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## Being connected to nature, reindeer, and family: findings from a photovoice study on well-being among older South Sámi people

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the perceptions of well-being among older South Sámi people with various experiences from reindeer herding by use of a method called photovoice. Eleven participants, including six men and five women aged 67–84 years, agreed to take photos of *situations, things, or persons that made them feel a sense of well-being*. When the researcher collected the photos, the participants were invited to tell their stories related to each photo. In the thematic analysis of the photos, three main themes emerged: a) well-being through connection to nature, b) well-being through connection to the reindeer, and c) well-being through connection to the family. In conclusion, we argue that if healthcare professionals are to enhance the well-being of care receivers – in this case older people with South Sami background from reindeer-herding families – they must consider the care receiver's life story and what constitutes well-being for the individual person.

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### KEYWORDS

Older indigenous people; South Sámi people; well-being; being connected; nature; reindeer; family

### Introduction

In this study, which may be situated in the intersection between social gerontology and indigenous studies, we analyse perceptions of well-being among older South Sámi with experience from reindeer-herding families. While some of the participants had not been much involved in the practical lifestyle and work related to reindeer husbandry since they were young, others still took active part in central events throughout the year, such as ear marking and the selection of animals for slaughtering.

The Sámi are an indigenous population living in the middle and northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula. The Sámi population is believed to be approximately 50,000–65,000 in Norway, 20,000 in Sweden, 8,000 in Finland, and 2,000 in Russia [1, p.53]. In Norway, some of the Sámi traditionally had a sedentary lifestyle along the coast combining fishing and small-scale farming, whereas others were reindeer herders with a mobile lifestyle. From 1850 onwards the Sámi suffered from colonisation enforced through national assimilation policies [2–4]. This process contributed to degrading Sámi culture and language. As a result, many Sámi parents decided to hide their identity and avoided speaking their mother tongue to their

children in order to save them from the shame of being “inferior” compared to people of majority background [5,6]. However, during the last 50 years or so the Sámi have gradually gained political and cultural recognition. In the case of Norway, this has been confirmed by the establishment of the Sámi Parliament in 1989 and by the public recognition of the Sámi as indigenous people in 1990 [2]. Moreover, Sámi institutions have been established such as Sámi nursing homes, schools, media, and a Sámi University College.

In Norway, we often distinguish between three main subgroups of Sámi people: the North Sámi, the Lule Sámi, and the South Sámi populations. Each group has their own language and customs [2]. The South Sámi population lives scattered in a vast region in the middle of Norway and Sweden and is estimated to be about 2,000 people in total [7]. The South Sámi underwent a particularly strong colonisation process, and it is estimated that only 25% (500–600 persons) speak the South Sámi language [8,9].

### Reindeer herding and health

Reindeer herding is a highly important symbol for all the Sámi subcultures, including the South Sámi people.

On the Norwegian side of the South Sámi area, there are 16 reindeer grazing districts accounting for approximately 150 man-years [10]. However, substantially more South Sámi people are involved in reindeer herding because although the reindeer are individually owned, the *sijte* (the community) coordinates the use of pastures and collaborates in taking care of the animals [MN Sara, 2009 in 11]. The *sijte* varies in size throughout the year and is constituted by contributors of all generations, including children and older women and men (ibid).

In general, the health situation of the Sámi population is good and approximately at the same level as the health of the majority population [12]. The health situation *within* the Sámi population, however, varies, and several studies have indicated that Sámi involved in reindeer herding experience significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than in the majority population living in the same geographical area [13]. In another study by [14], a comparatively high prevalence of discrimination and ethnic-related ill treatment among men involved in reindeer herding was identified. Research has also indicated that reindeer herding is one of the most dangerous occupations in the Nordic region [15]. Furthermore, a recent dissertation from Norway analysed the on-going tensions between reindeer herders and the authorities regarding, for example, how reindeer husbandry should be administered and controlled [11]. Johnsen [11] argued that these tensions may lead to stress and frustration among reindeer owners whose perspectives and understandings are silenced in the public discourse.

### **Ageing and well-being**

We live in an ageing society, but for a variety of reasons the life expectancy of older indigenous peoples is lower than that of non-indigenous people in most parts of the world [16]. In Sápmi, however, the life expectancy is the same among the indigenous and the non-indigenous population. In economic and demographic research, ageing is often viewed as something negative, and older people are often represented as a burden on society [17]. Within indigenous worldviews, however, ageing is conceptualised not as “degradation”, but rather as an important part of the circle of life [16]. Accordingly, in Sámi communities older people are traditionally viewed as important transmitters of culture to the younger generations, e.g. related to farming, fishing, traditional handicrafts (*duodji*), or reindeer herding [18].

In line with indigenous perspectives on ageing, social researchers have challenged pessimistic and

pejorative narratives of ageing by reorienting ageing policy and research in a more positive direction, e.g. by focusing on “well-being in old age” [19]. Well-being is a broad and multidimensional concept with both objective and subjective aspects that are both context and population-specific [20]. Subjective well-being often refers to a person’s overall satisfaction with their own life situation [e.g. 21]. Perceived well-being is dynamic, varies over the lifespan, and depends on a person’s family situation, place of living, cultural values, and expectations [22]. According to Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al [23], relations are pivotal for well-being in an indigenous perspective. In their article, they particularly highlight the significance of people’s connections to the land, to their ancestry, and to other beings (both human and non-human) [23, p. 184]. Based on these insights, and referencing a report by McConery and Dumont [24] indigenous well-being (or wellness) is thus defined as “a whole and healthy person expressed through a balance of spirit, heart, mind and body” [23, p. 184]. So far, we know little about the experiences of well-being among older Sámi with a background in reindeer herding. This knowledge is important, though, if we want to enhance the majority culture’s understanding of how to develop more culturally safe services vis-à-vis older persons with an indigenous or a minority background. In this article, in line with social gerontological and indigenous studies on well-being and positive ageing, we explore the following research question: How do older South Sámi people with a background in reindeer herding perceive well-being, and what are the main themes that make them feel like a whole and healthy person in old age?

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present the methods and data. Next, we present the results, and in the conclusion, we discuss how our findings might enhance our understanding of what might constitute well-being for older people with South Sami background living in Norway.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This qualitative study is part of a larger international research project examining ageing, quality of life, and home-based care among older people in indigenous communities – the Sámi in Norway and the Tayal in Taiwan. This study employed a method called photovoice. Photovoice, originally developed by Wang and Burris [25], is a qualitative visual research method. In this method, the participants are provided with a camera and are invited to take photos of certain

themes that are viewed as important by the participants themselves [26]. The theoretical foundation of photovoice is grounded in Paulo Freire's approach to education for critical consciousness [27, p.19]. The photovoice method may be particularly well suited for indigenous contexts because it allows the participants to define what is important to them and to convey, via photos and their related stories, the meaning and context of their lives from their own personal point of view [28]. The photovoice approach stresses that everyone is positioned in a unique way. The goal of this study, therefore, is not to generalise about the situation of all South Sámi people, but rather to point at some variations as well as to present and discuss the main patterns identified.

### **Participants**

Eleven participants, six men and five women, aged 67 to 84 years, agreed to take part in the study. All of them had a background from reindeer-herding families. Whereas several of the male participants had been actively engaged full time in reindeer husbandry all their lives, the women had for the most part had one foot in the majority society through higher education and a paid job in the public sector, e.g. health care services. Some participants had several homes that they had commuted between, together with the reindeer, according to the season.

### **Procedures**

A qualitative approach using in-depth photovoice interviews was employed. Data were collected between August 2019 and February 2020. In addition, shorter follow-up interviews were done by phone during spring 2021. The process of building relationships with older people in the South Sámi area started already several years back when the first author did her doctoral studies in the Southern Sámi area. Thus, in spring 2019 the first author contacted two of her acquaintances in the community who provided names and contact information for several potential participants. In addition, snowballing was used to broaden the recruitment [29]. This means that some of the participants suggested names of other persons who might be interested in taking part in the study. The data collection had two phases. During the first phase, the participants were interviewed about their background and life story, and in addition they received a digital camera. They were asked to take photos of things that were important to them, and in particular *"situations, things or persons that make you feel a sense of well-being"*. The second phase

happened between 6 and 15 weeks later. This time, a second interview was conducted highlighting hopes and dreams for the future in addition to their experiences and expectations of healthcare services. During this second visit, the participants also presented the photos they had taken to the researcher and shared their reflections related to each photo. The participants provided from 3 to 36 photos for the study. The 22 interviews lasted from 47 minutes to 3 hours and 23 minutes (Mean: 2 hours and 4 minutes).

### **Data analysis**

The photos were stored in a safe place and recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim. The interview data as well as the photos were thematically analysed [30,31]. Thus, the photos were coded with initial codes before being collated into three themes that appeared to be important in all the narratives, namely "well-being through connection to nature", "well-being through connection to the reindeer", and "well-being through connection to the family". Other themes that appeared in some of the participants' photos and stories were "well-being and friends", "well-being and dogs", and "well-being and duodji" (handicrafts). One photo of each of the three main themes was chosen to represent the theme in this article after which the interview data were read, coded, and analysed focusing on how the participants talked about well-being in relation to "nature", "reindeer", and "family".

### **Ethical considerations and roles in the research team**

Informed written consent was obtained from all participants before taking part in this study. The participants were informed that they had the possibility to withdraw from the study at any given time. Moreover, they were guaranteed confidentiality and that no real names would appear in the presentation of the results. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (No. 577949). While the first author collected and transcribed the data and did the main job of analysing the data, the second author was involved in all the phases of this study, including in the planning and in discussions of preliminary and final findings. The article was written and revised in collaboration between the two authors.

### **Results**

Our thematic analysis of the participants' photos revealed three main themes – "well-being through

connection to nature”, “well-being through connection to the reindeer”, and “well-being through connection to the family”. These themes will be outlined in the following.

### ***Well-being through connection to nature***

All participants in this study reported strong connections and feelings of well-being in relation to nature. They talked about important places in nature where they had spent a lot of time as a child, or where they had spent a lot of time as adults, or even in their old age. Several talked about places in nature where they had performed significant activities such as picking cloudberries, fishing, or hunting, or where they had been together with the reindeer as will be elaborated in the next theme. The photo selected to represent the theme of well-being through connection to nature portrays a typical mountainous landscape in the South Sámi region where this study was done. The photo was taken during winter (Photo 1).

The participant who took the selected photo explained: “I think nature looks a little grey and miserable on this photo, but somewhere inside lies the germ of a new spring. It does. It is there”. The participant moreover told that she had to stop at this exact spot every time she passed by. Stopping there was of great importance because it allowed the participant to revisit pleasant memories from the past. The participant explained that the weather did not matter because she knew by heart what the landscape would look like in any weather condition throughout the year. When

looking over the landscape, the participant was able to revisit in her imagination paths or trails taken in the past. Thus, being in and remembering this landscape created a strong feeling of well-being for the participant. The participant also shared good memories about picking berries and preparing coffee on the bonfire with family and friends. The participant said that the berry picking and the coffee on the bonfire were demanding tasks to accomplish now for several reasons. Thus, what the participant used to do, she said, was to prepare coffee at home and bring a little coffee in a thermos to drink in this well-known and cherished landscape. That was good, although it did not provide her body with quite the same sense of well-being as before when preparing coffee on the bonfire.

While most of the participants were no longer able to reach the highest mountains, the best fishing waters, or the best places to pick berries like they could earlier, several were still able to get out in nature to some of the places they liked by use of a car or power-driven vehicles such as ATVs. Some of the participants said that they would drive by car to one of the places they used to spend a lot of time in the old days, and just stop the car on the side of the road in order to enjoy the landscape outside of the car. Others said that they had limited possibilities to get out due to health issues. One participant, for instance, said: “If I fall, I must have a tree to grab on to, so I can stand up again. So, that means I would have to fall next to a tree, and that is hard to predict”. Therefore, the participant needed to be accompanied when out in nature. Several of the participants with limited access to nature admitted



**Photo 1.** Well-being through connection to nature.

that they had to let go of some of their dreams such as being able to reach and pick the yellow and tasty cloudberry or to go grouse hunting in exactly the same areas where they used to when they were younger. However, all of them were able to look at photos of significant landscapes and remember the activities that used to go on there. Also, some of them lived in a place where they had a nice view from the living room window over a landscape that they loved, and this created a sense of well-being as well.

### ***Well-being through connection to the reindeer***

As mentioned above, even if the participants were from reindeer herding families, only some of them had been engaged full-time in reindeer herding as adults. Some of the participants, moreover, were still active members of their *sijte* – either doing things or by giving advice. However, despite the varying degree of practical engagement in reindeer husbandry as such, almost all the participants explained that they felt well-being in connection to reindeer. The feeling of well-being was expressed by, for example, watching the reindeer, being part of the reindeer herding, and eating reindeer meat.

The photo selected to represent the theme of well-being through connection to the reindeer portrays part of a typical reindeer herd in the fence in the South Sámi region where this study was done. The photo was taken in the month of October ([Photo 2](#)).

The participant who took the selected photo noted the importance of reindeer in his life. He explained different aspects of the reindeer husbandry and the

gratitude for having lived together with the reindeer from childhood until today: “I think it is so good to be in the reindeer husbandry . . . I am so glad that I am in this lifestyle. When talking about well-being, reindeer herding is part of that”. In particular, he liked to be close to the reindeer because the well-being of the animals had been his priority all his life, and he felt contentment being with them. Even if the participant had different roles and tasks today compared to when he was younger, some things remained the same, e.g. that he would move together with the reindeer throughout the year between different grazing areas.

Several of the participants shared that they enjoyed spending time by the reindeer fence, e.g. during the slaughtering and ear marking period. This was also the case for participants who had not been much engaged in reindeer herding since they were young. Spending time by the reindeer fence allowed them to be close to the reindeer as well as to socialise with their extended family and other *sijte* members. One participant expressed it in this way: “It is so social to meet by the fence. You know, working with the reindeer. That is really . . . that is what life is really about. That is the good life!”

Those who no longer had a reindeer fence where they belonged shared memories from their childhood and early adulthood when the reindeer and reindeer herding had an important role in their lives. One of the participants shared that in his view reindeer husbandry had changed due to loss of land, climate change, and the use of motorised vehicles. But, despite all these changes, “the sound of the reindeer has not changed!” Hearing the



**Photo 2.** Well-being through connection to the reindeer.

sound of the reindeer created a strong feeling of well-being, knowing that the reindeer were still the same as in his childhood.

Another central aspect of well-being for the participants in connection to the reindeer was related to processing and eating reindeer meat. This theme was not only highlighted in the photos taken and the stories shared by the participants but was also indicated by the fact that many of the participants served a meal of reindeer meat to the researcher when she came to visit. One participant said: "I have to eat a little bit of reindeer meat every day". Another participant said: "Food is so much more than just filling the stomach. Food is culture and well-being". The same participant added that a member of his family had experienced difficulties getting access to reindeer meat when they were at a nursing home. The family member thus had been obliged to eat unfamiliar food, which had affected their health negatively. Similar experiences were also mentioned by other participants.

Some participants added that they needed to boil the reindeer meat a bit longer than before in order to be able to chew and digest it well. Several of them explained that in the old days people used to save the most tender parts of the reindeer for the oldest members of the family. The participants also mentioned that they hoped that they would be served reindeer meat at least on occasion if they were to have to move to a nursing home later in life because, as one of the participants said, "Reindeer meat means everything to me".

### ***Well-being through connection to the family***

All participants in this study expressed strong connections and feelings of well-being in relation to their family, which included their children, sons or daughters in-law, grandchildren, and great grandchildren in addition to their spouse for those who were not living alone. Their relationships to their spouses were described in ambivalent terms – whereas for some living with their spouse represented a feeling of safety and well-being, for others who were married to a partner with a declining health, the spousal relationship also represented a feeling of struggle and sometimes a lack of security. Having a spouse with declining health entailed increased caregiving tasks.

The photo selected to represent the theme of well-being through connection to the family portrays the participant, their two siblings, and their mother outside of the *lavvo* where the participant grew up as a child. Through the photo the participants told why family represented well-being (Photo 3).

This participant had felt the importance of family since being a child and said: "You just know it (when



**Photo 3.** Well-being through connection to the family.

you are a child). Your parents are important, and so are your siblings". Due to declining health, the participant felt lucky to receive help and support from their own family, as they all lived nearby. The family, and especially the adult children, provided emotional support and practical help, e.g. with paying the bills or getting in touch with various public offices in addition to various tasks that could be too physically demanding for the participant. The participant said: "My family represents security to me. They drop by, sometimes just for a little talk and a cup of coffee. Earlier I used to make dinner and invite them in, but not now anymore. I liked to do that, but now I no longer have the energy for that. It is a time for everything".

All of the participants explained that they felt a strong feeling of well-being when spending time with their family, and they appreciated when family members dropped by for a little chat or to give some help or support. Some participants spent much time with their family, e.g. in relation to reindeer herding, or by receiving regular visits from children, children in-laws, and grandchildren. Others told that they did not see their family as much as they would have wanted to due to distance or because their family members were occupied with other tasks in relation to their own jobs, children, or friends. Not receiving regular visits from

family members represented a feeling of loneliness for some of our participants, especially for those who were living alone. Some of the participants said that they also stayed in contact with their family by telephone. One participant said: "My biggest joy in everyday life is my grandchildren, like when I can be with them or talk with them on the phone".

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine perceptions of well-being among older South Sámi with a background in reindeer herding. As highlighted above, the participants in this study experienced well-being in connection to nature, reindeer, and family, as will be further discussed in the following.

**The theme "well-being through connection to nature"** revealed that all of the participants experienced strong connections and feelings of well-being in relation to significant places in nature where they had spent time as a child and as an adult. For some of them these were places they still had access to and could spend time in, even today. Some of the participants no longer had access to the significant places in their life due to impairments, but they revived these places by looking at photos or by imagining these places in their own memories. Some used their car or were accompanied in a car to a significant place where they could enjoy the landscapes, knowing and imagining what was beyond the scenery in front of them.

Previous research confirms that living in close relations with the land and nature can be significant for the Sami people [32,33]. Sørly et al. [33] for instance, concluded that living in close relation with nature was of significance in the healing process for Sami patients with mental health challenges. Our participants confirmed this finding, even if in our study the feelings of well-being in connection to nature did not necessarily require having physical access to nature, as leaning on memories from past experiences in nature could also enhance feelings of well-being among our participants.

The significance of a close relation to nature has also been found in other studies in other indigenous contexts. In their study of well-being among Inuit people in Nunatsiavut [34], found that the land was seen as "everything" for them. Moreover, the Inuit experienced that the land held a healing power and was able to cure people's hearts. Living in close connection to the land, in other words, was essential for the well-being of the Inuit.

**The theme "well-being through connection to the reindeer"** revealed that our participants felt well-being through connection to the reindeer, e.g. by seeing the reindeer, hearing the sound of the reindeer, being part

of the ear marking by the reindeer fence, and being engaged in other activities related to reindeer husbandry to various degrees, but also by preparing and eating reindeer meat, which by some of the participants was regarded as the only "real food".

According to Casi (35) and Begum and Naskali (36) [35,36] traditional Sami food is interlinked with integrity, dignity, self-determination, and well-being for the Sami population. In our study some of the participants said that they felt that they needed to eat a little reindeer meat every day. Some mentioned that they hoped they would be offered reindeer meat if they were to have to move to a nursing home later in their life. This last point can be seen in relation to a study by Hanssen and Kuven [37], where they found that traditional food, in particular reindeer meat, seemed to boost Sámi patients' sense of well-being, identity, and belonging. The importance of traditional Sámi foods was also emphasised by older South Sámi people living in Sweden [38].

In line with our findings, Magga et al. [39] also found that health and well-being for the Sámi people with a background in reindeer husbandry were connected to access to traditional food and feeling needed in various tasks related to reindeer herding. Liliequist [18] moreover, found that older Sámi women from reindeer herding families in Sweden wanted to stay active as long as possible in the reindeer herding rather than retiring as is often a dream of older people in the majority society. Moreover, Liliequist [18] found that staying active in reindeer herding was important for the dignity, sense of belonging, and well-being of the older women she interviewed. For the participants in our study the connection to the reindeer enhanced their well-being, even if they could not participate in the same way as before.

**The theme "well-being through connection to the family"** revealed that all participants expressed a strong connection and feeling of well-being in relation to their families. The participants very much enjoyed spending time with their children, in-laws, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and, of course, when applicable, their spouses. Even if they did not always see their families as much as wanted, they cherished every moment they had with their families. Some of them also kept in touch with family members by phone.

Feeling of well-being through connection to the family is essential to most humans, and good relations to family are often related to a higher degree of well-being [e.g. 40], and the Sami people are no different in that regard. The need to live in close relations to both nature and family can be significant for Sami people e.g. [33]. Well-being in relation to the family was also found in the above-mentioned study of the Inuit people in Nunatsiavut [34].



Experiences of well-being for older Sámi women living in Sweden are related to family, spirituality, cultural norms, and having a life of one's own [41].

### Methodological considerations

This is a qualitative study of well-being among older South Sámi people with a background in reindeer herding. In terms of limitations, it should be noted that the interviews were done in Norwegian language, because the first author is Norwegian and does not master the South Sami language. This can be viewed as a limitation, because if some participants had wanted to speak South Sami during the interviews, this would not have been possible without calling upon an interpreter. However, the participants in this study were either completely bilingual, or they spoke only Norwegian language due to the harsh national assimilation policies that have taken place since the 1800s as mentioned in the introduction of this article.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which does not allow us to generalise our findings. However, our methodological design enables us to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon of well-being in a specific context. This knowledge is useful not only for healthcare professionals and others who offer services to South Sami people with a background from reindeer herding. Rather, we argue that the principles illustrated in this study, including the importance of *tuning in and truly listen to what is significant for the person* in question, is also valuable for the development of more culturally safe healthcare services for indigenous populations and minority groups in other contexts as well.

### Conclusion and implications for practice

In this study, the participants revealed well-being in connection to nature, reindeer, and family. Defining well-being is a subjective experience, and knowledge about each person must be considered in order to define what is seen as well-being for the individual. Vaara et al. [22] stress that the individual's definition of well-being is based on the individual's lived experience and is not static, but may rather be perceived as a process that may be shifting over the lifetime. This is also the case for our participants. Begum and Naskali [36] state that older Sámi people often consider health and well-being in connection to individuals' physical, socio-economic, cultural, and environment surroundings, and the Sámi people's nature-based culture and environment influences their mental and physical health to a great degree. This is confirmed by this study where well-being is

experienced by our participants first and foremost in connection to nature, reindeer, and family.

Research indicates that healthcare professionals often do not quite understand what is important for older indigenous people [42]. This article points to the significance of memories and activities related to nature and nature-based activities, reindeer as animals, lifestyle, and food, and family for the sense of well-being of the participants in this study. In other communities, what creates a sense of well-being may be different. Our results therefore indicate that healthcare professionals must consider each person's life story in order to contribute to their well-being. Only by doing this, healthcare professionals may be able to provide person-centred and culturally safe care services.

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