depend on varying accesses to different forms of capital such as cultural, social, and economic capital.

Even though only a small proportion of the Sami population work in the reindeer industry, the Sami identity is still dominated by the stereotype of reindeer herders (Amft, 2000; Kvendseth, 1998; Olofsson, 2004). Research on indigenous people has mostly focused on activities typically carried out by men, while research on women has been scarce (Amft, 2000; Olofsson, 2004; Riseth, 2001; Sabbioni et al., 1998; Smith & Ward, 2000). There is a lack of knowledge about old Sami women's experiences of living both in a "roadless land" and within modern Swedish society (Amft, 2000; Olofsson, 2004).

To be an old, indigenous woman is to be influenced by several discourses, which can be described in an intersectional perspective as race/ethnicity, gender, class, and age. The definition of discourse used in this study is influenced by the work of Foucault (1993) and Bourdieu (2001), and can be conceptualized as follows: in any given historical and social period we can mainly write, speak, think, and act about a given social object or practice in certain specific ways (language, for example) and not in other ways. For instance, when working as a reindeer herder a person will think, speak, and act in one particular way (the reindeer herder discourse), but when participating in an academic seminar a person will think, speak, and act in another way (the academic discourse). Through interviews, old Sami women can share and narrate their unique experiences of living both as an indigenous person and as a woman, thus helping to increase understanding of the significance of both ethnicity and gender. The importance of giving a voice to those who have previously been silent (Wuest, 1995) was one starting point for our study. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore how indigenous women narrate their lives and their experience of being old as Sami women.

METHODS

Sampling and Participants

A modified snowball sampling technique was used (Willgerodt, Miller, & McElmurry, 2001), and the first selected woman was for instance a resource for identifying other women to be interviewed (Dahlgren et al., 2004). The study included 9 Sami women aged 75 to 90 years with experiences of living in a "roadless land." The women all had experiences of living in an ancient culture, and in old age they lived in the same area of northern Sweden as when they were children. Four had grown up with parents who owned and worked with reindeer and 2 had grown up with parents who both farmed and owned reindeer, while the parents of the remaining 3 women had not owned reindeer. Five of the women had been reindeer owners, including

1 who had been a herder, 2 were qualified teachers, 1 had held several jobs in the south of Sweden, and another had worked in a church as a young woman, collecting money and selling religious papers. At the time of the interviews, 3 of the women were married and 6 were widowed.

Interviews

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical–Odontological Faculty, Umeå University (No. 02–264). Participants were informed about the study by letter and by telephone, informed consent was obtained, and they were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymous presentation of the findings. All interviews took place in the participants' homes except for one, which took place at a hospital ward. Interviews were conducted by the first author (LA) during 2002–2004.

The women were asked a broad opening question: “Please narrate your experiences of living as a woman in the Sami culture.” The interviews covered topics such as family life, experiences of health and disease, and feelings and reflections connected with both Sami and Swedish society. The interviewer tried to pose hypothetical and provocative questions (Dahlgren et al., 2004), for example: “What would life have been like if you had been born a boy,” “Did you own many reindeer?,” and “Was it possible to fall in love with a Swede?.” The intention was to achieve a conversational interview (Dahlgren et al., 2004), with a focus on the issues that the women considered important to relate (Glaser & Holton, 2004). The tape-recorded interviews lasted for 1.5 to 3 hours and were transcribed verbatim, including notations of nonverbal expressions such as silence and laughter.

ANALYSIS

Grounded theory is a qualitative method that aims to develop concepts, models, or theories illustrating social and structural processes that underlie social experiences. Collection and analysis of the data proceeded simultaneously, following the emergent design approach (Dahlgren et al., 2004). The analysis was grounded on the meetings, the playback and transcripts of the interviews, and the written memos, representing the ideas that emerged during the analysis process (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Wuest, Merritt-Gray, Berman, & Ford-Gilboe, 2002).

The analysis of the first interview was reviewed in several seminar groups. Five other interviews were then read through several times, and coded. Substantive codes, mainly based on the particular topics of discussion, were formulated and compared, and codes with similar content were brought together into preliminary categories. These preliminary categories were reviewed with two of the not-yet-interviewed Sami women, who found them

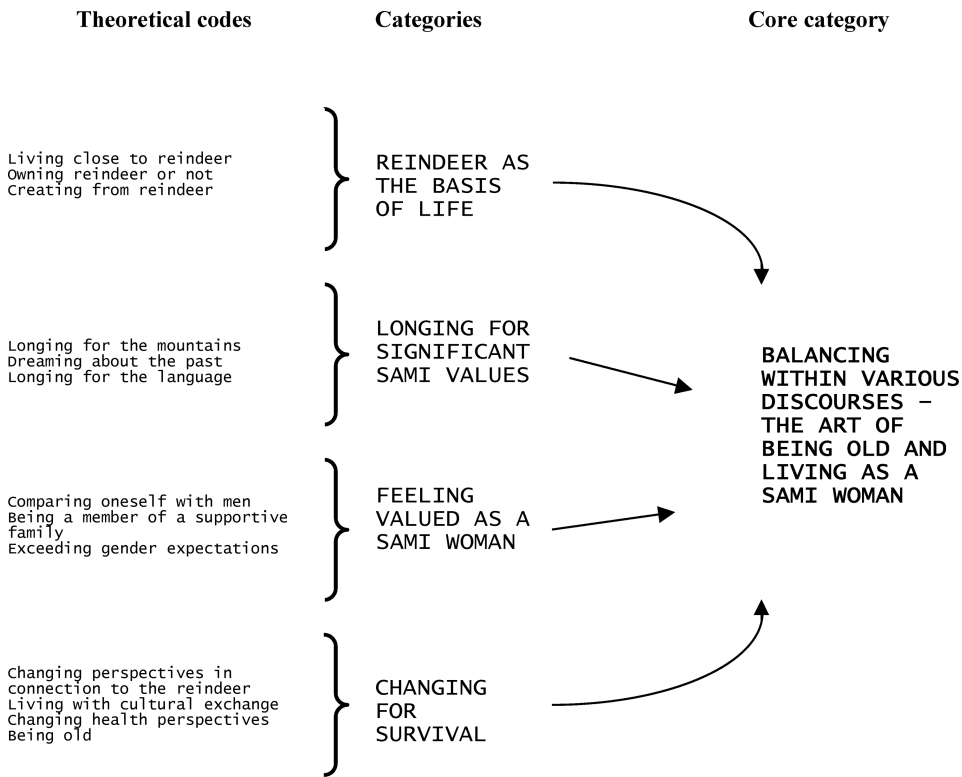


FIGURE 1 Theoretical codes, categories, and core category.

to be accurate. Analysis of the final three interviews revealed no additional substantial information central to the emergent design; we therefore judged that theoretical saturation had been achieved (Dahlgren et al., 2004).

Throughout the process the codes and the categories were compared with the transcribed interviews and the memos to ensure that they were grounded in the data (Heath & Cowley, 2004). The interviews and the coding were reread several times and discussed in the research team, and the preliminary categories were brought together into four categories and 14 theoretical codes. Through constant comparison of the categories and the theoretical codes, one core category was formulated (Glaser & Holton, 2004) as illustrated in Figure 1.

FINDINGS

The core category was balancing within various discourses—the art of being old and living as a Sami woman. This core category permeated the other categories: reindeer as the basis of life, longing for significant Sami values, feeling valued as a Sami woman, and changing for survival.

Reindeer as the Basis of Life

The category “reindeer as the basis of life” was developed from the theoretical codes: “living close to reindeer,” “owning reindeer or not,” and “creating from reindeer.” These theoretical codes stressed the specific value of reindeer in the Sami culture, that had influenced the women’s lives whether they were reindeer owners or not.

LIVING CLOSE TO REINDEER

Contact with reindeer involved being touched, supported, and consoled: “Without the reindeer you were poor, both in spirit and soul. . . . Yes, they belonged to our lives.” The women expressed astonishment that, even as old women, they were still permeated by thoughts and dreams of reindeer. One woman who had worked with reindeer all her life and tamed several herks (ox–reindeer) herself seemed to feel connected with each reindeer. When working as a herder and having to cut-mark the reindeer, she had asked every animal whether it hurt very much. Despite feeling connected with each animal, she also had to take part in the slaughter of the reindeer, which she never liked.

OWNING REINDEER OR NOT

Owning reindeer seemed to be equivalent to being wealthy and positively valued as a Sami. None of the women owning reindeer told us how many reindeer they owned. The connection to wealth was expressed by one woman, who had married a man whose mother was one of the major reindeer owners in the region: “I can say I married an equal.” The economic status of the family also was expressed by stating that the parents had contributed financially to the building of two small churches in the neighborhood. It was nevertheless important for the owner of several reindeer not to appear self-important, but to behave as an equal when interacting with both Sami who did not own reindeer, and Swedes.

One woman who did not own reindeer was upset that her parents had been banished from their Sami family cottage in the mountains because they owned too few reindeer. In spite of several judicial complaints, she had still not managed to find out who now owned the former family cottage: the state, other Sami, or her. This woman found it unfair that the reindeer owners had rights that she did not have. She was filled with memories of being discriminated against by both Swedish society and reindeer owners, noting, for example, “Yes, the state has given them money, or as we say, social allowances. . . . those who have reindeer, . . . but we, we, have got nothing.” Being a Sami but not owning reindeer meant being excluded from entering Sami folk schools, and being treated unfairly. Her lack of reindeer

had therefore influenced her view of herself as a Sami. She stressed the importance of being able to exist as a Sami despite not owning reindeer.

CREATING FROM REINDEER

Both girls and boys learned to take care of the skin from reindeer for daily use and craft. The women said that the girls were faster to sew, while the boys mostly learned more about making knives and art from reindeer horn. One of the women had been very skilled in sewing Sami handicraft art and had used her skill to contribute to the family wealth. Her knowledge about sewing had been in demand, and she had taught many courses, which had been stimulating as well as enabled her to save money for her old age. This woman described how, when she was younger, she got up early in the morning to sew before beginning her daily duties.

Longing for Significant Sami Values

The category “longing for significant Sami values” arose from the theoretical codes: “longing for the mountain,” “dreaming about the past,” and “longing for the language.” The theoretical codes stressed as specific values in their Sami lives were the mountain and moving around it; exotic memories from life as a young Sami; and strong expressions of feelings of being treated unfairly in relation to the mother tongue. The narratives also disclosed tensions between people using the two Sami languages.

LONGING FOR THE MOUNTAINS

The women had lived in a “roadless land” with experiences of fishing and herding cattle in the mountains. The life of a reindeer owner was characterized by moving with the reindeer to different pastures. Married women accompanied their husbands and moved together with the reindeer to the mountains, unless they had a newborn baby or a small child. 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 moving Sami. Yes, it is a longing. It is a terrible longing . . . a desire.”

DREAMING ABOUT THE PAST

The women poetically described romantic memories of connections with reindeer beginning at an early age. One woman had, as a child, been pulled on a sled by a nearly untamed herd that became calm when drawing the little child. Another woman expressed feelings of togetherness with the Sami

culture as exemplified by hearing the sound from the reindeer pushing their antlers towards one another when she stood outside the tepee as a girl and looked at the stars. During narrating one woman said, “Even as I am telling you this I feel that I miss that time.”

LONGING FOR THE LANGUAGE

The Sami language was seen as important for the Sami identity and for reindeer herding. Being forced to live in boarding schools for months and being forbidden to speak the Sami language made the women feel that the Sami language and culture were less worthy 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.” Statements also were made about the impossibility of preserving the unique Sami language given that there were no Sami words for any kind of new equipment (snowmobile, helicopter, spare parts). Now, in their old age, the women talked about taking courses in the Sami language simply to practice it and keep the language alive.

The narratives revealed tensions between speakers of the South Sami and North Sami languages. Women with South Sami as their mother tongue stressed the importance of preserving South Sami as a separate language. It was seen as lucky that the Sami people from the north and south had not spoken Sami with one another, thus avoiding the danger that the languages could become mixed and blend into one. One of the women who did not own reindeer was indignant that the Sami reindeer owners in her neighborhood spoke North Sami instead of the local Sami tongue.

Feeling Valued as a Sami Woman

The category “feeling valued as a Sami woman” evolved from the theoretical codes “comparing oneself with men,” “being a member of a supportive family,” and “exceeding gender expectations.” These theoretical codes were related to stressing the significance of being valued equally to men but being more restricted than them, and the importance of being able to exceed gender expectations.

COMPARING ONESELF WITH MEN

The Sami women said that they felt highly valued in Sami society, although they had to work very hard. They mostly talked about themselves as being on an equal footing with their husbands, who were described as nice, communicative, and well known in both Sami and Swedish society. The predominant opinion was that it was easier to be a Sami woman than a Sami man because the herding was seen as hard work for men. The women also

said that after the joint work in the reindeer forest was completed, however, they were the ones who had the responsibility of preparing meals, while the men could lie down and rest. One woman who had worked as a herder found it a comfort that, in her old age, she no longer had to serve the men.

While stressing that men and women were equal within the Sami culture, with boys and girls learning the same things and working together, the stories also included examples of gender-segregated activities. Goats, dogs, and children were described as women's responsibilities. Within a family, sons were more highly valued than daughters, and the sons' work with reindeer also gave them more chances to own reindeer. The women considered this to be natural, because they thought that the man should be the breadwinner for his family. When reflecting on what it would have been like to have been born a boy, one woman said, "Yes, if I had been a boy, I'd have been able to make a profit (laugh). . . . You know if you were very capable you got extra reindeer, and the one who was at home was more likely to be forgotten." Other statements suggested that even owning reindeer did not imply the same opportunity to make decisions in the Sami village for women as for men: "There were marriages where the women owned everything. But I don't know if they listened more to these women because of that."

Women who owned reindeer seemed to have been brought up in a society that precluded romance between Sami women and Swedish men. Belonging to a reindeer-owning family led to marriage with a man who also owned reindeer. Parents were described as being stricter toward their daughters than toward their sons; and they did not want their daughters to mix with Swedes.

BEING A MEMBER OF A SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

The Sami women considered that their lives had been free compared with those of people who had been brought up in a farmer family in the north of Sweden. Belonging to a family was considered to be important. One woman expressed the importance of family ties by telling us about her mother, who had been forced by the state to move south, and who used to leave her new family for about a month at a time when she went home to her old family in the north, because she longed for her parents and siblings. While she was gone, her oldest daughters took care of their younger brothers and sisters.

Working and moving with reindeer necessitated leaving the smaller children behind with a grandmother or a sister. The women in the study who were childless talked about taking care of relatives' children. Taking care of another woman's child, however, could mean having to return the child to her parents whenever they wanted: "Yes, then they wanted her back, when she needed to start school and that was sad . . . that was a sorrow too." Belonging to a family as an old person was described as being very

important, but other statements revealed that less time was spent with family now than earlier in life.

EXCEEDING GENDER EXPECTATIONS

If a family had few boys, the strongest girl might be encouraged to work as a herder. One woman told us that she had worked like a man; she thought she had been at nearly the same level as the men. She stressed that her parents and husband had been proud of her and that she always had high status. She contracted tuberculosis (TB) while young, but before that she felt physically very strong, and shortly after recovering from TB she was the only woman to participate in a competition involving shooting, skiing, and throwing lasso, competing against 80 Sami men. She was among the 10 best in the whole competition, but afterward she decided never to compete with men again as she sensed that the men felt humiliated.

Changing for Survival

The category “changing for survival” evolved from the theoretical codes: “changing perspectives in connection to the reindeer,” “living with cultural exchange,” “changing health perspectives,” and “being old.” The women told us about herding in the past and herding today, their experiences of cultural exchanges throughout life, of having opportunities in society because they belonged to an indigenous people, and of their perspective of being extremely healthy.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN CONNECTION TO THE REINDEER

While talking about changing times, the women expressed worries that reindeer herding might be a dying culture and that the Sami culture was in danger of becoming watered down. Compared with past times, when everything from the reindeer was used carefully, today’s method of slaughter was seen as mass production. The women were aware that conditions had changed, however, and they did not condemn the modern herders. They balanced memories of the herding methods of the past against a pragmatic view of the industrialized herding of today. Viewing the reindeer herding industry positively also meant denying the feeling that herding as a whole was threatened.

LIVING WITH CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The women stressed the good relationship between the Sami and the Swedish farmers, and described the Sami hospitality and interest in other

people. One woman observed that when moving with the reindeer the Sami took some customs from the farmers up to the mountains; she thought that the Sami culture thus had the best of both cultures, in a way. During the Second World War, when someone passed a Sami settlement, for example, workers and soldiers, it was natural for the Sami to offer food and a place to sleep. The practice of having an open home seemed to be influenced by spiritual beliefs: "You never know who you are meeting, and if God passes, he walks in disguise."

The women also reflected about changing perspectives on walking in the mountains. They had considered it important when walking alone in the mountains to show interest in the people they met there in order to make sure that everything was okay and to exchange news. They expressed astonishment about tourists today who do not show any interest in other people.

Being a representative of the Sami culture could involve the opportunity to appear on television and to have contact with royalty. One woman, who had sat between the Swedish king and queen in a tepee, questioned why she had to wear feast dress for the occasion, since it was not usually worn in the family tepee, which used to be a home and a place of work. Another woman had been visited by a photographer who wanted to document old people from different cultures. The photographer considered her too beautiful, however, and did not wish to photograph her; she interpreted this as the photographer only wanting to portray Sami women as old, ugly, and wrinkled.

Since not all women could own reindeer, education often was chosen as another way of surviving. The educated women in our study still seemed to have connections with the Sami society, however; the Sami identity was expressed as being an enduring one. One woman with 40 years' experience as a teacher in southern Sweden said, "We have this Sami identity. It never leaves you."

CHANGING HEALTH PERSPECTIVES

Being born under special circumstances, for example being born in a tepee, was described with pride. The perspective of the Swedes, however, was exemplified by one woman's story of a midwife who had wanted to adopt her because she thought that the Sami life was poor and miserable. When the women talked about health and illness, they stressed that they had been healthy and belonged to healthy families. As children they had caught diseases like scarlet fever and measles only when they lived in boarding schools close to other children. They also believed that the Sami dress, which included trousers for girls as well as boys, helped them avoid bladder infections and other typical women's diseases.

Although the women described themselves as being extremely healthy, they also disclosed experiences of sisters, brothers, and school friends who had contracted TB or even died from it. Some women related that they themselves had had a “spot on the lungs,” but others seemed to find it difficult and even disgraceful to mention the disease. Spending time at a TB sanatorium could be empowering, however, leading, for example, to increased knowledge regarding menstruation, or reflections on one’s own life: “At the sanatorium I dreamed of having the opportunity to study in order to have an easier job.”

The women seemed to have incorporated the dominant societal view on health care into their thinking, but there were also a few narratives about connections with people who were clairvoyant. One woman told us that her husband had second sight like his father, but he did not want to develop the gift; she thought that this was because he felt this special capability to be a burden.

BEING OLD

When they were old, the women who had lived in southern Sweden had moved “home” to Sápmi in the north of Sweden. The women’s reflections on life included statements demonstrating that, in spite of hard times, life in general was perceived as being rather good. They described one aspect of being old as being no longer interested in work, since hard work had dominated their earlier lives. On the other hand, one woman said that being a Sami meant “never becoming a pensioner”; for her, being a Sami woman meant being needed by her family, taking care of her grandchildren, and helping the two herder sons as best she could.

Balancing Within Various Discourses—The Art of Being Old and Living as a Sami Woman

The theme of balancing was evident in all four of the categories described above. In terms of “reindeer as the basis of life,” there was a balance between having feelings of being connected with each reindeer but also having to take part in their slaughter; between being very skilled at creating reindeer handicraft art and having limited opportunities to sew; and between being a reindeer owner or not being a reindeer owner.

“Longing for significant Sami values” encompassed a balance between longing to move to the mountain but being too old for such activity; between having a romantic picture of Sami life and living in a world where everything had changed; and between having been forced to speak the dominant Swedish language while longing for the mother tongue.

Balance within the category “feeling valued as a Sami woman” was expressed as stressing equality between women and men while living in a society dominated by the activities of male herders; stressing the importance of belonging to a big family but having to separate from a child; and being physically strong but not wanting to demonstrate physical strength in front of men.

Balancing in the category “changing for survival” was exemplified by taking a positive view of the modern herding industry and denying the feeling that herding as a whole was threatened; and by getting attention from the Swedish media, but having to correspond to the traditional view of being a Sami.

Thus, mirrored in these categories was a balance between various discourses: being a reindeer owner versus not owning reindeer, being Sami versus being Swedish, dreaming about the past versus looking forward, the importance of being equal to men versus living in the shadow of the male herders, and continuously changing versus striving to retain one’s uniqueness as a Sami.

DISCUSSION

On the Findings

The aim of our study was to explore how indigenous women narrate their lives and their experience of being old as Sami women in Sweden. The categories identified were “reindeer as the basis of life,” “feeling valued as a Sami woman,” “longing for significant Sami values,” and “changing for survival”; these evolved into the core category: “balancing within various discourses—the art of being old and living as a Sami woman.”

The women in our study had contributed to their families’ economies by owning reindeer, making handicraft arts, and working within Swedish society. We hypothesize that these economic contributions to the family made the women feel highly valued in both Sami and Swedish society. As old women, they seemed to be financially secure. Swedish feminist researchers have stressed the importance of women’s own economic resources for their being and feeling valued equally to men (Göransson, 1999; Stark & Regnér, 2002).

The reindeer-owning women all had married reindeer herders, and it was considered improper to fall in love with or marry a Swede. This attitude can be considered in light of the 1928 law that stated that a Sami woman who married a man who was not a reindeer herder lost her right to own reindeer (Amft, 2000). While the women in our study could not marry a Swedish man and still own reindeer, a Sami man could marry a Swedish woman and remain a reindeer owner; for men, unlike women, the right to own reindeer was based entirely on ethnic heritage. Thus, a Sami woman’s identity as a

Sami was flexible, and was tied to the man she married (Olofsson, 2004). The inability to marry a Swedish man, however, seemed to have improved the Sami women's economic resources, since in their later years they still owned reindeer. In contrast with other indigenous societies, in which mixing with the newcomers mainly occurred among the women rather than the men (Coates, 2004), the female reindeer owners in our study mostly lived within the Sami society.

The Sami women, as members of an indigenous group, stressed cultural values such as respect for reindeer, mountains, and the Sami language, as well as the importance of the common history of belonging to a herder people. These Sami values, which can be compared with the definition of the cultural capital by Bourdieu (2001), seemed to be taken for granted, and as individually incorporated and forming the women's being and thinking. Bourdieu (2001) showed how our way of thinking and living is related to our access to various types of capital, such as economic capital and cultural capital. The specific value of a place close to the mountains was important to the women in our study. Even if they had left the place a long time ago, they had returned in their later years. These experiences of the importance of place and geographical location are in accordance with other international studies (Chacko, 2005; Nelson, 2004).

The Sami women in our study all had been exposed to the nation's dominant culture during some period of their lives, something also seen in earlier studies of indigenous people (Barusch & TenBarge, 2003; Coates, 2004). The Swedish state has tried both to assimilate the Sami and make them into Swedes and to court the tourist industry by portraying an exotic picture of the indigenous Sami people in the far north. This exotic picture of an indigenous people is stressed in many societies. Pietikäinen (2001) found that the Sami in Finland have frequently been represented with a focus on their culture and indigenous status rather than with examples, for instance, of political decision making or discrimination. Olofsson (2004) also stresses that indigenous people often are used as positive symbols or icons for a state's unique identity.

The Sami women in our study placed importance on being and feeling valued equally with men, but compared with men their opportunities to own reindeer and to make decisions in the Sami villages communities were limited. From the Western feminist perspective, which focuses on gender order, power, and economic ownership (Connell, 1995; Harding, 1986), this could be interpreted as meaning that the women in our study were subordinate to men in the Sami society, an interpretation in accordance with results from other studies (Amft, 2000; Beach, 1993; Olofsson, 2004). Such basing of the criticism of other cultures on the ideas of Western feminism, however, has been questioned from the intersectional perspective, in which gender is seen as one dimension among others, such as the economic and ethnic aspects. Critics from non-Western societies have led to new directions

in feminism, for example, postcolonial feminism (Hooks, 2004; McIlwaine & Datta, 2003), and the idea that the Western feminist perspective could be viewed as a hegemonic domination of the politics of science, media, and equality (de los Reyes et al., 2005).

The Sami languages also were considered to be important. As children, the women had been forbidden to speak their mother tongue in school. This practice may be compared with that of other jurisdictions where governments also moved indigenous children from their homes to boarding schools, and where the children were punished for using their mother tongue (Barusch & TenBerge, 2003; Coates, 2004). The women expressed that during the period when they were not allowed to use their mother tongue, they also felt that to be a Sami was viewed in a deprecatory way. Not being able to use the mother tongue was to be forced to deny an important part of the Sami identity. This can be seen in light of derogatory descriptions in late-nineteenth-century Swedish literature of Sami as being unsteady, suspicious, drunkards, and childlike (Kvist, 1992). In 1999, the Sami language was granted the status of minority language by the Swedish government (Swedish Code of Statutes, Ministry of Culture SFS 1999:1175); this guarantee of the right to speak the mother tongue probably has strengthened the women's positive attitude toward the Sami language. The Sami women in our study still longed for their mother tongue, and opportunities to use it were seen as important for growing old with dignity. Nevertheless, the women had used the Swedish language and had gained access to Swedish culture.

The narratives of the old Sami women can be reflected upon in light of the feminist philosopher Butler (1990), who states 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 through, for example, creating romantic, idealized pictures of Sami life in the past. The women in our study also demonstrated, however, that the Sami culture is a differentiated one that has continually and to a great extent been changed by interaction with Swedish society (Amft, 2000).

On the Method

In a qualitative study of this kind, the trustworthiness of the results needs to be considered. The interviewer's intention was to be open to the data by using sensitivity, creativity, and insight (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). The data were systematically checked and the analyses and the interpretations were constantly monitored and confirmed (Morse et al., 2002; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Two of the last interviewed Sami women confirmed the analysis of the categories and thus strengthened the face validity. The analyses were also discussed several times among the research

team as well in seminars. To illuminate women's own experiences can be seen as an opportunity to understand the world around them (DeMarco, Campbell, & Wuest, 1993; King, 1994; McCormick & Bunting, 2002). The interviewer strove for a relaxed interview situation, and as the narratives proceeded the interviews became both narrative and reflective. One of the interviewed women said after the interview, "You are a nice Swede"; this first made the interviewer feel confirmed (as a nice and social person and a good interviewer). While analyzing this statement, however, we found that the woman regarded the interviewer as a Swede, or as "other," and herself as a Sami despite looking and behaving just like a Swede. This statement made the interviewer more conscious of the power hierarchy that can exist between the interviewer and the interviewee (Campbell & Bunting, 1991; Fahy, 2002; King, 1994).

International Relevance

Narratives are of importance for gaining a wider and deeper perspective on human lives. Analysis of the narratives of Sami women who have extensive bicultural experiences as well as experiences of being derogated can contribute to wider perspectives on women's lives, which is of importance in our increasingly multicultural world. From an intersectional perspective, old women's narratives are important because they show the complexities of being old, indigenous, and woman (Hernández-Avila, 2002; Ramirez, 2002).

Balancing between various discourses brings with it the conscious or unconscious knowledge of societies' manifest or latent rules. Being an indigenous woman can result in the acquisition of a feeling for balancing within various discourses and making use of available opportunities. "Having a feeling for the game" is explained by Bourdieu (2001) as the fact that although as individuals we are formed in relation to our access to different symbolic values (which for the Sami women in our study were being indigenous and being women), we still have the potential for change.

Our study of old, indigenous Sami women shows that they experience and have access to economic and cultural capital, and they feel in control of their lives; these are perspectives that can contribute to a view of indigenous women as actors. Other international studies of indigenous people have given a picture of women as invisible, or have mentioned them only in relation to economic deprivation and unemployment, as well as their vulnerability to rape and to becoming victims of the sex trade (Coates, 2004; Vinding, 2004).

Our study contributes to knowledge about the importance for Swedish Sami indigenous women of being regarded not only as a Swede but as also belonging to their own Sami ethnic group. The Sami women expressed a

longing for their mother tongue; we hypothesize that the importance of being able to communicate in their mother tongue increased as they became older and frailer. Furthermore, awareness of the complexity of both belonging to a group of indigenous people and of being a woman could contribute to the success of interactions between help-seeking old indigenous women and health care personnel.

CONCLUSIONS

The old Sami women in our study had been forced to balance within (and between) various discourses and had developed the capacity for doing this within such discourses as being a reindeer owner versus not owning reindeer, being Sami versus being Swedish, dreaming about the past versus looking forward, the importance of being equal to men versus living in the shadow of the male herders, and continuously changing versus striving to retain one's uniqueness as a Sami. In their old age, the women in our study seemed to "know the rules" of how to interact between and within various discourses, while at the same time they still held onto their uniqueness. Further research is needed into gendered experiences of living as old, indigenous people in order to take account of their unique life experiences, to widen our perspective on the human being, and to increase our understanding of various groups of people within a multicultural society.

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