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A sociological study of the significance of identity and ageing in a North Sami community

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ABSTRACT

This article explored experiences of ageing from interviews with a sample drawn from a population living in a North Sami community. Our focus is on older adult's involvement in activities that emphasise and maintain them as participants in specific kinds of activities that require knowledge, skills and mentorship, and to what degree it provides them with social capital and ethnic identity. We present data from in-depth interviews with female and male inhabitants ranging from 29 to 75 years of age. Thematic analysis of the data indicates that social capital and identity are particularly apparent within three contexts: 1. family and social relationships, 2. reindeer herding and other traditional labour and 3. Sami language. We conclude that older people hold vital positions in the local community regarding these three contexts. They transfer and reproduce cultural competence, and they manifest their roles and positions as active and valuable cultural members and practical contributors to the community. Their cultural involvement is not performed for their own advantage but is a regular part of their everyday lives, benefiting their special position within this sociocultural context and creating social capital.

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Introduction

The culture of the west is generally perceived as celebrating youth and perceiving older generations as burdens. This perception is acknowledged by older adults themselves [1]. Various empirical studies have also demonstrated that perceptions of older adults vary within various western societies. Bergeron and Lagacé [2] found that immigrants may value older adults' competence higher compared to the native western society where they live. Liliequist's [3], study of Sami communities in Sweden found that older adults were considered by younger generations to be substantial knowledge carriers and mediators with regard to traditional handicrafts and reindeer herding. Although these important efforts have been made to study older adults as carriers of knowledge, the focus on older adults' function as both carriers and active participants in the making and maintaining of sociocultural knowledge and skills in North Sami communities in Norway are limited, and similarly there has been little focus on how older adults' involvement in activities serve to emphasise and maintain social capital and ethnic identity. This article explored experiences of ageing from interviews with a sample drawn

from a population living in a North Sami community. Our focus is on older adult's involvement in activities that emphasise and maintain them as participants in specific kinds of activities that require knowledge, skills and mentorship, and to what degree it provides them with social capital and ethnic identity. The data in the current study comes from a North Sami community where the Sami culture is strong. Even if most Sami communities are similar to the predominant Norwegian communities, the differences between the cultures influence the particular position and forms of participation in specific activities or contexts of older members of the Sami community. In this article, we in particular highlight three activities or contexts older adults are engaged in relevant for our topic: family networks, reindeer herding and other forms of work, and language use.

Most of the people in the community for this study were Sami, an Indigenous group mostly living in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Historically, the Sami in Norway were subjected to a severe assimilation policy that resulted in many being forced to give up their language and cultural traditions [4], although some geographical areas were less affected than others.

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After World War II, and particularly since the late 1970s, the Sami have gained political and cultural recognition in Norway [4] and were recognised as an Indigenous people in 1990 (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation 220, ILO convention no 169). This recognition led to the establishment of a Sami parliament, and in some Sami administrative municipalities, the Sami and Norwegian languages were given equal status. Efforts have been made to build public institutions with competence in the three different Sami languages spoken in Norway, to recognise and value Sami history and culture, and to increase the number of Sami-speaking professionals within health and educational institutions. Over the last few decades, an increasing number of Norwegian cities and places have started using both Sami and Norwegian names and bilingual Sami-Norwegian signage [5].

We argue that older adults' position in this community benefits the community. In return, they gain a position in the community as cultural authorities, they are respected, needed and considered as a resource the community depends on.

Aging, social participation and social capital

Studies on ageing often focus on structural, social, cultural and relational issues that impact the lives of older adults in different ways, for instance, the transition to retirement [6], caring for elderly (Hamran and Blix, 7 [8], housing [9] and more relevant to our article ageing in rural places [10], older Sami women's relationship to nature and family [11], and Liliequist [12] who argues that older Sami women's knowledge of families and family relations are important identity markers in the struggle to recover Sami identity and strengthen the position of older women.

At some point ageing means turning away from a regular working life. Some people experience the transfer from working life to retirement as simple and wished for, while others experience it as demanding and undesirable [13,14]. Norwegian statistics [15] indicate that the risk of loneliness and depression among older adults is not particularly high but around 70–75 years old, retirees start to feel lonely. This is especially the case when older adults live alone, have declining health and lose close family members and friends [16].

Family networks are social networks and provide social space for interaction, sharing information and finding support [17] both materially and emotionally [18,19]. Such networks may be spaces for socialising and maintaining Sami cultural and ethnic identities [20]. Social networks provide the ground upon which

social capital can be built, and it is considered as one of the key determinants of health and wellbeing [21].

In addition to networks, social capital concerns norms and shared understanding in a group of people. Keeley [22], 103, defines social capital as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups”. Social capital can also reflect “the array of social contacts that give access to social, emotional, and practical support” [23], 6. In this definition, social capital consists of two mutually dependent components: norms and networks. Another similar way of defining social capital is “features of social organization, such as civic participation, norms of reciprocity and trust in others” [24], 36. Such features have been considered contextual and used to describe the qualities of places and communities [25]. Putnam [24] distinguishes between the two types of social capital; bonding and bridging. Bonding ties people from the same social background together and tends to create strong ingroups and loyalty and marginalise those who are not members of the ingroup while bridging links people of different backgrounds, such as civil rights movements. Key indicators of social capital, such as trust, reciprocity and cooperation, determine and influence social relations [26].

Arregle et al. [27] argue that family-based networks may be the most powerful forms of social capital. Referencing Keskitalo et al. [28], Kietäväinen and Tuulentie [20] show that the social capital developed within reindeer herding families is closely related to the fact that family members are dependent on each other to manage the herding workload, as well as running family homes. In another study from a Sami area, Selle et al. [29] state that Sami feel more connected to their local communities than non-Sami people living in the same area and Norwegians as a whole. Ness & Munkejord [11] point out that older adults in these areas also feel particularly connected to nature and activities in nature. Studies have also found that older adults who are still involved in such social networks as reindeer herding, experienced it as meaningful and maintained their sense of social and cultural belonging [12, 30], it made them feel appreciated as competent persons [31].

A sense of belonging and social membership does not only mean involvement in a business-like reindeer herding. Other cultural activities and social factors may also be involved in the making and maintaining of social and cultural belonging and identity, and they also support acquisition of cultural identity. Particularly, this is the case when it comes to language. According to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller [32], “The language spoken by somebody and his or her identity

as a speaker of this language are inseparable: This is surely a piece of knowledge as old as human speech itself. Language acts are acts of identity". Although some Sami families in the area of the present study changed their everyday language from Sami to Norwegian during their childhood, resulting in loss of their mother tongue, there is a revitalisation of Sami language competence which sustains it. Studies among young generations in these areas show that the Sami language is a strong ethnic identity marker among young people today [33, 34].

The formation of ethnic identity has been defined and widely discussed by various scholars (i.e. [34–36]). In this article, we, in line with Epstein and Heizler [37] and Kvernmo and Heyerdahl [38], define ethnic identity as a feeling of belonging to one ethnic group as Sami or more than one ethnic group, and we will add, produced in collaboration with others [39]. This article explored experiences of ageing from interviews with a sample drawn from a population living in a North Sami community. Our focus is on older adult's involvement in activities that emphasise and maintain them as participants in specific kinds of activities that require knowledge, skills and mentorship, and to what degree it provides them with social capital and ethnic identity. The aim of the article is to explore if and how social membership in social activities may gain older adults in this community

Methods

The present study looked at a sample of 36 interviews with people aged 27–74 years in a Sami inland municipality in Norway. We asked the interviewees or research participants how it is, and for the younger generations how they expect it and will be, to grow old in this community; what kind of activities they were involved in and expect to be involved in, characteristics with their society they valued the most and less, and if they planned to move to other communities when they retired or become older. The project was approved by the NSD (Norwegian Social Science Data Service).

In the interviews, we tried to catch what the research participants themselves emphasise when they reflect on the course of their own lives where they live. We wanted to follow their lifelines or "life maps" [40]. Life maps track a person's perspective on different events, the meaning they give the event today, and how they interpret those events. Life course interviews were chosen since they generate data that "looks at the experiences preceding and following the phenomenon in question, and the order in which they occurred" [41], 50. The important biographical turning points were

different for each informant. It must be emphasised that their "perspectives from today" were characterised by the types of memories highlighted by Rosenthal [41], and their expectations were based on how the research participants experienced treatment of older adults and how they usually acted. The interviews generated many reflections and stories.

We wanted to gather as many different reflections as possible and interviewed people at different life stages (27–74 years old). Even though the topic of this paper is ageing, ageing is part of a normal life course. Young as well as middle-aged people in a community have opinions about ageing. They may be based on own experiences with how it has been to age in the community for relatives or other people they know, what older adults often participate in, and their own expectations of how it will be for themselves to age in the community. However, most of the quotes we use stems from people 60+ since they are personally most concerned by ageing.

Some (5 persons) of the research participants were in their late twenties early thirties (25–35 years), some (5 persons) were middle-aged, while most of the research participants were 60 years or older (25 persons). The oldest was 74 years old. The research participants, 60 years or older, were either retired (5 persons) or planned to retire in the next few years. All the research participants had family and/or in-laws living in the municipality. Among those with grown-up children, most had at least one of child living in the municipality.

Several of the research participants worked or had retired from public professions such as administration, health and education. Those who were not employed in public professions were working within reindeer herding or other private enterprises. The most work-intensive seasons in reindeer herding are in spring and autumn, and most family members need to be involved.

We recruited the first research participants through a contact in the municipal government. Since many of those employed in the local government had been living in the area for many years, they had an overview of the residents in the age groups we wanted to reach. They gave us some names; we found their address and sent a letter which informed about the project and asked them to contact us if they wanted to participate. The first recruits then recommended others, who got our information letter. In this way, we used the so-called snowball method [42]. All interviews were conducted in person in their homes or workplaces.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian by the authors. Interview length ranged from 45 to 120 min.

All recordings were transcribed by an employee at the university of one of the authors. The research participants were offered to read the transcription of their interview, but none of them responded. Since the authors did not transcribe the interviews themselves, we checked the transcripts against the recordings to avoid misunderstandings. The quotes relevant for this article were translated to English by the authors and were later checked by a professional proofreading service. A thematic analysis was undertaken [43,44]. The transcript was read several times by the authors, and different initial ideas were noted by the authors independent of each other. Then, the ideas were compared and discussed. They were then discussed in relation to the overall research question, and afterwards different patterns were identified, and coded. At this point, we had several codes (as a. o. everyday language use, work, local social meeting places, reindeer herding, duodji, family relations, integration, exclusion and reciprocity), which after discussions were merged into three themes. All the data relevant to the themes were reviewed several times, where we outlined the specifics of each theme. Afterwards, the themes were given names [43]. Even though we did not send the transcript of the data back to the research participants, in all stages of the analysing process we reviewed, discussed, and reflected on our data. This reading, discussing and rereading clarified that the research participants highlighted three characteristics with their community significant for ageing: 1) family networks and social relation, 2) relation to and value of reindeer herding and traditional work and 3) significance of the Sami language. These three characteristics, described in the next section, contribute to social capital and ethnic identity.

Findings

One of the main findings is that the research participants to a large degree contextualised their ageing or expected ageing process within home and local community, and within cultural, social and institutional systems. Ageing was thus described with reference to a place and local frameworks.

Family and social relation

Research participants reported that, usually, family members from multiple generations in the community socialise together, and close friends are often relatives. Because they live in the same geographical area, social relations are easily maintained. Several of the research participants said they live close to their relatives, some are their closest neighbours, and some relatives

constitute minor farmyards. Families also often spend their leisure time together. Research participants said cross-generational groups of women meet to make duodji, traditional handicrafts, and the older women act as mentors. They reported that women also casually visit each other to chat over a coffee. Other communal activities mentioned include hunting, gathering berries and fishing together on the lakes of the mountain plateaus. Some of the research participants said they usually spend weekends with their families in cabins. Others work at reindeer herding together.

Research participants generally agree that family members help older relatives, often on a regular basis, and grandparents contribute to childcare in the family by babysitting or picking up children from day care. They also teach duodji and traditional cooking to their children's grandchildren.

According to our research participants, their family networks extend beyond the nuclear family to include cousin and second cousins, and sometimes beyond. The family social network is considered as reliable and consists of trusted members willing to lend a hand when needed. Members help each other when there is illness. They help to prepare for weddings, baptisms and confirmations. These extended family networks mean that there are large numbers of guests for these culturally significant ceremonies.

I have many relatives here, although my parents have moved to other places in the country, I see my relatives daily, and my grandmother every day, we live close to each other. I do not want to move away, I know that if something is bothering me or I need support, my relatives will support me (Woman, in her late twenties)

Some of the interviewees said that their family social networks differ from their non-Sami social networks. The non-Sami friendships were characterised as same-age, while the Sami family friendships were cross-generational.

I spend a lot of time with my relatives, cousins, second cousins and so on. It is very common to do that here; people mainly socialise with relatives. We visit each other in the evenings, drink coffee, talk, and sometimes knit or do other kinds of needlework. ... we differ in age, maybe ten years or more, some of us, but it doesn't matter, we have always known each other, it is easy and comfortable. The non-Sami, they mainly socialise with people their own age. (Woman, in her early forties)

The distinction between Sami and non-Sami ways of socialising, as pointed out by the woman above, is important. However, the social relations between families are not necessarily uncomplicated. Research participants mentioned that there were sometimes

familial conflicts that caused family members to stop socialising as a result, and these conflicts may have a long history not easily understood by younger generations. The story below demonstrates an exception to the many positive stories that we heard.

It is a good place to live. I have a good job, family, and a partner, and we want to raise a family here. I have friends and ... but there are also conflicts. You better not fall in love with a man from a family that your family does not get along with. That is not welcomed. I find that quite unreasonable and disturbing. (Woman, late twenties)

As indicated by research participants, there are limits to the closeness of Sami families. Most of the research participants in this study grew up in the community or close by, and some had moved to the community because they married one of its inhabitants. Independent of gender, those who had moved in said that they did not know if they would continue to live in the community if their spouse died first, and if none of their children had settled in the community. They thought they might be lonely.

I am not sure if the family of my spouse will care much for me if he dies first. The relation to the family goes through him. I think I would move closer to my children. (Woman, late fifties)

The interviewee's opinion goes against the positive Sami family perception, and she is uncertain about her position in her in-law's family, particularly as a widow.

Some of the research participants found social networks to be limiting when they consisted only of relatives, and they chose to be involved in outside networks. They invited newcomers in the community into their networks and socialised with colleagues from work or with people they met in other arenas. However, these networks may not have the same stability as the traditional family network.

... the social life here consists most often of family members, it is a pattern here, but we want it to be different. We would also like to spend time with colleagues, people who moved here and don't know anyone, immigrants and so. It is enriching. I have heard that this is not an easy place to move to because of the close relations between relatives it is excluding. Someone at my workplace said directly that she didn't need anyone else but her relatives ... But of course, they (the newcomers) often leave after a while ... (Woman, early seventies)

When talking about friends and who she meets on a regular basis, the woman above mentions only close relatives like her sister, sister-in-law and cousins.

The municipality offers social and welfare services to older adults, but according to the interviewees they do

not offer possibilities where people can socialise informally, such as cafes. This means that family networks become important to older adults for socialising and joint activities

Reindeer herding and other forms of labour

Several of the research participants were either directly or minimally involved in reindeer herding. According to the interviewees reindeer herding is very much a family business and is fundamental for the existence of the community and for the maintenance of North Sami culture and language. It is a substantial economic activity of the area and usually involves family members in addition to the herd owner.

Research participants reported that family members of all ages, including older adults who are able and interested, participate in the work of the herding business. Typically, there is a lot of work when the reindeer are gathered into pens for marking and when vulnerable calves are taken out of the flock for care.

We had reindeer before my husband died. I couldn't manage without him, but I still have some animals in my cousin's flock and contribute occasionally. I like to be in the mountains with the others for the marking. I like to contribute where I can ... I take care of weak calves outside my house until they become healthy and strong and can return to the flock. (Woman, late sixties)

A young reindeer herder talks of his frail grandmother, who is almost 90. Despite that, he says, she has an important job looking after reindeer calves in an enclosure by her house. She loves to nurture them back to health. "My grandma is frail now, but she helps out where she can, she are taking care of the weak calves outside her house. It is an important job".

Research participants near retirement age (67 years) said that they hope to contribute as pensioners. During summer, reindeer herding families move from their inland winter homes to the coast, where they have second homes grouped together for the summer as they watch and herd their reindeer.

I am going to take part in the reindeer herding for as long as I can. Not on a daily basis, and not when the weather is bad, I want to do what I enjoy most with reindeer herding, that is the privilege of the elderly who have handed over the responsibility for the herding to the younger generation ... the gathering of the flock, the marking and, yes, you know ... take part in discussions, be consulted ... I have been part of it my whole life ... When I am too old to drive myself, I hope my family will

bring us (he and his wife) to the coast, to join them.
(Male, mid-sixties)

The man above wants to contribute his competence and remain involved in herding when he gets older. Another reindeer herder added: *You don't retire from reindeer herding, it is a lifelong matter* (Male, early sixties).

Research participants reported that in most families where reindeer herding is a livelihood, often one spouse works in a different profession, which is necessary to generate a good income. Several research participants expressed the view that "reindeer herding is expensive". Most often it is the women who take a job outside of herding. One of the research participants expressed it this way:

Reindeer herding has a very high status here. We see that females with high educational levels marry reindeer herders. We don't have the classic situation where highly educated marry highly educated, that lawyers marry lawyers, medical professionals marry medical professionals.
(Woman, early forties)

She explained that even if a highly educated spouse contributes more significantly to the family income, reindeer herding is considered more important for the family as a whole. At the same time, many of the well-educated spouses have Sami cultural backgrounds and understand the significance of reindeer herding. They also seek to be involved, and regardless of their jobs, women contribute to reindeer herding in the busy seasons. They said that in this community, employers must facilitate them and make it possible to participate when needed.

For a stranger, it is striking how many people in the community are regularly and more irregularly involved, in the yearly reindeer herding cycle: close family members, distant relatives, and others within the family social network. It is a business that is highly valued among the research participants and in the community, and it is considered vital for maintenance of Sami culture and community.

The local labour market is limited, and the research participants were concerned that the lack of employment could threaten their community in the future, and ability to withhold their social networks. They are also worried about threats to reindeer herding from public regulation of traditional pasture areas, lack of pasture and possible expansion of the mining industry which could put limitations on herding. They argue the community needs more employment diversity, but not just any type of industry would be welcomed. The area has considerable mining potential and there are plans to start mining, but mining is understood as a threat. Those involved in herding consider it vital to maintain the tradition.

I am against mining in these areas, it would destroy so much and possibly pollute the water and ground. It is a threat to reindeer herding, and I don't want this to become an industrial community with mining workers from other places and countries commuting here. (Male, late fifties)

Language and activities

Sami is the first language of most of the studied community members, with Norwegian as the second language. Some of the research participants also spoke Finnish. The Finnish border is not far, and some research participants had relatives in Finland who they regularly visit. Finnish is taught as a foreign language in school. Some research participants said that although Sami is usually spoken in the community, Sami and Norwegian have equal status. The interviewees said that this can be both positive and problematic for older adults.

The positive aspect often mentioned is that older adults with poor Norwegian language competence can manage linguistically in their everyday lives, when Sami is spoken widely. When Sami is used as the everyday language by most people, also language competence is transferred to and maintained and developed by younger generations. Some research participants said they moved to the community because they wanted to raise their families where the Sami language was used every day. Some had moved to other parts of the country for the sake of their careers when their children were young, but they returned because they realised their children would not acquire Sami language competence when it was only used at home

The more problematic aspect the interviewees reported is that when older adults do not speak Norwegian very often, their ability to communicate in Norwegian is not maintained and developed. Research participants said this can be a problem when they need to speak Norwegian to communicate with health care professionals or other public officials who speak little or no Sami. They may also need to read and fill in application forms in Norwegian required by administrative offices, such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

Here we (Sami) are the majority. Most places we are not and have to use other languages. I am comfortable. I speak Norwegian well, but it is not my mother tongue ... and some elderly here are not as lucky as I am. Their competence in Norwegian is quite poor. I am also happy that most of our health professionals here (in this community) speak Sami and have cultural competence. (Woman early seventies)

Symbols of Sami culture are visible throughout the community. The dominance of Sami language is an obvious cultural trait, and in addition, many older adults, particularly women, dress in Traditional Sami outfits.

Several of the female research participants practiced duodji by sewing traditional Sami outfits or modernised variants. This was a topic that research participants often spontaneously mentioned when we asked about their activities. There were, however, differing opinions about how the outfits should be designed. For instance, some argued that the decorative ribbon on the outfit should have square corners and others said that the ribbons should have round corners. They said that women discussed details like this, even though it is ultimately the decision of the sewer and the wearer. Older family members were often described as mentors for younger women who were learning how to become skilful outfit makers.

I sew. I have four children, work, and busy days, but this is an important leisure activity for me. My mother who lives just over on the other side of the courtyard is my mentor. My aunt, who is my neighbour, is also. They are skilled and I often turn to my mother for help and advice. Sami cultural traditions are important for us to teach and maintain, for many here actually. I want to learn to sew, become skilful and to teach the skill to my daughters. I find it relaxing, and it is also our responsibility to maintain and transfer our cultural traditions to the next generations. (Woman, early forties)

The woman above is saying that not only does she want to learn a handicraft, she wants to learn how to be a Sami. The quote also shows that when relatives live close by and engage with each other daily, the context for acquiring different cultural skills is in place and strengthens family ties and culture.

Older adults, who had recently retired or would soon reach retirement age, said they looked forward to time to nurture hobbies and activities. The woman below said that she looks forward to spending more time on duodji, and together with family members who share her interests

I look forward to having time to spend on duodji, to improve my skills, and not having to rush when I make things, as I often do now. I have a daughter who wants to learn to make the outfitss, and I look forward to having time to guide and help her. (Woman, mid-sixties)

Our data material does not include any data about men engaged in duodji activities, although we were told that some do. Men directly involved in reindeer herding said they mostly spend their time on work and activities related to the herding business. Some said they spent their leisure time hunting and fishing in the area and

some also used to exercise for the sake of physical strength and fitness. Hunting and fishing seem to be common leisure-time activities among some men in the area, as is helping out family members in the herding business, and other forms of social activities and outdoor activities.

I spend time in the mountains. I like hunting and fishing. Most often I walk alone. It gives me time to myself and to think over matters. Sometimes I help my cousins with the flock. I have some animals in his flock and helps him out once in a while. If I wasn't as old as I am and had the job I have I would have been a reindeer herder, if I was allowed. I dreamed about it when I was younger, but I never had the opportunity. I love the nature we live in. Being in the mountains, we have here is relaxing, good for your physical and mental health (Male, mid sixties).

Some males told us they used to meet occasionally to talk and practice common “yoik” they remembered from their childhood.

I occasionally meet some old friends and “yoik”. We enjoy to recall yoiks we remember from our childhood. This is probably a sign of ageing, isn't it? I hope we can continue doing this together when I become a pensioner. I also look forward to ski more (as a pensioner), in the spring when the weather is good, and to spend more time on fishing. I enjoy fishing and spend quite some time on it (Male mid-sixties).

The man above talks about his leisure activities and what he hopes to be able to spend more time on practicing when retired. Among these activities are yoik and fishing. The yoik is “a distinct ancient vocal music tradition” [45], 1 and to many belongs to their Sami ethnic identity [46]. The male above also enjoy spending time outdoors, using the nature, for harvesting and recreation.

We have presented three characteristics with the community the research participant mentioned as significant for ageing and social capital. They concern certain social activities and social networks. These social networks, family-based and cross-generational as they often are, provide a ground upon which social capital and ethnic identity are built and maintained. As demonstrated, the members of these networks invest time, work force, skills and competence in their social relations. There exists a norm of reciprocity between the older generations and the younger, they help out and they expect to be helped out. These social networks are considered as stable and trust worthy. On direct question, none of the research participants were aware of loneliness among older adults in the community. Older adults gain social capital from their involvement in the areas.

Discussion

This study explored experiences of ageing by a sample from a population living in a North Sami community. Our focus has been on older adult's involvement in activities that emphasise and maintain them as participants in specific kinds of activities that require knowledge, skills and mentorship. Participation in such activities provides them with social capital and ethnic identity. The data came from interviews with inhabitants of this community, a community with specific cultural characteristics.

The findings show that one of the distinctive features of this community is that older people hold important positions in family networks, traditional work and reindeer herding cooperatives. They are carriers of cultural competence and knowledge, mentors for younger generations and active participants in educating duodji handicrafts and herding practices, helping with practical matters, they are participants in cross-generational social gatherings, and they have an important role in maintaining and reproducing Sami language and family network. Rather than a burden, older adults are presented as a resource. The findings were sorted under three subheadings mentioned above and will be discussed below. The data shows that having frequent and regular contact with relatives creates a stable family network. The network feels solid, and people in it feel that they count on each other. One of the research participants said that he expects he will benefit from his investments in family relations, that is, social capital building, and that his children will take care of him when he gets older. He expressed confidence in the way his community takes care of older adults. Bourdieu [47] showed that people in other traditional societies build their social relations intentionally for the benefits they may need later. The data from this study indicate that the norm of reciprocity within the family social network is strong and extends further than just the nuclear family. Studies of social capital in rural farming communities have found similar patterns within families [26].

The family network represents stable relations, and some find the family networks sufficient, while others try to bring in newcomers to their individual networks. To be a newcomer in a community characterised by close family ties and networks, can be challenging and uncertain, and some people feel a responsibility to reach out to newcomers. There may be cultural structural potentialities within such family-based networks to produce outsiders in the community (e.g. [48]). Nystad et al. [49] found that newcomers without competence in Sami language excluded adolescence from

full membership in local communities, and it is likely that incapacity in the language spoken by the majority also is excluding for adults.

Research participants in their late fifties and sixties with Sami language competence but without close family members in the community express concerns for becoming outsiders if their spouse pass away first and left lonely and fragile. There is a distinction between those who grew up in the community and experience belonging and those who did not and are uncertain of their individual social membership status and the strength of social capital in the community. Although the relational resilience, that is, the linkage between people and the support they give each other [49] within a social network may be strong among the participant in a social network, the status of the members is seldom equal and everyone are not treated equally by everyone in such networks.

Sigga-Marja Magga [50] 91) argues that "duodji, or Sami handicraft, is one of the most visible and important manifestations of Sami reality". The data in this study show that duodji is vital both to those who enjoy being part of the making and those who do not practice the handicraft themselves, but benefit from the handcrafters' work. The makers do it for the sake of cultural maintenance and transfer, for the enjoyment and social communality that comes with it. To be well skilled in the craft is highly valued. Gustafsson [51] who explored Lulesami womens' production of Sami handicraft found that duodji creates personal and social well-being in their everyday life and strengthen their cultural identity.

The older adults in our data material have significant functions as mentors and helpers when it comes to maintaining and transferring competence in duodji to others. We found this to be a gendered viewpoint, as many of the women we interviewed said they wanted to learn to make and improve their outfit making skills and produce Sami handicrafts, while it was not mentioned by the male research participants. Those women who were approaching retirement looked forward to the possibility of spending more time on duodji and mentorship for family members. While some males within reindeer herding looked forward to be able to limit their engagement in the business to the most pleasant work operations and activities as pensioners, and spend more time with their established leisure and outdoor activities for which conditions are well suited locally. Among these activities include continuing the participation in the herding industry, as well as the practice of yoik, which is related to ethnic identity.

The joint social situations of manufacturing duodji produce and maintain communality between the

women belonging to different generations, and they provide social capital in the form of social bonds as Putnam [52] says between generations and persons, and they also transfer and develop skills and taste. Bourdieu [47] argues that our consumer preferences are not the result of natural individualistic choices but are socially conditioned and reflect a position in a symbolic hierarchy determined and maintained by the socially dominant in order to enforce their distance or distinction from other classes of society. In our data, Traditional Sami outfit design shows that not all the duodji crafters shared the same taste. There may be disagreement about outfit details and what constitutes good taste. Magga [53] who study Sami handicraft mentions that social control may be practiced through duodji by older women in communities that manifest their expertise in the handicraft in relation to others. This kind of social control is also expressed in our data, in the story about disagreements over the corners of the decoration ribbons between older women.

With expert position in a network, authority often follows [54], and the mentors in duodji making may maintain and transfer their preferred rules, for instance for Sami outfit design, to the next generations and uphold distinctions to others with a different taste or ideas about what traditionally is the correct cultural norm. Whatever corners they make, the women maintain traditions and cultural knowledge and competence, and belonging [55]. Passing on competence and taste usually takes place within family networks, but our data does not include any information about whether these differences are related to status hierarchy in the community

The role of older adults as participants, mentors and helpers is also strong in reindeer herding. This is also shown by other studies of Sami communities [3,12, 30]. Aléx et al. (2007) and Kietäväinen and Tuulentie [20] state that reindeer herding is also seen as a business where young and old work together, and where the economic activity is inextricably linked to everyday family life. Similar to duodji is reindeer herding cross-generational and family-based networks. Older adults help their families with childcare, transportation to activities and school, practical work in the herding business, and participate in reflections concerning problem-solving. This close involvement and participation has also been found in farming communities. Heenan [26] found that older adults represented a substantial economic and social resource in rural farming communities. Like the participants in our study, they help the younger generations in the family with, for instance, child care, practical farming work and house work.

Their contribution and participation give them a sense of belonging and meaning.

Our data show that many research participants would like to be part of reindeer herding, even in a limited manner, and that they would like to maintain participation as they grow older. Often these were reindeer herders themselves who had transferred the main responsibilities for the enterprise to their offspring, but also people who grew up in reindeer herding families and had retrained some reindeer that were being maintained in a relative's flock or had developed close relations to the business and experienced the involvement as vital and meaningful to them, or if they had not been involved in the business but still felt it was vital for their culture and local community. As one of the research participants pointed out, as a pensioner he intends and expects to be involved in the business as long as possible, reindeer herding and the social participation that comes with it is not something you pension yourself from. In our understanding of the data, he and several others who join, help and find the reindeer herding business as vital for their own everyday life, the local culture and community perceive reindeer herding as "a way of life", not as an occupation from which to retire entirely or to be excluded from at a certain age when the younger generation takes it over. Helmreich [56], 6, defines a way of life as a "cultural, social, symbolic and pragmatic way of thinking and acting that organise human communities", and as Jaeggi [57], 17, claims, it is an "inert bundles of practices" influencing peoples' lives in general.

This finding is supported by Kietäväinen and Tuulentie [20], study of social capital in reindeer herding cooperations in Finland, but unlike Møllersen et al. [58], study in Norway who argue that traditional reindeer herding used to be recognised as a way of life but has now become an occupation. The differences in the understanding of the reindeer herding status between Møllersen et al.'s study and ours may be due to different opinions among the research participants in the two studies, or different opinions among generations. In our study, most of the research participants directly involved in reindeer herding are over 50 years old. However, the younger generation in this study recognised the contribution of older adults to the industry and acknowledged the significance of belonging to herding culture. It might also be a question of context. In our data material, most of the research participants, directly involved in reindeer herding or not, describe it as vital and support the idea by Jaggie, that it influences peoples' life in general.

Reindeer herding is closely related to family and to the dominant local culture. Participation in reindeer

herding, even if it is restricted, strengthens important family bonds while it also reproduces cultural membership and social capital. It is not uncommon that women with higher education marry men with lower education [59] but who are involved in the reindeer herding industry who according to our data has a high status and is attractive to be attached to. This is also stated by Johannesen and Skonhoft [60] and Ravna et al. [61]. In this way, they gain or maintain social capital, social membership and participation within the herding industry and become a part of a network where according to Liliequist [12] older Sami women's knowledge are important identity markers in the struggle to recover Sami identity and strengthen the position of older women.

An essential cultural feature of this community is the Northern Sami language. In Sami areas, the relationship between the Sami and Norwegian languages has been problematic. Norwegian is the national majority language [5, 62], and a large part of the Sami population have lost their competence in Sami languages as a result of the historical assimilation policy. All variants of Sami in Norway are minority languages, and this recognition has led to protection and facilitation. Although Northern Sami is the largest Sami language community in Norway, it is still a minority language that belongs to a people that may be characterised as an ethnic minority [33]. This makes this language extremely important and valuable, both as an ethnic and cultural symbol, as a sign of ethnic and cultural membership, and as a means of interaction between members of an ethnic group.

As a minority language, it is also vulnerable [5, 33] and the research participants are concerned about this situation and the need to educate the young and use and expand the use of Sami language. In the studied community, Sami is the majority language and some people, particularly older adults, almost only speak Sami. Maintenance of Sami language competence is therefore important for both practical and symbolic reasons. The distinctive Sami language dominance also has consequences for cohesion and shared cultural identity. Older adults are a fundamental resource in this respect.

As long as family members, health professionals and other professionals or helpers speak Sami, Sami adults with poor Norwegian language competence mostly manage locally. This is also important when frailty occurs with memory loss and possibly dementia [63] or in communication and care as patient [64]. The ability to use one's everyday life language, the common communication tool by the person and the community, is not only related to being a carrier and transferer of

language skills for the younger generation, to being able to communicate in a decent manner with professionals and helpers when problems occur; it is also about using a language that is experienced as yours [5]. Grosjean [65] have found that some bilinguals do not have any preferred language. In the studied community, they do. Even if many are skilled in Norwegian, they prefer Sami. In addition to what is mentioned above, it is probably also related to the fact that Sami community confronts past colonialism history, but also possesses indigenous identity [49]. Putnam [52] argues that social capital arises through bonding and bridging. Bonding is understood as ties of solidarity between similar groups of people, as we find in families, and bridging between people that are not particularly close but might have a cause to fight for in common. Within family relations, we are talking about bonding between family members who help to get by [26]. In this data material, the networks are mainly family-based whether the members of the networks meet to work with reindeer herding business issues, duodji, or other types of activities. According to Arregle et al. [27], are such family-based networks as reindeer herding the most powerful form of social capital. The family members are dependent on their ability to collaborate successfully both as herders and as family members at home. It influences their "way of life" in a fundamental manner.

There are forms of reciprocity involved in the exchange between generations, and as pointed out, trust and commitment to the family networks. These powerful networks are open for their members and most often closed for others. That may be recognised as one of the dark sides of social capital [26], and as pointed out by Moore and Carpiano [25] sometimes social capital networks are practicing matters detrimental for their members health and wellbeing rather than benefiting and upholding. In our data material, conflicts between family networks are described, but not within. Conflicts between social networks may reinforce them [25] and as demonstrated in the findings demand loyalty from the members of the network. This may strengthen the internal social capital in the networks that gives social, emotional and practical support [23]. However, maintenance of such conflicts may also counteract creation of new social bonds between different kinship networks and as such produce broader social networks in the community. The participation in social activities presented in this study seems to gain older adults, and they seem to participate in the production of the social networks and social capital as well as being recipients of what is produced.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored older adult's involvement in community activities that serve to emphasise and maintain their social capital and identity. The data demonstrate that gaining social capital and ethnic identity are particularly apparent within three social contexts: family relations, reindeer herding and other forms of culturally significant work and language.

This community is a part of a Sami majority area, and a large part of the population has Sami as their everyday language. We have explored characteristic aspects of membership in the society and how it seems to gain older adults. To them, to be part of this society is an advantage.

In this article, we understand ethnic identity as a product of what you do and the activities you are involved in. We argue that to maintain and transfer cultural competence and language competence, activities connected to the transfer and maintenance of ethnic identity must be performed. Ethnic identities are produced in collaboration with others, in face-to-face interaction, by participation in situations or activities with others [39]. The ageing population is vital for transferring and maintaining ethnic identity, and they produce and gain social capital from participation in such activities. Older adults' participation upholds their position as valuable social members of the community, and they contribute significantly to production and reproduction of cultural and ethnic identity. Cultural involvement is not performed intentionally for the benefit of older persons, rather it is a regular part of everyday life as practised in the community

We argue that the social capital gained by older adults when they sustain reindeer herding and duodji is beneficial for the community and for the individual. Older adults are also available to help with childcare and other family tasks. In line with Gray [23], we argue that they build their social capital by giving social, emotional and practical support. Older adults' competence, their social functions, roles and status as participants give them, standing and produce and maintain social capital in social networks. Older people are part of social networks, and family networks where they have an important position. They are necessary participants with their expertise, but also because the reindeer herding, which is also a cultural marker, needs volunteers, and the elderly want to participate, and they have the necessary skills. Participation in reindeer herding or production of handicrafts upholds social memberships, belonging, and provides well-being, also for those who are not yet elderly but are soon to become. The coming elderly in our data expect to be treated as the previous and contemporary elderly, as

members of the social networks, and experience belonging to the local community.

Limitations and implications

We tried to recruit an equal number of women and men, but more women than men agreed to participate in the study. In the younger age group, the gender distribution was more equal with 6 women and 4 men, but the group over 60 years comprised 16 women and 10 men. The gender imbalance is evident in the data, as we gathered more quotes from women than from men. This inequality is reinforced by the fact that the focus of our study seemed to appeal more to women than men, since women often gave more detailed reflections on the topics of ageing and identity than men. As a result, we have more information about women's lives than men's. Although this might be a limitation, we do not believe that this bias has a significant impact on the data analysis and conclusions for the study.

Implications

There are benefits of living in a community where the population is naturally integrated in significant local activities and social networks, and where older people are given status. Social networks in communities also protect people in general, but maybe in particular vulnerable citizens as older adults may become, against loneliness, which again is a threat to public health and wellbeing.

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