
📌 **CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 12 Issue 1 – 2018**

Identity construction of Sami people with disabilities

Line Melbøe

UiT - The Arctic University of Norway

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how the political, technological and economic development of recent decades has influenced the identity construction of Sami people with disabilities. While Sami identity work is described as a continuous process carried out in everyday life, the subject is addressed through a presentation and discussion of three narratives. The analysis demonstrates how different types of development have expanded access for Samis with disabilities to participate in traditional Sami activities in many ways and, as such, have increased their opportunities to identify themselves as Sami. At the same time, however, changes in laws and regulations concerning ownership and use of land and sea resources seem to constitute political barriers that hinder disabled Samis from pursuing traditional Sami occupations and activities such as fishing and reindeer herding. Furthermore, 'cultural blindness' among professionals within the welfare system seems to block opportunities for Samis with disabilities to access their own culture through language and traditional Sami way of life. This lack of connection to traditional Sami activities is problematic as it may lead to the perception among both disabled Sami individuals and other Samis that these individuals are not entitled to define themselves as Sami.

Introduction

The Sami are an indigenous people who traditionally inhabit Sápmi, the circumpolar regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1: Map of circumpolar Sapmi region

After more than a century of a government assimilation policy which aimed to force the Sami to abandon and replace their culture and identity, many Samis chose to hide this affiliation (Minde, 2003). However, while the Sami were a stigmatised, poor and politically disorganized population fifty years ago, today they constitute a rather self-confident society (Gaski, 2008). This dramatic turnaround from feelings of shame and oppression to ethnic pride is the result of major changes in the conditions for 'being Sami' in Norway during the past few decades (Pettersen & Brustad, 2015). Moreover, we know that changes impacting Sami identity may happen at the macro level (e.g. national Sami policy), as well as the meso (e.g. local community conditions) and micro (e.g. individual characteristics) levels (Pettersen & Brustad, 2015). Thus, one may describe Sami identity as a meeting between indigenous traditions, previous and current political contexts and the specific features of the northern territory (Aikio-Puoskari, 2001).

Regardless of these changes, Sami people with disabilities nonetheless experience barriers to participation that are related to both their disability and their ethnicity (Melbøe, 2018) which may make the possibility for them to create a Sami identity different from that of Samis who do not have disabilities. Accordingly, using three narratives this article empirically explores *how the economic, political and technical development of recent decades has influenced the identity construction of Sami people with disabilities.*

The Sami

Today, the Sami population is estimated to comprise approximately 60,000 to 110,000 individuals (Hassler, Kvernmo, & Kozlow, 2008), a majority of whom (about 40,000) live in Norway. Historically, the Sami have lived in rural areas where they engaged in reindeer herding, small-scale farming and fishing. Today, less than 10 percent hold on to this traditional way of life and many have adopted ordinary western lifestyles, engaging in

modern professions and adopting the same dietary habits as the general population (Sørli & Nergard, 2005). Furthermore, an increasing share of Sami people live in urban areas (Selle, Semb, Strømsnes, & Nordø, 2015) – in fact, more Samis currently live outside rather than within core Sami areas (Pedersen & Nyseth, 2015). At present, three Sami languages are spoken in Norway: North Sami, Lule Sami and South Sami (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2009).

From the mid-1800s until after World War II, a strong government assimilation process attempted to replace Sami language and cultural characteristics with corresponding features of the majority Norwegian culture (Josefsen, 2006). Furthermore, the assimilation process was accompanied by individual experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation (Minde, 2005). The assimilation policy diminished the use of the Sami language as well as the use of traditional religion and Sami names (Møllersen, Sexton, & Holte, 2005) and caused an extensive loss of ethnic identity, language and traditional knowledge (Turi, Bals, Skre, & Kvernmo, 2009). However, during the past few decades there has been an ethnic and cultural revival process (Hansen, Melhus, & Lund, 2010) including increased cultural awareness and use of the Sami language, the passing of the Sami Act¹, and the establishment of Sami institutions such as a Sami parliament, research centre and college (Pedersen & Høgmø, 2012). Of particular note, the Educational Act of 1998 gave all Sami students the right to receive education in Sami (Ministry of Church Affairs, 1998). However, the outcome of the assimilation process and the ethnic revitalisation varies depending on the region and/or ethnic context, with much stronger presence of structural and practical support for Sami culture in the core Sami areas that have a high density of Sami population than in more sparsely Sami-populated areas (Turi et al., 2009). Consequently, in many communities outside the 'core Sami areas', the difference between Sami and Norwegian is not necessarily obvious (Kramvig, 2005).

Compared to many other indigenous peoples, the living conditions of the Sami in Norway are exceptionally good (Sjölander, 2011), being almost on par with those of the majority (Norwegian) population. This is probably primarily due to the way in which the Norwegian welfare state is organized. In Norway, all citizens – indigenous and non-indigenous alike – are ensured equal access to free education, health services and a number of social rights and benefits such as sick leave, family allowance and retirement pension (Brustad, Pettersen, Melhus, & Lund, 2009; Kvernmo, 2004). Nonetheless, Sami people with disabilities still encounter cultural and linguistic barriers within the support system, and their situation varies depending on their relation to Sami identity, sex, type of impairment, age and location, among other things (Melbøe et al, 2016).

Reindeer herding

Reindeer herding has been practised among the Sami from time immemorial (Sara, 2009). In Norway, reindeer husbandry is based on a pattern of seasonal migration. In the most northern parts of Norway, the herders move their reindeer between summer grazing areas, close to the coast, and winter pastures that are inland. The reindeer herders often work in cooperative herding groups, called *siidas*. These consist of one or more reindeer-herding families who move their reindeer together in a common herd (Horstkotte & Aikio, 2017; Sara, 2009). The *siida* system is based on cooperation to obtain both stability and flexibility in the herding by, for example, providing access to extra labour during labour-intensive periods (White Paper 32, 2016-2017).

Prior to the 1970s, reindeer husbandry was mainly based on traditional Sami knowledge and understanding of the world. However, since the late 1970s, there has been a state-led reindeer governance characterized by 'rationalisation' involving a combination of sanctions and economic incentives. This policy is based on a western scientific perspective focusing on market-oriented meat production with targets for such things as proper carcass weights, animal density and reindeer numbers. This perspective differs quite dramatically from the traditional Sami knowledge of reindeer herding which focuses on balance in the relationship between reindeer, humans and nature. Through the state-led policy, for example, the flexibility of reindeer-herding mobility is reduced. At the same time, the state now operates with fixed dates for entrance and exit from seasonal pastures, whereas herders had traditionally based the manner and timing of herd movement on observations of both herd and landscape (e.g. local climate and grazing conditions). The herders who do not maneuver within the officially-defined targets are met by government sanctions such as fines or reduced subsidies (Johnsen, Mathiesen, & Eira, 2017). During this period, changes have also been initiated by the reindeer herders themselves. Among other things, this modernisation includes the introduction of motorised vehicles such as snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles (ATV) and, more recently, the use of GPS collars for reindeer husbandry (White Paper 32, 2016-2017).

Nevertheless, reindeer herders currently face a number of challenges, such as a poor economic situation in the reindeer herding industry and claims by the authorities that overstocking of the range causes extensive pasture decline. Furthermore, there has been a rise in land-use conflicts (Benjaminsen, Reinert, Sjaastad, & Sara, 2015) due to the increase in competition for land use between reindeer herders and other industries such as forestry, mining, water power (Horstkotte & Aikio, 2017), wind farms and roads (Linkowski, 2017), all of which gravely diminish the grazing grounds.

The coastal Sami

The coastal Sami comprise a large area of the north Norwegian Sami region, mainly inhabiting the inner parts of the fjords. Traditionally, the coastal Sami earned their living by combining fishery, livestock husbandry and hunting (Nilsen, 2003). The coastal Sami fisheries have been characterised by fishermen who make use of their extensive knowledge of the sea and local environment while relying on conventional fishing gear and small vessels (Elisabeth, 2006). Since the end of the 1980s, the coastal Sami have fought to maintain their rights to make a living from marine-based resources while the Norwegian government has made this challenging through a series of regulations. One such example was the introduction and extensive legalized use of mobile fishing gear, which allowed for over-exploitation by outsiders with large boats having overwhelming catch-capacities. This naturally caused a negative impact on the local cod fishing for Sami fishermen. To make matters worse, in 1990 the authorities introduced quotas for cod fishing. The result was that most Sami fishermen in the smaller fjords, for various reasons, were not able to harvest enough fish to meet the quotas that granted them fishing permits and the rights to sell their catch.

Subsequently, in the 1990s there was an enormous migration of king crab from Russia to the coastal Sami fjords. The crab displaced the native fjord species and destroyed the traditional fishing industry. Moreover, quotas for commercial king crab fishing could only be met by bigger boats, denying most Samis the chance to obtain the permits that would have allowed them to earn an alternative income. Even though the cod and crab fishing regulations have improved in recent years, the Sami are still denied full rights to fish and make use of the marine resources along their shoreline (Perdersen, 2012).

Identity and identity construction

Previously, Sami identity was understood as something you either hold on to or let go of. However, according to recent research, Sami identity is rather dependent on the situation – a matter of negotiation rather than something to hold on to or not (Nymo, 2011). Today, Sami identity work is described as a continuous process that extends into old age (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2013). According to Dankertsen (2014), Sami identity is something that people exhibit in their everyday life – one may act upon and activate the Sami in some contexts but not in others. Furthermore, in northern Norway where most of the Sami live, a complex multi-ethnic situation influences the identity question. This complexity is caused by a history of intermarriage between ethnic groups (e.g. Norwegians, Sami and Finnish) and the government assimilation process of both the Sami and the Kvæn (Finnish) (Kramvig, 2005). Moreover, while other indigenous people often do not identify with the other citizens of the country they inhabit, many individuals with Sami background have an identity as both Sami and Norwegian (Selle et al., 2015).

Many of the cultural markers considered and recognised as Sami are based on traits from inner Finnmark which is often presented as a core Sami area. Among the most important markers of Sami ethnicity are the language and the *gákti* (traditional Sami clothing) (Hernes, 2017). People with Sami background living outside of core Sami areas are found to undergo unique challenges when it comes to preserving and developing their Sami identity as there is limited access to institutions and meeting places where Sami culture is promoted and maintained. Additionally, although partially mitigated by contact with and visits to core Sami areas, some Samis experience few possibilities to combine culture and nature, which is important to the self-understanding of many indigenous peoples (Selle et al., 2015). As an increasing number of Samis who want to identify themselves as such have moved from rural to urban areas, new Sami identities have also been developed. An example are those who are referred to as *city Sami* (Pedersen & Nyseth, 2015).

As there are few studies about Sami people with disabilities (Gjertsen, Melbøe, Fedreheim, & Fylling, 2017; Line Melbøe, Johnsen, Fedreheim, & Hansen, 2016), little is known about the identity construction of Sami people with disabilities. What we do know from disability studies is that the self-identities of disabled people are also basically fluid and plural, and that self-identity is established based on experiences with different identity positions (Gustavsson, Nyberg, & Westin, 2016). Furthermore, research finds that professionals have a tendency to overlook ethnic background and primarily identify people with impairments as disabled (Kittelsaa, 2015). This 'cultural blindness', according to Kittelsaa (2015), may cause difficulties and influence the person's own identity construction. Such 'cultural blindness' in welfare services illustrates how attention to structural aspects is also required when gaining new knowledge concerning the construction of identity. In this article, this entails particular knowledge on how the economic, political and technical development of the past three decades has influenced the identity construction of disabled people of Sami background.

Method

This paper is based on data from a qualitative study exploring the situation of Sami people with disabilities in Norway. The study was conducted by the research group 'Diversity and Tolerance' at the Arctic University of Norway during the period from April 2014 to December 2015 (Melbøe et al., 2016). The study group consisted of researchers with both Sami and Norwegian backgrounds. The implementation of the study was followed by a reference group comprised of representatives from Sami organisations and communities in addition to organisations and communities of people with disabilities.

We conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with 24 Sami people with disabilities, and/or 12 of their guardians or next of kin. The sample included children, youth, adults and elderly people from the age of seven to 88, primarily adults. The participants were Sami individuals with either physical, sensory, mental or

cognitive impairments. Among the 31 participants, there were 22 boys/men, and nine girls/women.

During recruitment we provided all information about the study in the three Sami languages as well as Norwegian. The participants lived in both rural and urban areas, mainly located in the three northernmost counties in Norway. We recruited the participants through health and social services, media, and Sami and disability organisations and networks.

The participants could choose whether to be interviewed in Sami or Norwegian. We used a semi-structured interview guide that included topics such as everyday life, transitions in life and democratic participation. All interviews except one were recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed and inspired by what Kvale (1996) describes as meaning structuring through narratives. Coherent stories were constructed out of the events reported by three of the informants, whereby the 'new' stories constituted condensed versions of the many tales told during the original interviews. The three narratives were chosen because they illuminate the theme of this article in relevant ways: how economic, political and technical development have influenced the possibility for Sami people with disabilities to establish or maintain a Sami identity. While two of the three Sami participants presented in this article reside at the very north of Sápmi in Norway, the third live at the southern part of Sápmi ².

The study was conducted with informed consent from the participants (and/or their next of kin or guardian), who could withdraw from the study at any time; in accordance with the Norwegian Social Science Data Service that approved the study. Participants were anonymised by using pseudonyms and generalising the type of impairment they had. The study was funded by the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues (NVC).

Results

In the following section, I present the stories of 'Johan', 'Olaus' and 'Ketil', three Sami individuals with disabilities. The three narratives refer only to men's stories due to an overrepresentation of men in our study (22 men and 9 women). The narratives are not selected because they are in any way representative of the interviews, in general. Rather, they highlight a diversity when it comes to how the development of recent decades has influenced the identity construction of Sami people with disabilities. The three subjects have different kinds of physical or cognitive impairments. Furthermore, Olaus' and Johan's stories represent elderly and adult generations, respectively, living in Sami areas and maintaining traditional Sami occupations. Ketil's story, on the other hand, represents the young generation of 'modern' Sami, where the family lives outside the core Sami areas and the parents work in the public sector.

Johan: The reindeer herder

Johan is an adult male from a reindeer herding family, who lives in the southern Sami area of Norway. He was born with a physical impairment. When Johan left school, his counselor recommended that he forget about reindeer herding and get an office job. However, Johan ignored this advice, took up reindeer herding and has stuck to the profession ever since.

Johan feels privileged to work as a reindeer herder; to experience the fantastic freedom of working in the mountains and making a living from nature. Furthermore, he perceives it as an advantage to work in collaboration with several families. When cooperating, they can work shifts during the calm periods of the year and do not need to be available all the time. Johan benefits particularly from this collaboration, as the other reindeer herders relieve him of work tasks when his impairment bothers him.

However, according to Johan, the increasing bureaucratisation of Norwegian reindeer husbandry is a considerable challenge. Instead of following traditional Sami ways of thinking in reindeer herding where weather conditions, for instance, have determined the timing of reindeer gathering and butchering, they are now forced to follow regulations and deadlines decided by the Norwegian authorities. These changes make Johan's work much more stressful and demanding, consequently increasing the health risks. At the same time, the regulations reduce the very flexibility that has made it possible for him to work as a reindeer herder despite his impairment. He also perceives the fight for access to grazing grounds as a continuous pressure, being forced to herd the reindeer increasingly farther away and higher up in the mountains. Today, Johan is herding reindeer over an area that encompasses six municipalities, using some areas for summer grazing and others for winter grazing.

Furthermore, Johan finds it a burden having to continually defend the legal rights of the Sami people to use and manage land. These have been the subject of debate in courts, newspapers and social media for decades. According to Johan, many people no longer see the point in continuing with reindeer husbandry. He finds it very sad that those who continually challenge Sami land rights fail to recognize how important the reindeer tradition is to Sami identity. Additionally, he faces the challenges of losing grazing grounds to other sectors and losing extensive amounts of reindeer to predators.

Olaus: The fisherman

Olaus is the son of a Sami fishing family living in the coastal areas of northern Norway. He is dependent on a wheelchair due to paralysis in his legs suffered since early childhood. Despite the suggestions of professionals to send Olaus to an institution for disabled children as a youngster, his parents decided he should spend some time at the local school and some at a boarding school. He describes the boarding school as a tough experience, having had to manage on his own with his impairment. After finishing school, welfare services advised Olaus to continue his education, but instead he chose to become a fisherman. Olaus later married and has both children and grandchildren today. In general, he is pleased with his life, having a family, friends, work and leisure activities that he enjoys. He has met the quotas to hold fishing permits for both cod and king crab and describes his work as physically demanding. Olaus appreciates the camaraderie and sense of equality among his fishing mates with whom he interacts almost daily. According to Olaus, 'none of them [the colleagues], as far as I know, has thought of me as disabled. I've been a colleague and that's it. I've been a fisherman just like everybody else'. Olaus knows that they do sometimes worry about him and notices that they occasionally look after him and help him out. For example, they call him on the Very high frequency (VHF) boat radio if he is alone at sea and the weather suddenly turns bad. He appreciates this, as 'they know I'm at sea without feet, and when the weather gets bad it's tough even when your feet are all right'. While Olaus only has the same technical equipment as everybody else when he's on the fishing boat, he depends on the wheelchair as soon as he goes ashore.

Olaus is very involved in traditional Sami activities during his leisure time as well, spending a lot of time out in nature, getting wood for heating, picking berries and smoking fish, among other things. In order to do so, he has bought a snowmobile that he uses in winter and an ATV for the summer. Recently Olaus acquired his first gákti which he is very proud to wear for funerals and other important occasions. Additionally, Olaus was engaged in disability sports for years, participating in a number of competitions and gatherings.

Ketil: The student

Ketil is a boy with general learning disabilities who lives with his parents in a town outside the core Sami areas of northern Norway. His mother comes from a Sami reindeer-herding family. Both his parents have academic degrees and work within the public sector. Ketil is a student at the local mainstream primary school and plays on the same football team as the boys from his class. Quite early on, a psychologist told Ketil's parents that he did not have the capacity to learn two languages due to his learning disability. Living in a Norwegian-speaking area, his parents felt he had to focus on Norwegian. However, Ketil receives weekly education in Sami. Because he is not capable of learning more than a few words in Sami at a time, this additional education has a practical approach, primarily teaching Ketil about Sami culture and traditions such as Duodji (Sami handicraft) and outdoor activities like making bonfires.

Ketil's parents focus on giving him a Sami upbringing. Living outside core Sami areas, however, they are aware that this requires some extra effort. First, they try to spend some of their leisure time together with other Sami families so as to keep up with traditional Sami activities like fishing and using a bonfire to cook fish and meat. Second, they make sure that Ketil reads Sami books, listens to Sami radio programs and watches Sami programs on television. Third, they often travel to visit Sami family and friends living in the core Sami areas where Ketil actively takes part in traditional Sami activities such as hunting in the mountains, reindeer herding, and throwing the lasso (a rope used by Sami herders to round up the reindeer). Lastly, the family attends Sami festivals and events. According to Ketil's mother, Ketil possesses a strong Sami identity thanks to all of the above. For example, he wants to wear gákti (traditional Sami clothing) and to carry the Sami flag when celebrating the Norwegian national day.

Discussion

The issue of 'Sami-ness', touched upon in all three interviews and narratives, is a source of insight into how different developmental aspects may influence the construction of a Sami identity throughout everyday life. The discussion is divided into three sections, illustrating the creation of three types of Sami identities that are all quite different, in some aspects, while also having quite a lot in common.

Identifying as a reindeer Sami

The idea that Sami individuals with disabilities want to become reindeer herders is not surprising. Reindeer herding is regarded as an important career of the Sami culture (Omma, Holmgren, & Jacobsson, 2011); a family tradition that boys particularly feel a responsibility to uphold and are expected to continue (Nystad, 2007). Several circumstances influence the possibility for Sami people with disabilities to take up reindeer herding. While some find that their impairment makes it challenging to perform the tasks involved, others do not necessarily experience their impairment as the main problem. For example, Johan's description of how a counselor discouraged him from pursuing reindeer herding illustrates a documented tendency among welfare services to focus entirely on the impairment rather than paying attention to an individual's cultural background (Melbøe et al., 2016). According to Kittelsaa (2015), the professional gaze guides what professionals see. Working with disabled people, what they look for and find, are the impairments thereby overlooking other important individual characteristics. A consequence of this cultural blindness in welfare services is that disabled Sami individuals are offered services adapted to the majority in society which may hinder them from taking part in Sami culture and way of life such as reindeer herding (Melbøe et al., 2016).

There is no doubt that Johan's impairment has an impact on his work as a reindeer herder. Nevertheless, the way in which Samis traditionally organise reindeer herding helps make it possible for him to carry on with this profession. The Sami work in cooperative groups, *siidas*, where they herd the reindeer together in a common herd (Horstkotte & Aikio, 2017; Sara, 2009). This way of organising the work provides a flexibility through which the other herders can relieve a disabled herder of work tasks when or if his/her impairment causes trouble. In stark contrast, the increased government bureaucratisation of reindeer husbandry (Johnsen et al., 2017) violates what is considered the traditional use of Sami land. Instead of allowing weather conditions, for example, to determine routines, deadlines decided by the Norwegian authorities now regulate when to gather and butcher the reindeer. These regulations make the herders' work much more demanding, removing the very flexibility that has helped make it possible for Johan and other disabled Sami individuals to work in reindeer husbandry.

Technical development in the reindeer industry has also influenced the chance for disabled Sami individuals to take up reindeer herding. The introduction of snowmobiles, ATVs and, more recently, the use of drones in monitoring the herd (White Paper 32, 2016-2017), have made it possible to overcome mobility challenges that would have previously prevented many Samis with impairments from actively taking part in reindeer herding. At the same time, an implication of this technological progress, along with the challenge to find good grazing grounds, is that reindeer herders operate on a much larger scale today, keeping the reindeer on larger areas (Linkowski, 2017). Despite the use of motorised vehicles, increased transport distances prevent some disabled Samis from pursuing reindeer herding as a profession.

However, there are other aspects connected to reindeer herding that may also influence whether or not people with disabilities identify themselves as Sami. The government assimilation process caused negative attitudes among the general Norwegian population towards the Sami; and, like Johan, other Samis report having to explain and defend Sami way of life as a burden. Being one of the most visible cultural traits traditionally connected to 'Sami-ness', reindeer herding particularly seems to trigger negative reactions that signal that the industry is a hindrance to societal progress (Omnia et al., 2011). This tendency is problematic, as fear of racism is known to be a reason many Samis lack openness about their ethnicity (Nystad, Spein, Balto, & Ingstad, 2017). Moreover, disabled Sami people are particularly exposed as they are found to experience discrimination due to both their cultural background and their impairment (Gjertsen et al., 2017). Thus, the social burden associated with publicly identifying oneself as Sami may hold some disabled people back from openly displaying their Sami background, through reindeer herding, and establishing a Sami identity.

Identifying as a coastal Sami

The government assimilation policy caused a loss of Sami identity particularly for the Sami people living in coastal areas (Eidheim, 1969). Olaus and other elderly disabled Sami people experienced this 'Norwegianisation' policy firsthand, as they were sent to boarding schools where they were required to learn to speak, read and write Norwegian, and received no education in the Sami language (Minde, 2005). Consequently, already as children they were denied access to one of the primary cultural markers of being Sami (Lina Gaski, 2008) and the chance to practise this valuable part of Sami culture.

An interesting aspect of Olaus' narrative, however, is the way in which it illustrates Pietikäinen's and Dufva's (2006) assertion that Sami consists of multiple identities. When Olaus was young, professionals seemed to perceive him mainly as disabled, suggesting that he be sent to a special institution for disabled people. This is an example of how welfare services mainly focus on the deficiencies of disabled individuals when providing services, a focus that limits the service users' opportunity to obtain an identity in the usual way (Langøy, 2018). In any case, even Olaus perceives himself as disabled in some settings – for example, when taking part and competing in disability sports. At the same time, in other settings such as work, Olaus pinpoints how both he and his colleagues identify him as a fisherman, just like the others. He handles this work on his own and has managed to fulfill the government's criteria to obtain a permit. Nonetheless, such governmental criteria for harvesting enough fish to meet the quota probably hinder other disabled Samis from working in the fishing industry as they are not necessarily able to fulfill the criteria. As a consequence, they are excluded from practising this aspect of Sami culture.

Furthermore, what characterises the coastal Sami is the way in which they traditionally combined fisheries with access to other local natural resources on land (S. Pedersen, 2012). Due to the technological development of the past few decades, Olaus and other disabled Samis have acquired snowmobiles and/or ATVs, which make it possible for them to participate in such traditional Sami activities as berry picking and gathering wood for heating. On the other hand, fishing or activities like berry picking are not necessarily perceived as being specifically Sami in these areas, but rather as Norwegian activities that are part of Norwegian culture (Lätsch, 2012). Thus, Olaus and other disabled Sami fishermen may just as well identify themselves as Norwegian rather than Sami fjord fishermen.

What makes the question of identity even more complex, as a result of the government assimilation process, is the small number of Sami living in these coastal districts who were 'born into' a Sami identity following World War II; meaning that any such identity was only acquired later in life. References to identify with are necessary when 'becoming' Sami (Pedersen & Nyseth, 2015) and, during the Sami revitalisation process,

identity has been viewed as being closely intertwined with what is known as a 'traditional' Sami culture, in particular. Consequently, activities such as fishing, hunting and berry picking, when performed in areas traditionally inhabited by the Sami, denote something more than the simple use of resources; in both politics and the media nowadays, such activities in these areas are specifically referred to as culture-based Sami harvesting (Lina Gaski, 2008). Hence, Samis with disabilities today may perceive access to such nature-based activities as an important way to redefine their Sami background. Olaus' pride in the recent acquisition of a gákti may be an example of how coastal Samis outwardly choose to establish a Sami identity in their older years.

Identifying as a city Sami

Urbanization is a trend in the Sami settlement pattern, and just like many other Sami families nowadays, Ketil and his family live in a north Norwegian town outside of the core Sami area. Samis who live in towns outside of core Sami areas are in a position to choose whether they mark themselves with a Sami identity or not; and are referred to as city Samis, according to Pedersen and Nyseth (2015). One way to mark one's identity is to participate in Sami culture and activities, but most Norwegian towns offer few such Sami symbols. Nevertheless, access to some markers, such as the Sami language, has increased during the last three decades. Historically, schools have provided an important arena for negotiating Sami identity (Gaski, 2000) and, due to the official assimilation process, education in Sami was forbidden for decades. However, according to the Sami Act (1987) and the Educational Act (1998), Sami students today are entitled to receive education in the Sami language no matter where they live in Norway. Furthermore, there have also been changes in the practise of special education in public schools. Previously, Sami students with impairments, like disabled students from other ethnic minorities (Ostad, 2006), have experienced that professionals assumed their impairment made it impossible for them to become bilingual. As a consequence, disabled Sami did not necessarily receive education in Sami even though they were legally entitled to it (Melbøe et al., 2016).

Moreover, as the narrative about Ketil illuminates, nowadays some disabled Sami students who have trouble learning the Sami language instead receive additional education in Sami that focuses on practical skills, like traditional Sami handicraft and outdoor activities, while also learning the language. This sort of facilitation of Sami education gives Ketil and other disabled students a chance to get acquainted with Sami culture despite their impairment. Additionally, the lack of teachers with Sami language skills has constituted a barrier to learning Sami. However, due to the development of computer technology, many Sami students today receive online education in Sami (Solstad, Balto, Nygaard, Josefsen, & Solstad, 2012), access that is also increasing the opportunity for disabled Samis to learn their native language (Melbøe et al., 2016). This access to education in Sami is very important as the language is essential to communication and social inclusion, in addition to being emotionally significant as a marker of ethnicity (Hernes, 2017); Sami often being referred to as the language of the heart (Gaski, 1997).

Urbanisation has complicated the traditional Sami upbringing, which usually starts early and involves both parents and other relatives telling stories and including the children in concrete work tasks (Gaski, 1997). Many Samis today do not live near their relatives and are engaged in modern professions which hinders the traditional transition of culture. Thus, for city-Sami families, wanting to offer this sort of Sami upbringing also becomes a financial question. However, the official welfare policy after World War II, aimed at reducing social differences, has improved the economic situation of a previously poor Sami population (Pedersen, 2015). This general rise in economy provides the Sami population some freedom of action. For example, Ketil's parents can afford frequent visits to family in the core Sami areas where they are able to participate in traditional Sami outdoor activities. Regular visits to rural Sápmi are found to be a common practise among many city Samis, helping to strengthen their identity and affiliation to Sápmi (Gjerpe, 2015). Moreover, the government sponsors such events as Sami festivals and theatres, through the Sami parliament, which both Ketil and other city Samis attend. These Sami festivals are important arenas for ethnic revitalization by showcasing traditional Sami music, costumes, and other aspects of the Sami culture (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). Thus, attending such events may support the establishment of a Sami identity. Ketil, who is eager to take part in Sami activities, dress in the gákti and carry the Sami flag when celebrating the Norwegian national day, seems to be an example of a city Sami actively wanting to mark his Sami identity.

Concluding remarks

The findings from this study highlight how the political, economic and technological Norwegian context can influence the identity construction of Samis with disabilities. After a long assimilation process, the past few decades have been characterised by an active fight among the Sami to strengthen and redefine their Sami identity. Through a number of laws, the Sami have received special rights to both Sami language and culture, in addition to certain rights concerning land and marine resources. These rights have been important, while access to Sami symbols as the Sami language, Sami clothing and traditional way of life is decisive in establishing a Sami identity (Pedersen & Nyseth, 2015). This shift in conditions for being Sami contributes to a general change among the Sami, from feelings of shame to cultural pride (Nystad et al., 2017). However, as described in the presented narratives, people with disabilities still experience barriers that may prevent them from learning Sami and/or being involved in 'traditional Sami' occupations and activities. Such lack of

involvement is problematic, as it can make them, in addition to other Samis and non-Samis, question whether those with disabilities are entitled to define themselves as Sami (Nystad et al., 2017). Furthermore, the fact that Sami culture lacks equivalent markers to express Sami identity (L. Gaski, 2000), that disabled Samis could alternatively bear or possess to create a Sami identity, may be an additional hindrance to those with disabilities wishing to identify themselves as Sami.

The three narratives presented demonstrate how disabled Samis still experience barriers to gaining access to traditional Sami activities that may help to define 'how to be Sami', despite the described political, economic and technological (snowmobiles, ATVs, internet, etc.) improvements of the past few decades. First, there are on-going changes in rights and regulations concerning ownership and use of land and water resources. For example, the restructuring of reindeer husbandry causes both practical and economic uncertainty, which may hinder young Samis with disabilities from pursuing it as an occupation. Second, despite current legislation mandating that professionals provide facilitated services that 'enable the Sami people in Norway to safeguard and develop their language, culture and way of life' (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 1987), a cultural blindness still exists among professionals within the welfare system. Professionals mainly perceive Sami people with impairments as disabled and accordingly provide services that are not adapted to Sami culture; creating barriers to participation (Melbøe, 2018) which, in turn, may weaken cultural ties and identity (Andresen, 2008). Third, the emergence of the city-Sami identity may contribute to new ways of being Sami for disabled people as well, particularly because the city-Sami category seems to be a meeting point for past, present and future ways of 'Sami-ness'.

Furthermore, the narratives discussed in this article illustrate the complexity of identity construction among Samis with disabilities. First, Sami is not an identity they either hold on to or leave behind, but rather an identity they activate in some settings and not in others. For example, they may activate their Sami identity by wearing a gákti in some settings, but not in others, such as when participating in disability sports. Second, Sami is only one of several identities they possess. For example, they may define themselves as Sami, Norwegian, a fisherman, a student, a father, a football player and a person with a disability. Thus the narratives are in accordance with Hall's (1996) assertion that people have multiple identities and Kramvig's (2005) claim that such identities are not necessarily mutually contrasting.

The study of narratives of Samis with disabilities is a beneficial approach to gain insight into how the interplay between structural conditions, such as politics, technology and the economy, is significant to the opportunity for disabled individuals to establish a Sami identity. The findings highlight the need for cultural awareness, especially among politicians and professionals in welfare services, to make sure people with disabilities have the opportunity to identify themselves as Sami.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the informants who contributed stories of their everyday life, and to the members of the research group, 'Diversity and Tolerance', who participated in the data collection: Gunn-Elin Fedreheim, Bjørn-Eirik Johnsen, Ketil-Lenert Hansen, Gunn-Tove Minde, Tone Dinesen, Kari-Anne Opsal, Marit Rustad, and Leif Lysvik.

Funding

The research for this article was funded by the Nordic Welfare Centre (NVC): Grant number 262000-1608.

Notes

1 The pass of the Saami Act in 1987 was based on the Norwegian governments acceptance of the Saami being a separate people with a separate culture. The purpose of the Act is to enable the Sami people in Norway to safeguard and develop their language, culture and way of life (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 1987).

2 See the map in the Introduction.

References

- Aikio-Puoskari, U. (2001). Kielten ja kulttuurien risteysasemalla. Kysymyksiä saamen kielestä ja identiteetistä maailmojen ja aikakausien rajalla. In S. Laihiala-Kankainen, S. Pietikäinen, & H. Dufva (Eds.), *Moniääninen Suomi. Kieli, kulttuuri ja identiteetti* (pp. 90–109). Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
- Andresen, A. (2008). *Health citizenship and/ as Sami citizenship: Norway 1985-2007*. Retrieved from Bergen:
- Benjaminsen, T. A., Reinert, H., Sjaastad, E., & Sara, M. N. (2015). Misreading the Arctic landscape: A political ecology of reindeer, carrying capacities, and overstocking in Finnmark, Norway. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift – Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 69(4), 219-229 doi:10.1080/00291951.2015.1031274

- Blix, B. H., Hamran, T., & Normann, H. K. (2013). Struggles of being and becoming: A dialogical narrative analysis of the life stories of Sami elderly. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(3), 264-275. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2013.05.002
- Brustad, M., Pettersen, T., Melhus, M., & Lund, E. (2009). Mortality patterns in geographical areas with a high vs. low Sami population density in Arctic Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 37(5), 475-480.
- Dankertsen, A. (2014). *Samisk artikkelasjon: Melankoli, tap og forsoning*. (PhD), Universitetet i Nordland, Bodø.
- Eidheim, H. (1969). When Ethnic Identity is a Social Stigma In F. Barth (Ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Differences*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Elisabeth, E. (2006). *Some Legal Considerations Concerning Sami Rights in Saltwater. The Extent of Ownership Rights in Saltwater Areas under Norwegian and International Law*. Kautokeino: Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Gaski, H. (1997). *Sami culture in a new era : the Norwegian Sami experience*. Karasjok: Davvi girji.
- Gaski, L. (2000). 'Hundre prosent lapp?' [A hundred per cent Sami?]. Retrieved from Kautokeino:
- Gaski, L. (2008). Sami identity as a discursive formation : essentialism and ambivalence. In H. Minde (Ed.), *Self-determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity* (pp. 219-236). Delft: Eburon.
- Gjerpe, K. K. (2015). En urban samisk identitet – det beste av to verdener [An urban identity – the best of two worlds]. In P. Pedersen & T. Nyseth (Eds.), *City-Saami* (pp. 261-278). Vaasa: CálliidLágádus.
- Gjertsen, H., Melbøe, L., Fedreheim, G.-E., & Fylling, I. (2017). *Kartlegging av levkårene til personer med utviklingshemming i samiske områder*. Tromsø: Uit, Norges Arktiske Universitet & Nordens Velferdssenter.
- Gustavsson, A., Nyberg, C., & Westin, C. (2016). Plurality and continuity—Understanding self-identity of persons with intellectual disability. *Alter – European Journal of Disability research*, 10(4), 310-326. doi:10.1016/j.alter.2016.06.003
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs 'identity'? . In S. Hall & P. d. Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 1-17). London: Sage.
- Hansen, K. L., Melhus, M., & Lund, E. (2010). Ethnicity, self-reported health, discrimination and socio-economic status: a study of Sami and non-Sami Norwegian populations. *Int J Circumpolar Health*, 69(2), 111-128.
- Hassler, S., Kvernmo, S., & Kozlow, A. (2008). Sami. In T. K. Young & P. Bjerregaard (Eds.), *Health transitions in arctic populations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hernes, M. (2017). *Being Sami Enough – Increasing the Sami Stage of Performance*. (Master Master), Universitetet i Oslo, Oslo.
- Horstkotte, T., & Aikio, A. (2017). *Sápmi and reindeer husbandry*. Retrieved from Turku:
- Jaeger, K., & Mykletun, R. J. (2013). Festivals, identities, and belonging. *Event Management*, 17(3), 213-226. doi:10.3727/152599513X13708863377791
- Johnsen, K. I., Mathiesen, S. D., & Eira, I. M. G. (2017). Sámi reindeer governance in Norway as competing knowledge systems: a participatory study. *Ecology and Society*, 22(4), 33. doi:10.5751/ES-09786-220433
- Josefsen, E. (2006). *Selvopplevd diskriminering blant samer i Norge*. Retrieved from Alta:
- Kittelsaa, A. M. (2015). Ethnicity, Disability and Identity. In R. Traustadóttir, B. Ytterhus, S. T. Egilson, & B. Berg (Eds.), *Childhood and Disability in the Nordic Countries : Being, Becoming, Belonging*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kittelsaa, A. M. (2015). Ethnicity, Disability, and Identity. In R. Traustadóttir, B. Ytterhus, S. T. Egilson, & B. Berg (Eds.), *Childhood and Disability in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 101-114). London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Kramvig, B. (2005). The silent language of ethnicity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 45-64. doi:10.1177/1367549405049491
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews : an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Kvernmo, S. (2004). Mental health of Sami youth. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 63(3), 221-234.
- Langøy, E. E. (2018). Annerledes er ikke noe man er, men noe man blir? *Fontene Forskning*(1), 43-55.

- Linkowski, W. A. (2017). *Managing mountains, past and present conditions for traditional summer farming and Sami reindeer husbandry in northern Scandinavia*. (PhD), Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences, Umeå.
- Lätsch, A. (2012). *Coastal Sami revitalization and rights claims in Finnmark (North Norway) – two aspects of one issue?* Retrieved from Tromsø:
- Melbøe, L. (2018). Cultural sensitivity and barriers: Sami people with disabilities facing the welfare system. *Community Development Journal*. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsy025
- Melbøe, L., Johnsen, B.-E., Fedreheim, G. E., & Hansen, K. L. (2016). *Situasjonen til samer med funksjonsnedsettelse*. Retrieved from Stockholm/ Tromsø:
- Minde, H. (2003). Assimilation of the Sami – implementation and consequences. *Acta borealia, Vol. 20, no. 2 (2003)*, 121-146.
- Minde, H. (2005). *Assimilation of the Sami: implementation and consequences* (Vol. nr 3/2005). [Kautokeino]: Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Ministry of Church Affairs, E. a. R. (1998). *Education Act*. Oslo.
- Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. (1987). Act of 12 June 1987 No. 56 concerning the Sameting (the Sami parliament) and other Sami legal matters (the Sami Act). Translation of Lov om Sametinget og andre samiske rettsforhold (sameloven). <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/doc/laws/Acts/the-sami-act-.html?id=449701> (cited aug. 17. 2015)
- Møllersen, S., Sexton, H. C., & Holte, A. (2005). Ethnic variations in the initial phase of mental health treatment: A study of Sami and non-Sami clients and therapists in northern Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 46(5)*, 447-457.
- Nilsen, R. (2003). From Norwegianization to Coastal Sami Uprising. In S. Jentoft, H. Minde, & R. Nilsen (Eds.), *Indigenous peoples : resource management and global rights* (pp. 163-184). Delft: Eburon.
- Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion (2009) *Action plan for Sami languages*. Oslo.
- Nymo, R. (2011). *Helseomsorgssystemer i samiske markebygder i Nordre Nordland og Sør-Troms. Praksiser i hverdagslivet. 'En ska ikkje gje sæ over og en ska ta tida til hjelp'*. (PhD), Universitetet i Tromsø, Tromsø.
- Nystad, K. (2007). Hindrer verdikonflikten mellom hjem og skole Jussa og Mihkku å ta utdanning? Kvinnforsk skriftserie, 6/2007. In M. A. Hauan (Ed.), *Maskuniliteter i Nord*. Tromsø: Universitetet i Tromsø.
- Nystad, K., Spein, A. R., Balto, A. M., & Ingstad, B. (2017). Ethnic identity negotiation among Sami youth living in a majority Sami community in Norway. *Int J Circumpolar Health, 76(1)*. doi:10.1080/22423982.2017.1316939.
- Omma, L. M., Holmgren, L. E., & Jacobsson, L. H. (2011). Being a young sami in Sweden: living conditions, identity and life satisfaction. *Journal of Northern Studies, 5(1)*, 9-28.
- Ostad, J. (2006). *Zweisprachigkeit bei Kindern mit Down-Syndrom*. (PhD), Humboldt-Universität, Berlin.
- Pedersen, P. (2015). Likheter og forskjeller i samepolitiske saker og gryende samisk nasjonsbygging. In P. Pedersen & T. Nyseth (Eds.), *City-Sami* (pp. 137-163). Kautokeino: ČálliidLágádus.
- Pedersen, P., & Høgmo, A. (2012). *Sápmi slår tilbake: samiske revitaliserings- og moderniseringsprosesser i siste generasjon*. Kárášjohka: ČálliidLágádus.
- Pedersen, P., & Nyseth, T. (2015). *City-Saami. Same i byen eller bysame? Skandinaviske byer i et samisk perspektiv*. Karasjok: ČálliidLágádus.
- Pedersen, S. (2012). The coastal Sámi of Norway and their rights to traditional marine livelihood. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics, 3(1)*, 51-80.
- Perdersen, S. (2012). The Coastal Sami of Norway and their rights to traditional marine livelihood. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics, 3(1)*, 51-80.
- Pettersen, T., & Brustad, M. (2015). Same Sámi? A comparison of self-reported Sámi ethnicity measures in 1970 and 2003 in selected rural areas in northern Norway. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38(12)*, 2071-2089. doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1031262
- Pietikäinen, S., & Dufva, H. (2006). Voices in discourses: Dialogism, Critical Discourse Analysis and ethnic identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 10(2)*, 205-224. doi:10.1111/j.1360-6441.2006.00325.x

Sara, N. M. (2009). Siida and Traditional Sami Reindeer Herding Knowledge. *The Northern Review*(30), 153-178.

Selle, P., Semb, A. J., Strømsnes, K., & Nordø, Å. D. (2015). *Den samiske medborgeren*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Sjölander, P. (2011). What is known about the health and living conditions of the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, the Sami? *Glob Health Action*, 4(8457). doi:10.3402

Solstad, K. J., Balto, A., Nygaard, V., Josefsen, E., & Solstad, M. (2012). *Samisk språkundervisning 2012*. Retrieved from Bodø:

Sørli, T., & Nergard, J.-I. (2005). Treatment satisfaction and recovery in Saami and Norwegian patients following psychiatric hospital treatment: a comparative study. *Transcult Psychiatry*, 42(2), 295-316.

Turi, A. L., Bals, M., Skre, I., & Kvernmo, S. (2009). Health service use in indigenous Sami and non-indigenous youth in North Norway: A population based study. *BMC Public Health*(9), 378.

White Paper 32. (2016-2017). *Reindeer husbandry. Long tradition – unique possibilities*. Oslo.

About the author

Line Melbøe is Associate Professor in the Institute of Social Education in the Arctic University of Norway (UiT).

E-mail: line.melboe@uit.no