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# Being a Young Sami in Sweden

## Living Conditions, Identity and Life Satisfaction

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**ABSTRACT Objective:** The aim of the present study was to illuminate the contemporary cultural reality of being a young Sami in Sweden, with special reference to issues such as identity/self-perception, autonomy, and experiences of being ill treated and discrimination.

**Design:** The study comprises a qualitative and a quantitative part. The qualitative part includes meetings, discussions and dialogues with young Sami and others. The quantitative part includes a questionnaire on socioeconomic conditions, Sami ethnicity, experiences of being ill-treated because of a Sami background, specific questions on identity and self-perception, questions about self-determination, and thoughts and expectations of the future. The sample consists of 876 young Sami aged 18–28, of whom 516 (59 per cent) responded to the questionnaire.

**Results:** A majority are proud to be Sami and wish to preserve their culture. 71 per cent have a close connection to a Sami community. Most of the young Sami have had to explain and defend their culture and way of life. Nearly half had perceived discrimination or ill-treatment because of their ethnicity, with reindeer herders reporting a higher degree of ill-treatment (70 per cent). Reindeer herders exist in a severe environment with an insecure legacy. Most of the young Sami in this study have a positive self-perception and think that their lives are meaningful. Very few dropped out of school and very few are unemployed.

**Conclusion:** We believe that there are protective factors that potentially explain the well-being of this group; a strong feeling of belonging among the Sami, strong connections to family, relatives and friends and good sociocultural adaptation (to have a job, completed school).<sup>1</sup>

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**KEYWORDS** young Sami, perceived discrimination, well-being, ethnic identity

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## Introduction

Since prehistoric times, the Sami have lived in an area that now extends across four countries, comprising the Kola Peninsula in Russia, northernmost Finland, the coastal and inland region of northern Norway, and parts of Sweden from the middle of the country northwards. This region is called *Sápmi* ['Samiland'].

The official number of Sami in Sweden is between 20,000 and 25,000. This figure is probably far too low: Hassler and colleagues estimate the number at 40,000 to 50,000, calculated from various registers such as the Sami Parliament electoral register, depending on the way Sami identity is defined (Hassler *et al.* 2004).

Around 10 per cent of Sami in Sweden are employed in reindeer husbandry. This is one of the traditional Sami occupations, others being handicrafts, hunting and fishing. More recent professions include tourism, media, art and music. In Sweden, reindeer husbandry is organised in a *sameby*, which is both an economic association and a specific geographical area. Nationally, there are 51 *samebys* from the middle to the far north of the country. There are approximately 4,500 reindeer owners in the country overall. Many of the reindeer herding Sami also work part-time in the majority community.

Until *Sápmi* was drawn into the sphere of interest of the surrounding nations in the Middle Ages, the region had been viewed as a barren wasteland. The Sami were not organised as a state, instead living in *sijdda* societies (Ruong 1982). *Sijddas* were groups of families living in an area with set boundaries, with hunting and fishing rights divided within each *sijdda*. From the middle of the nineteenth century, there was increased interest in exploiting these northern lands for agriculture. Darwin's theory of the evolution of species was soon applied to explain the development of the human races and their various cultures. Leading scientists of the day ranked farming and industrial societies above hunter-gatherer and nomadic societies, meaning that it was the destiny of Sami culture to give way to superior agriculture. Settlers were encouraged to move to the land that Sami had used for grazing and paid taxes on for hundreds of years. As a result, the Sami lost a great deal of their winter grazing areas, limiting their opportunities to live in the traditional manner. Many lost their reindeer herds and suffered hunger as a result (Lundmark 2002).

The Swedish policy was two-pronged: segregation on the one hand and assimilation on the other. Reindeer herders should be segregated and remain in their traditional nomadic way of life under the dictum "Lapps should stay Lapps" (Mörkenstam 1997; Lundmark 2002). This expression represented the Government's view that if the Sami lived in houses and received a good

education, they would not wish to continue the hard life of reindeer herding. A special form of boarding school was set up, with lower standards and lower aspirations. In temporary wooden constructions, a type of wooden shack, the children lived far from their parents (Pusch 1998; Amft 2000). In such schools many children became ill. Pusch describes the cultural hierarchy and nomadic boarding school system established by law in 1913. This aimed to keep the mountain Sami segregated, not only from the Swedish population but also from the forest Sami who were regarded as even lower socially (Pusch 1998). The forest Sami were settled and herded their reindeer in a more restricted forest area and were not nomadic.

The statement “Lapps should stay Lapps” also expressed a general view that the Sami could not be farmers and therefore could not receive the same state support to farming as other Swedish inhabitants. Those Sami who did not own reindeer should simply be assimilated into the Swedish society and in a sense cease to be Sami. This assimilation policy led to extensive loss of ethnic identity, language and traditional knowledge, both in Sweden and Norway (Minde 2003; Lehtola 2004).

The long history of discrimination and racism may have had a significant impact on Sami self-esteem. However, over the last 30 years a strong indigenous movement has emerged worldwide, and the Sami are now incorporated into an international network of indigenous peoples. This has strengthened their position as an ethnic minority. Many indigenous peoples are fighting for their rights to land and water. This double influence and the kind of impact it may have on young Sami today is the background to the current study.

## The Sami Identity and Context

Identity is here viewed as a social construction that is formed and developed in a context of relations to others through life. Ethnic identity is constructed through a complex of processes, depending on self-reflection and self-assignment to a very high degree but also determined by descent. There are at least three groups of Sami: young Sami who grow up without knowledge of their Sami heritage and who as adults start to search and explore this phenomenon; those who grow up aware of their Sami heritage but without being a member of a *sameby* (Sami community); and those who grow up surrounded by other Sami as members of a *sameby* (Åhrén 2008).

Phinney (1990) conducted a review of empirical research on ethnic identity and found that three theoretical frameworks had a significant impact on the conceptualisation of ethnic identity: social identity theory, a theory of acculturation and culture conflict, and identity formation, drawing on a psychoanalytic perspective. Social identity theory, like acculturation theory,

concerns the potential problems resulting from participating in two cultures. Both theories acknowledge that ethnic identity is dynamic, changing over time and context. Psychoanalytic theory emphasises the solving of different development tasks in the formation of identity (Erikson 1968). Berry and colleagues emphasize that acculturation is a two-dimensional process in which both the relationship with ethnic culture and the relationship with the dominant culture must be considered and that strong identification with both groups is indicative of integration or biculturalism, while identification with neither group suggests marginality (Berry *et al.* 2006).

There have been very few studies in Sweden on young Sami, their living conditions and life satisfaction, and there is very limited knowledge about what it is like to be a Sami today. In Norway a larger number of studies have been conducted, but they generally report few overall differences between Sami and their non-Sami peers regarding behavioural or emotional problems (Kvernmo & Heyerdahl 2003; Heyerdahl *et al.* 2004; Kvernmo 2004). An epidemiological study from Greenland found no statistically significant differences in reported internalisation symptoms between young people in Greenland and their Danish peers (Curtis *et al.* 2006). However, Bjerregaard *et al.* concluded that accidents, suicides, violence, and substance abuse are of major importance for the pattern of ill health in most Inuit communities (Bjerregaard *et al.* 2004).

Kirmayer *et al.* (2003) reviewed recent literature examining links between a history of colonialism and government intervention in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They found that, with some exceptions, there are high rates of social problems, demoralisation, depression, substance abuse, suicide and other mental health problems in aboriginal communities.

## Aim

The overall aim of this study is to illuminate and explore the contemporary cultural reality of being a young Sami in Sweden by investigating some basic socioeconomic conditions, their view of Sami culture and Sami way of life, existential issues, self-perception, and experience of ignorance and being ill treated because of ethnicity.

We further wish to make some comparisons between the Sami themselves, considering gender, education, rural or urban living, occupation (to be a reindeer herder or not), and perceived discrimination.

## Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to illuminate the research questions.

## Qualitative Section

As it was important to give groups and individuals opportunities to participate in the research process, a kind of Participatory Action Research (PAR) was applied (Foote Whyte (ed.) 1991). This was accomplished through:

- Meetings and discussions with Sáminuorra, the Sami youth organisation (2007 and 2008)
- Participating in a Sami Youth Conference in Lycksele (2008) attended by young Sami from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia, with the theme of mental health.

We also participated in a “round-table meeting” by invitation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (BO) in Stockholm (2008) as part of their commission “Let Sami children talk.” In this meeting a representative of the office of the Ombudsman against Discrimination (DO) participated and urged us to ask questions about perceived discrimination/being badly treated because of ethnicity.

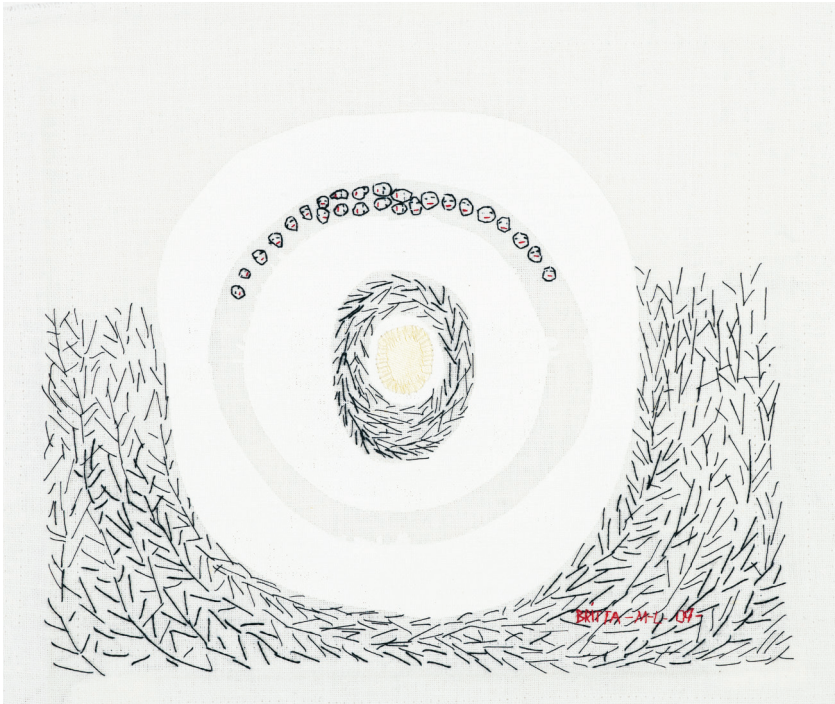


Fig. 1. *The SCHULLS* by Britta Marakatt-Labba. According to Sami belief, one must let the departed rest in peace. The skulls which were dug up for supposed research reasons caused problems for the souls of the deceased, still restlessly searching for the skeletons robbed from them. In our study it has been important that the informants felt involved throughout the research process in order to avoid disrespect.

## Quantitative Section

The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of the discussions with young Sami, our knowledge of the Sami culture and clinical experiences of more than 30 years of using a lot of traditional self-evaluating scales considering self-esteem, depression, anxiety and anger (Antonovsky 1980; Ouvinen-Birgerstam 1985; Beck *et al.* 2001; Eriksson & Lindström 2006). In 2008, a questionnaire was sent out to a group of young Sami aged 18–28 years.

The questionnaire consisted of several sections:

- Socioeconomic conditions: gender, age, educational level, occupation, family situation and place of residence.
- Questions about Sami ethnicity: knowledge of the Sami language, connection to a *sameby* or Sami organisation, engagement in any Sami activities, thoughts and expectations about the future.
- Perceived discrimination, questions of being ill treated/or assaulted because of their Sami background.
- More specific questions about self-perception/self-esteem and, connected to this, questions about autonomy and possibilities to participate in important decisions.

Other domains in the questionnaires were health, alcohol use, and contact with suicide. Results from this part of the questionnaire will be presented elsewhere.

## Participants

In order to identify and obtain addresses contact was made with many different Sami organisations, including the Sami Parliament, the director of Sami schools, the Sami Education Centre in Jokkmokk, and the Sami Youth Organisation.

The final group consisted of 876 persons aged 18–28 years. They were all sent a questionnaire to their home address. After one reminder, 516 (59 per cent) returned the questionnaire.

## Statistical Analysis and Ethical Approval

The results of the questionnaire were examined using frequency tables and cross-tables with the Pearson chi-square test and/or Fisher's exact test to determine potential statistical significance.

This study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Committee in Umeå (§ 06-007). Participation in interviews, group sessions and completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymity was provided. The study was conducted according to the Helsinki Declaration.

# Results

## Qualitative Section

In a meeting with the Sami youth organisation, the 60 participants were divided into working groups with 7–9 participants each to discuss the following questions: What is it like being a young Sami?; Do young Sami feel well?; Are there any differences between female and male Sami regarding well-being?; What questions do you think are important to ask concerning health/well-being? All the groups reported their results and a lively discussion ensued, from which two concrete themes emerged: Pressure from within and pressure from without.

The young Sami spoke of “great pressure to preserve Sami culture and the language in particular.” They were very conscious of the fact that so few people are speaking Sami that it is in danger of being lost. Some were very concerned about the possibility of continuing reindeer herding, as the Sami are losing grazing land to other interests. It became clear that the economic situation of reindeer herding is very difficult, with considerable expenses. For example, unlike forestry, farming and horticulture, reindeer herding does not receive tax subsidies on fuel. For some young Sami, it would be a difficult personal dilemma to choose to do something else instead of reindeer herding, as nobody would then continue the tradition after their parents.

Some of the young women spoke of their interest in reindeer herding, which was not encouraged. They felt disappointed and sometimes excluded. One of the groups concluded as follows: “It’s hard for the girls to get in [to reindeer herding] and it’s hard for the boys to get out.” Further, it was sometimes difficult to resolve conflicts between Sami groups as all the time was taken up fighting for rights against the majority society. Some individuals felt insecure regarding questions of identity—who is Sami and who is not (Åhrén 2008).

The young respondents stated that it was not easy to be a Sami in Sweden, because Sami are valued less and suffer discrimination and racism. Many talked of their experiences of others’ ignorance about the Sami and their history. They stated that in “Swedish” schools, pupils learn very little about the Sami, with a great deal of prejudice as a result. For example, it is often claimed that Sami drink a lot of alcohol, despite the fact that nobody has undertaken a study of this question in Sweden (in Norway there are studies looking into this issue [Spein 2008]). A Sami in traditional dress is easy to identify, and if you then get drunk it is easy to extrapolate from one individual to the entire group. The young people stated that they very often

had to explain and defend Sami culture and the Sami way of life. Always defending and explaining is not easy, and sometimes this prevented the young people from going out and having fun.

In the discussions, it became obvious that the most positive and strengthening aspects of their lives were the strong connections to family and relatives and a strong feeling of belonging to the Sami people. In working with reindeer, the family plays an extremely important role, in which everybody is necessary and able to help. Even children have tasks to fulfil.

The young people preferred to be anonymous in this kind of research and felt a questionnaire was appropriate. The discussions and dialogues outlined above subsequently formed the basis for the questionnaire.

## Results of the Questionnaire

### Socio-Demographic Background

Most of the young people (78 per cent) lived in the four northernmost regions of Sweden (Norrbotten 46 per cent, Västerbotten 21 per cent, Jämtland 8 per cent and Västernorrland 3 per cent). However, 6 per cent lived in the Stockholm region and 4 per cent in the Gothenburg area.

Table 1 presents some socio-demographic background data.

A majority of the respondents were female (57 per cent). One third lived in a settlement with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants (20 per cent lived in a settlement with fewer than 200 inhabitants). One third lived in a city with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

Education: 63 per cent had completed 12 years of school, and 31 per cent had completed more than 13 years of education, meaning college or university. Only 6 per cent had received nine years or less of education.

Occupation/work: 62 per cent of the group were working and the majority had full-time jobs; 80 per cent answered the open question on the type of employment. 33 per cent were studying, mostly full time. Just 1.9 per cent were unemployed or on sick leave, and 2.3 per cent were receiving government subsidies to stimulate employment. The respondents thus reported many kinds of work. 10 per cent worked in reindeer herding.

### Sami Identity

A majority of the respondents (83 per cent) were “proud of being Sami” and 16 per cent chose the response alternative “I don’t think of that.” As many as 71 per cent answered that they had a close connection to a *sameby*, and 82 per cent had participated in traditional Sami activities such as working with reindeer, hunting, fishing and handicrafts.



Table 1. Socio-demographic/economic conditions among females and males in per cent.

Age	Female N=295	Male N=220	Total N=516
18–22 year	41.4	40.8	
23–28 year	58.6	59.2	
Missing information			n=1
<b>Years of education</b>			
≤ 9 years	5.1	6.4	
10–13 year	58.7	70.5	
≥ 14 years	36.2	23.2	
Missing information			n=2
<b>Living situation</b>			
Alone	25.3	20.5	
With partner	30.1	32.9	
With partner and children	14.2	7.8	
Alone with children	1.7	0.5	
With parents	24.6	32.4	
Other alternative	4.2	5.9	n=7
Missing information			
<b>Community size</b>			
1–3,000	35.1	36.3	
3,000–10,000	13.0	12.8	
10,000–50,000	18.9	25.7	
50,000–	33.0	25.2	
Missing information			n=13

One quarter of the young people could speak Sami (26 per cent), and a little over one quarter could understand the language but did not speak it. Eighty-six per cent responded “Yes” to the question “Do you want to learn Sami?” One quarter received their early education in one of the five Sami schools in Sweden (available from 6 to 12 years of age).

### Perceived Discrimination/Being Ill-Treated and Experience of Ignorance about the Sami

Table 2 shows the responses to questions about experiences of being ill-treated because of the Sami background.

As many as 37 per cent of the young people had requested education in the Sami language but had not received it. 64 per cent answered “No” to the question “Did you learn anything about the Sami or Sami culture in a normal school?” A quarter replied “yes” to the question, “Has a teacher said something bad about the Sami?” and below are some citations from 135 examples of teachers’ comments:

	Yes	No	N
"Have you received education in the Sami language?"	63 %	37 %	n=410
"Did you learn anything about the Sami or Sami culture in normal school?"	36 %	64 %	n=503
"Have you found derogatory formulations about the Sami in school textbooks?"	41 %	59 %	n=496
"Have you been treated unfairly by a teacher because of your Sami background?"	17 %	83 %	n=516
"Has a teacher said something bad about the Sami?"	25 %	75 %	n=516
"Have you been treated badly by other people?"	45 %	55 %	n=516

Table 2. Questions about experience of being ill-treated because of ethnicity and ignorance about the Sami.

They talked as if we didn't exist, as we were far away in the forests. Teachers from areas without Sami know nothing about their country's indigenous people or the opposing group that hates Sami; they say nothing, and we are, like, invisible to them.

My alleged laziness and lack of ability in maths was due to my Sami ethnicity.

I can't speak my native language because teachers told my mother that it would confuse me if I was educated in Sami.

The reindeer herders had twice as often experienced "teachers saying something bad about the Sami" as other participants in the study (43 per cent compared to 22 per cent). On the topic "Have you often or sometimes been unfairly treated by teachers because of your Sami ethnicity," 38 per cent of the reindeer herders answered "yes" compared to 10 per cent of the others.

To the question "Have you been treated badly by other people," 45 per cent of respondents replied "yes." Here are some examples:

They say that we live on subsidies, drive the reindeer on the railway track to get money, that we have many advantages (we can use land for grazing, we have fishing and hunting rights).

Derogatory comments about the Sami occur:

If I'm looking for a job, I never tell them about my Sami ethnicity because then the job might go to somebody else.

I have been spat on. They have thrown stones at me. I have been beaten because I spoke Sami. They told me to go to hell. Generally I have been assaulted and my existence has been threatened by adults and children. There is a lot more but over time I have repressed a great deal. At the same time it has all made me stronger.

At primary school it was usual to be called “Lapp bastard.” The teachers never took any notice. It was as if they condoned the bullying with their silence.

As regards the question on being ill-treated by others, there was a statistically significant difference between the reindeer herders and the total group, with 70 per cent of the reindeer herders having been ill-treated by others because of their ethnicity compared to 43 per cent of the non-herding group.

## Sami Culture and the Sami Way of Life

Nearly all (92 per cent) thought that it was important to preserve and strengthen the Sami culture. Most of the young people felt it was important to have meeting places for Sami, and 63 per cent attended Sami ceremonies or festivals, such as the Jokkmokk Winter Market, or participated in various Sami sports championships.

Many responded to the open question “What is for you the most important part of the Sami culture?” A third mentioned the Sami language and its preservation. Another third answered “reindeer” or “reindeer herding” and the possibility to continue herding. Half of those who mentioned language also stated that reindeer herding was important, and vice versa. After these, respondents also mentioned the bonds among the Sami with strong ties to family and friends and a feeling of connection with nature. It became obvious that the young people see Sami culture as a way of life, an entirety, a lifestyle, a special way of feeling, thinking, learning and perceiving throughout life. Here is an example:

To me it's a special and fundamental relationship to everything else, to nature and people. Sami culture influences my values and perception in every way and unfortunately in contrast to Swedish society. The yoik, the Sami way of singing, is very important for me but I don't want to prioritise anything above anything else, because the culture is a whole, a way of thinking, feeling and perceiving throughout your life.

Two questions focused on whether the respondents had felt forced to defend or explain Sami culture and the Sami way of life. Here, 82 per cent had “often” or “sometimes” felt forced to do so, and 90 per cent had “often” or “sometimes” been asked to do so.

## Self-Perception

In Table 3 responses to a number of questions on self-perception are presented along with statistically significant differences between male and female respondents

Most respondents have a positive self-perception and are satisfied with their life situation and performance. They feel secure and have somebody to talk to about important matters. A majority have a good relationship with their family.

The responses to the questions in Table 3 were dichotomized, so that very often/quite often became “often” and seldom/very seldom became “seldom.” Six of the questions show statistically significant gender differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). Female respondents were less satisfied with their life situation and performance, and thought about the meaning of their life more often than male respondents. They also reported less often having a good relationship with their family, and did not feel secure to the same extent as male respondents. Male respondents reported that they did not have somebody to talk to about important matters to the same extent as female respondents.

As many as 21.2 per cent of the reindeer herders seldom had anybody to talk to about important matters compared to 7.3 per cent of the other respondents in the study ( $p < 0.05$ ).

One of the questions in Self-perception “I have somebody to talk to about important matters” showed significant statistical differences in the back-ground variable community size; 15,1 per cent ( $n=27$ ) of those living in a place with fewer than 3000 inhabitants had seldom somebody to talk to about important matters (not showed in the table).

Table 3. Self-perception in per cent for young male (N=220) and female (N=295) Sami.

		Very often	Quite often	Seldom	Very seldom	p
I am satisfied with my performance	Male	37.9	55.7	5.9	0.5	0.006
	Female	28.8	57.3	11.9	2.0	
I feel alert and full of energy	Male	30.6	54.3	13.7	1.4	ns
	Female	23.7	55.3	19.3	1.7	
I think my appearance is okay	Male	42.2	44.0	13.8	0.0	ns
	Female	27.5	55.9	12.2	4.4	
I am satisfied with my life situation	Male	41.3	50.5	7.3	0.9	0.005
	Female	32.7	50.7	14.3	2.4	
I have a good relationship with my family	Male	74.0	24.2	1.8	0.0	0.036
	Female	67.3	27.2	4.8	0.7	
I feel secure	Male	63.9	32.0	3.2	0.9	0.027
	Female	58.6	32.2	7.5	1.7	
I have somebody to talk to about important matters	Male	60.7	27.4	9.6	2.3	0.031
	Female	73.9	19.7	5.4	1.0	
I think about the meaning of my life	Male	19.3	31.2	34.8	14.7	0.003
	Female	33.2	30.5	28.2	8.1	

After dichotomized into often/seldom  
 ns = not significant  $p > 0.05$

## Autonomy and Possibilities to Participate in Important Decisions

The questionnaire also included questions on autonomy and possibilities for the young people to participate in important decisions. The answers are shown in Table 4.

As a group, the young people experienced a high degree of autonomy and possibilities to participate in important decisions about their situation. Comparing the view of the reindeer herders with other respondents in the study there was a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ); 11.5 per cent of reindeer herders did not feel that they could participate in important decisions concerning their situation compared to 0.9 per cent of others, and 50 per cent of reindeer herders compared to 35.7 per cent of others stated, “other people decide about important decisions in my life.”

There were no statistically significant differences between males and females in any of these questions. Nearly 40 per cent of the young people agreed that it sometimes was not easy to obtain the information they needed.

We also included a general question on life satisfaction. To the question whether they considered themselves happy, 36 per cent of the young people answered “very happy,” 55 per cent answered “quite happy,” 7 per cent “not especially happy” and 2 per cent “I don’t know.”

Table 4. Questions on autonomy, responses in per cent for men and women combined (n=515).

	Yes, nearly always	Yes, sometimes	No
What I do myself determines how things develop	79.7	19.9	0.4
Others decide about important decisions in my life	3.9	33.3	62.8
I feel I can participate in important decisions about my situation	80.0	18.0	2.0
It is easy to obtain the information I need	56.2	39.4	4.1

## Expectations of the Future

The questionnaire also included a number of open-ended questions on expectations of the future.

“*How do you want the future to be?*” Half of the respondents (n=263) stated that they wanted to continue living the way they were living now; the other half (n=245) wanted to change things. They gave examples like “[I want to] change my drinking habits,” “increase my self-esteem,” “live in a way that makes me feel better,” and “not live for other people.”

They also answered more generally, giving high priority to changing

their work situation. Many wanted to prioritise their family and tend to important relations more than they did today. Many wanted to live a less stressful life and to settle down and have children. Several answered that they wanted to work with reindeer herding more, learn the Sami language and make sure that their children could learn the language.

*"What do you think you will be doing in five years' time?"* A majority thought that they would be working, several mentioned a specific job. Several wanted to continue reindeer herding and several expected to start reindeer herding. A few thought that they would settle down and have children, a few thought that they would have completed their studies, and some answered, "I don't know."

*"Your greatest concern about the future?"* Here 398 answered this open question. A majority mentioned concerns about not being able to continue reindeer herding (reduction of grazing land, climate change). After that, most were worried about their work situation—whether or not they would have a job and, if they had a job, where they would want to live and whether they could manage on their income.

## Discussion

### Limitations of the Study

The response rate of 59 per cent is satisfactory considering the problems of reaching a group of young people who move around quite a lot. Young people are also less likely to respond to a questionnaire. There was a gender difference in the dropouts, with 68 per cent men and 32 per cent women. Most of the non-responders came from the very north of Sweden (Karesuando, Kiruna, Jokkmokk). An interpretation is that the dropouts may consist of many reindeer herders. It is possible that the results are not then representative for reindeer herders. Further, the results in this study are only representative for young Sami who have an explicit Sami identity. In Sweden, most Sami are assimilated into Swedish society and it is generally not possible to identify who is Sami and who is not.

### Socioeconomic Background

The majority of the young people had completed school and very few were unemployed. It became clear that the reindeer herders were facing a difficult financial situation: reindeer herding incurs considerable expenses, and is dependent on nature and its shifting fortunes. The young people regard reindeer herding as a way of life rather than a job and wish to continue in spite of economic hardship (Nordin 2007).

## Sami Ethnicity

We agree with Kirmayer *et al.* (2000) that there are multiple meanings of aboriginal (indigenous) identity.

Being part of an indigenous people, being Sami, is something the young people are proud of. The native Sami language and/or the possibilities to learn it seem to be of high importance, and an absolute majority want to learn the language. Reindeer herding is viewed as a very important carrier of culture, and the reindeer have great symbolic value. It could be hard to be a Sami in Sweden, the young people are compelled to explain and defend their culture and way of life; often they were given the impression that reindeer herding was an obstacle to societal progress. From the statements given by the young Sami, it is obvious that Swedish people use the same arguments today as a century ago. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, agriculture seemed to be the highest level of culture and the Sami cultural destiny was to die out (Lundmark 2002). Now we know that the industrial society has also had its day (in Europe) and that we are living in a postmodern society based on information and high technology, and yet Sami culture is still alive. In his book *Myten om framsteget* ['The myth of progress'] the philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright discusses how our extremely technocratic and profit-maximising society is losing its connection to nature and more spiritual values, with a consequently large impact on people's well-being (von Wright 1993).

It became clear that the young people in this study view Sami culture as a way of life, a whole, a lifestyle, a special way of feeling, thinking, learning and perceiving throughout life. Nearly all (92 per cent) felt that it was important to preserve and strengthen their culture.

In our view, most of the young people in this study have a strong and positive Sami identity. According to Phinney (1990), this should result in a positive relationship to health and well-being.

## Perceived Discrimination and/or Ill-Treatment

Half of the respondents had been assaulted or ill treated because of their ethnicity and for the reindeer herders the figure was 70 per cent. A quarter had experienced derogatory language from people like teachers, police and bus drivers—a mixture of racism, discrimination and ignorance. The results show that the more explicit a person's Sami ethnicity was, the more discrimination he or she experienced. This means that if you speak the native language, or are a reindeer herder, you are more exposed. A study in Norway has shown that ethnic discrimination is an important variable related to health inequalities and that lower socioeconomic status could not fully ex-

plain inferior health reports given by Sami participants (Hansen *et al.* 2010). Whitbeck *et al.* conducted a qualitative study on perceived discrimination, traditional practices and depressive symptoms based on a sample of Native American adults. They found that discrimination was strongly associated with depressive symptoms and that engaging in traditional practices buffers the negative effect of discrimination (Whitbeck *et al.* 2002).

In Sweden, Sami have a legal right to learn their native language in school, as they are the indigenous people of Sweden. However, this obligation is not fulfilled and 37 per cent of the respondents in the present study had asked for education in their native language but had not received it. Several studies have shown that learning one's native language or language revitalisation can be a health-promotion strategy (King *et al.* 2009; Bals *et al.* 2010). In this study, it was clear that the opportunity to learn their native language was extremely important to the young people.

It is very striking that about 90 per cent of the young Sami were compelled to defend and explain about their culture and history. It is then obvious that there is a lack of information and education about the indigenous people of Sweden—the teaching about the Sami is scarce in schools, contrary to the obligation given in the Education Act. In a study entitled “Exotic reindeer herders and the magic of the Drum,” the author assessed 63 school textbooks regarding their description of the Sami: half did not mention the Sami at all, and those that did gave a superficial and limited description (Karlsson 2004). In our opinion, the Sami people have been neglected by the Government, which, as over a century ago, turn a blind eye to their situation. Ignorance about the Sami is a burden that increases pressure on the young people, and could be a very significant stressor. And perhaps more seriously, this ignorance could be a breeding ground for prejudices and racism.

Like Bals *et al.*, we believe that Sami nation-building and cultural revitalisation have contributed to cultural pride and promoted well-being among the Sami (Bals *et al.* 2010). We believe that ethnic socialisation (transmission of information, values and perspectives about ethnicity to children) comes not only from parents (Balto 1997) but also from Sami society and organisations, which helps to generate positive attitudes towards their own ethnic identity (Yasui *et al.* 2004; Yasui & Dishion 2007). The reindeer herders as a group exist in a very severe situation. They do not feel participant in important decisions about their situation and feel, to a higher degree than other respondents, that others decide about important matters in their life. This could be a risk factor with a negative impact on well-being in the long run. We believe that being respected as a people with their unique history and life situations, and the opportunity to continue their traditional way of life, are the most important contributions to the well-being of this group.



## Self-Perception

All the young people in this study have an explicit Sami identity and a majority are proud to be Sami. A majority of the young people in the study are still connected to a *sameby* and are engaged in work with reindeer, fishing, hunting or handicraft. They belong somewhere and are part of something greater than themselves—and in our view this connection is health promoting. The Sami still experience a traditional way of life, with reindeer herding, hunting and fishing, which could be an important element in understanding differences between Sami and the well-being of other indigenous peoples. In a review article by King *et al.* assessing the underlying causes of the health gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people, the authors stated: “Cultural identity depends not only on access to culture and heritage but also on opportunities for cultural expression and cultural endorsement within society’s institutions” (King *et al.* 2009).

Another factor promoting well-being is good relations with family, relatives and friends. In Sami culture the family is valued very highly, and a strong connection to one’s family gives a feeling of belonging and of not being alone.

## Gender Perspective

Although both female and male respondents reported having good relations to family to a very high degree, there was a statically significant gender difference in favour of the males. This is both interesting and surprising, as women are commonly said to have more social relations than men. On the other hand, compared to male respondents, female respondents reported not only having more important relations (somebody to talk to) but also having more thoughts about the meaning of life. The male respondents were more satisfied with their life situation and their own performance compared to female respondents. It is not easy to understand these differences: is it a difference in coping style, with females having a more reflective cognitive style or are they more sensitive to norms and demands mirroring gender differences in expectations and demands socially constructed in our society? The women generally seemed to be the carriers of tradition and culture, and they are still responsible to a very high degree for raising the children, which could be a great stressor when one’s culture is under threat.

## Conclusions

We believe it is more fruitful to think in terms of risk and protective factors to understand the complexity of human well-being, where negative life experiences can be mediated by positive or protective factors. The young Sami in our study had experiences of ill-treatment because of ethnicity to a

high degree. The ignorance about the Sami is apparent, they have very often had to defend and explain their way of life and culture. This could be both a stressor and a clarifying factor. Being aware of differences in culture and lifestyles probably helps to understand and gain a more profound perspective on life, as well as helping to learn to cope with different situations in life (Yasui & Dishion 2007; Bals *et al.* 2010).

However, in this group of young Sami people we also found factors promoting well-being; to have work/or study, a positive self-esteem, good relations with family, relatives and friends and a strong feeling of affinity among the Sami.

## NOTES

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