

Invisible Differentness in Sámi Child Protection Services

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Abstract

The paper explores what lies behind the development of Sámi child protection services in practice. The study is an empirical investigation of how policymakers and child welfare leaders reflect on the challenges and opportunities in this field. All the twelve participants in the study worked in northernmost counties of Norway that are part of the Sámi-language administrative district.

Although Norwegian regulation is clear when it comes to the cultural and linguistic rights of Sámi children, it is hard for child welfare services to adhere to this in practice. In this article, the focus is on one important aspect that we argue contributes to this situation, which we refer to as “invisible differentness”. Due to the historical misuse of ethnic information in Norway, there is no practice of recording Sámi ethnicity in

Norwegian censuses. This makes the Sámi population invisible in both statistics and the Norwegian child welfare system, whose administrative branch does not ask about indigenous status. As such, the administrative system does not help child welfare services to consider Sámi identity when meeting with Sámi children and families. As a result, it is up to the caseworker and his or her personal knowledge of the family to preserve the children's rights to recognition and protection of their Sámi culture and language. This creates a vulnerable situation for Sámi children and families and the protection of their rights. The authors argue for the importance of including ethnicity in the administrative language and system of child welfare services.

Keywords: Policymakers, child protective service workers, Sámi child protection services, social work authorities, child welfare, indigenous population.

Introduction

During recent years, there has been growing attention in Norwegian child protection services on the families' and children's cultural belonging (Fylkesnes, 2018; Holm-Hansen, Haaland, & Myrvold, 2007; Križ & Skivenes, 2010, 2011, 2015; Saus, Salamonsen, Douglas, Hansen & Thode, 2018; Rugkåsa, Ylvisaker & Eide 2017; Ylvisaker, Rugkåsa & Eide, 2015). This article explores the case of the Sámi in relation to Norwegian child protection services and the importance of visibility as a first step in addressing the issues that arise for ethnic minorities. Official statistics have become an important tool for politics and social development in all countries. Statistics, and the data on which they are based, can also help secure the rights to which citizens are entitled. At the same time, in extreme cases, knowledge of individuals and vulnerable groups may be abused, which can lead to serious human rights violations (Seltzer & Anderson, 2001). In Norway, it was formerly common to register the official statistics of linguistic minority groups such as the Sámi population. The overview of language minorities in the north was used when the Norwegian state initiated its "Norwegianization policy" (Lie, Roll-Hansen, & Boquist, 2001). After the Second World War, Norway stopped the practice of recording Sámi ethnicity in Norwegian censuses, thereby making the Sámi population invisible in such statistics (Pettersen, 2014).

The state of being invisible in national census questionnaires is something that Sámi people share with indigenous peoples in many parts of the world (Peters, 2011). There is a need to make indigenous peoples visible through statistics, in their own countries and across the world (Madden et al., 2016). The lack of visibility of Sámi and other indigenous communities is far-reaching. One of the consequences of not including specific populations as census variables is a lack of precise data and in-depth knowledge on the situation for ethnic groups that are often vulnerable. This provides a weak base for adequate policy development and, furthermore, a challenge for the practice field in their work with these groups.

The Sámi people live in Sápmi, at the very north of Europe. This area stretches across the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula. They represent a minority in today's Sweden, Finland, Russia and Norway, but comprise the majority population of the innermost parts of Finnmark county in Norway as well as the municipality of Utsjoki in Finland (United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe). While regarded as one people, there are various types of Sámi based on patterns of settlement and how they sustain themselves. Their rights and general living conditions vary significantly depending on the nation-state within which they reside. Although the Sámi population is invisible in statistics, there is knowledge about Sámi culture, in general. Sámi culture is varied and complex; Sámi in the south have traditionally had cultural differences from those of the north, hunting and fishing Sámi

of the forest regions were different from nomadic Sámi, and a considerable number of Sámi abandoned reindeer herding for a more agricultural way of life. There are great differences within modern Sámi society in terms of cultural diversity, language, occupation, and traditional economies (Sköld & Axelsson, 2008). The Sámi is an ethnic group that is not cohesive when it comes to language, cultural values and way of life. The ways in which Sámi culture is expressed and manifested vary, provides for diversity among the Sámi (Solbakk & Solbakk, 2012; Pedersen & Nyseth, 2013). The complex Sámi identity, combined with the question of how to deal with cultural issues in social work practice, pose a challenge for child protection services of Norway (Boine, 2010; Eidheim & Stordahl, 1998; Henriksen, 2004; Laitinen & Väyrynen, 2016). The discussion presented in this paper builds on the reflections of the policymakers, as bureaucrats and politicians, and the reflections of the child welfare leaders working in the field to advance Sámi child protection services. How do the policymakers and child welfare leaders understand Sámi child protection services in relation to cultural issues? What are the main challenges they see in Sámi child protection services? What kinds of opportunities do they see? How do these two groups of policymakers and child welfare leaders work together in the field? There is little knowledge about how the authorities cooperate with child welfare leaders in this particular field. This article will contribute to filling this gap. Norwegian government policy towards the Sámi has changed character through the years. Until World War II there was a strict assimilation policy

that aimed to incorporate the Sámi into a common Norwegian identity (Minde, 2008). There was a turning point in the beginning of the 60s; a change towards cultural integration and, subsequently, cultural pluralism. The Constitution of Norway changed in 1989 to recognize the Sámi and the Norwegian government's obligations to the Sámi people. It was revised to state that it is "the responsibility of the Norwegian authorities to create settings that permit the Sámi people to preserve and develop their culture, language and way of life" (The Constitution of Norway, Article 110a). These changes in Norwegian government policy towards the Sámi minority are reflected in the creation of the Sámi Parliament, among other things, which is financed by the Norwegian state and has been granted authority over specific areas, works to promote a viable Sámi culture, and ensures that the indigenous rights of the Sámi are effectively protected and realized. They are further embodied in the Sámi Language Act, aimed at placing the Sámi language on an equal legal footing with Norwegian and increasing the possibilities to use Sámi in an official context. In accordance with these changing political attitudes towards the Sámi population, more attempts have been made to adapt some public services to the Sámi population, including child welfare (Saus, 2006).

This article reports on a qualitative study regarding Norwegian authorities - the policymakers behind the politics and regulations that are practiced by child protection services in northern Norway and child welfare leaders. The need for Norwegian child protection services to adapt their practices to Sámi families and the cultural uniqueness

of children has been pointed to for quite some time (Saus, 2006). There is a need for methods that integrate cultural knowledge into practice work. In order for child protection services to do this, there is a need for more knowledge on what challenges exist in this practice. In accordance with this is the child protection services chosen as the focus for this article.

Sámi Child Protection Services

Child welfare protection services in Norway are both preventive, working within families, and protective, handling out-of-home care. The services are organized in two divisions: municipal child welfare and the Directorate for Child, Youth, and Family Affairs, which is divided into five regional child welfare service departments. The individual municipalities are responsible for the frontline work with children and their families. The regional child welfare services are responsible for specialist services, such as out-of-home placements and family interventions. Both of these levels have a legal obligation to adjust the service according to the rights of Sámi children and families to maintain and further develop Sámi culture and language.

Child welfare in Sámi areas has been on the agenda in Norwegian child welfare since the release of the 1996 Official Norwegian Report, NOU 1996:5, *Plan for Health and Social Services for the Sámi Population in Norway* (Laitinen & Väyrynen, 2016). This

report declared the implications for Sámi children's rights in the child welfare system according to Convention 169: Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention and the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, both ratified by the Norwegian state (Saus, 2004). The report was part of a process that contributed to change social work in northern Norway, highlighting identity, network family work, context and cultural perception in Sámi social work (Henriksen, 2009; Hanssen, 2004; Hætta, 1995).

Research-based knowledge on child welfare and Sámi children, adolescents and their families, is important for facilitating child welfare work in Sámi communities. It helps strengthen the overall competence of culturally sensitive practice when working with families of Sámi background in municipal and state child welfare. Sámi children have the same basic rights as other children in Norway, but they also have special rights expressed in international conventions and national laws. They have the right to preserve their culture, religion and language. These rights also apply when the child is under the care of child welfare services.

The Sámi Act No. 56 of June 12th, 1987, states that the Sámi-language administrative district consists of the municipalities of Karasjok, Kautokeino, Nesseby, Porsanger, Tana and Kåfjord. The aim of the Act is to “enable the Sámi people in Norway to safeguard and develop their language, culture and way of life” (The Sámi Act § 1-1). The Act further

states that announcements and forms produced by public bodies in the Sámi-language administrative district shall be made in both Sámi and Norwegian (The Sámi Act § 3-2). The Sámi Language Act gave major language and cultural rights to Norway's Sámi people (Corson, 1995). The families and children living in the Sámi-language administrative area have a statutory right to use the Sámi language when dealing with child welfare services. According to this right, the Sámi families in this administrative area should receive guidelines, information, forms, and all other communication, in the Sámi language (Sameloven §§ 3-2, 3-3) when contacting Norwegian child welfare. The same right is not as strongly expressed in child welfare legislation for Sámi residents outside the Sámi-language administrative area. Nevertheless, Sámi children have the right to hold onto and further develop their Sámi language and culture when they receive services from child welfare and if transferred to foster homes or child welfare institutions (Child Welfare Act section 4-15).

When child welfare takes care of a child, they are obliged to supervise the child in the foster home or child welfare institution (Child Welfare Act section 2-3). There are specific regulations covering the supervision, treatment and care of children who have been transferred to child welfare institutions. The regulations stipulate that supervisors shall ensure that the special rights of Sámi children, safeguarding their linguistic and cultural background, are sufficiently secured. The paragraph further states that the

commencement must ensure that the supervisor have the same cultural or linguistic affiliation as the child or possess competence in the minority child's own language or culture.

If child welfare services are to make a forced decision -e.g. regarding the removal of a child from the home -the County Council for Child Welfare and Social Affairs shall deal with the matter. When dealing with the case, the child is entitled to a spokesperson to ensure that the child is heard. When a spokesperson is appointed to a Sámi child in the Sámi-language district, the child is offered a spokesperson with Sámi language and cultural understanding. The offer should be made to children in other areas as well.

Although the regulations are clear when it comes to the rights of Sámi children, it is hard for child welfare services to secure these rights in practice. This is due to several important aspects, such as lack of manpower and financial resources in addition to lack of skills and knowledge on how to carryout a culturally sensitive practice. However, it is also related to the system since it is not possible to register indigenous background. In this article we focus on one important aspect that we refer to as invisible differentness.

When it comes to Norwegian child welfare, the administrative system does not ask about indigenous status. As such, the system does not help child welfare services to take into

consideration the Sámi identity when meeting with children and families and engaging in other work with this group. As a result, it is up to the caseworker and his or her personal knowledge of the family and awareness of Sáminess. This creates a vulnerable situation for Sámi children and the preservation of their rights.

Study and Method

This study aimed to gain more knowledge about the forces that drive Sámi social work. Qualitative research seeks to determine the meaning of a phenomenon through the description. It aims to develop concepts that aid in the understanding of natural phenomena with emphasis on the meaning, experiences and views of the participants (Holloway, 1997). Following this tradition, the basic outline of this research involves a series of twelve semi-structured, qualitative interviews (using an interview guide) with social service providers including leaders of child protection service offices. This consist of five leaders in Sámi child welfare work, and four Sámi politicians and three representatives from the authorities who were all asked to reflect upon the future and discuss how to enhance the field. Semi-structured interviews can elicit people's own views and understandings and uncover issues that have not been anticipated by the researchers (Silverman, 2006). The research questions have focused on how Sámi politicians, Sámi child welfare leaders, and government leaders that have Sámi social

work in their remit understand Sámi social work and what challenges and possibilities they see.

This study is significant in many ways. Nygård (2018) demonstrated that there is a significant lack of empirical studies concerning child welfare in Sámi contexts. There is also a need to cast light on the forces that drive Sámi child welfare work, in order to ensure the ethnic, cultural and language identity of Sámi children.

This group of participants belongs to a professional occupational group that leads in the field of Sámi social work and is familiar with being interviewed in the spirit of openness. Furthermore, most of them have a Sámi background; they have mastered the language and have knowledge of Sámi culture in different ways. Interviewees were chosen based on their leading professional status and experience with Sámi social work. Via e-mail and telephone, Sámi politicians, Sámi child welfare leaders and government leaders responsible for Sámi social work in the northernmost counties of Finnmark and Troms were contacted with information about the project. All participants were promised anonymity.

All interviews were conducted individually and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. They were all recorded with the consent of the participant. Data analysis took place after all

interviews were completed. Through this process, major themes were identified as significant if they were addressed by multiple interviewees. Participants were asked about three major themes: their work practice in relation to a Sámi context; what possible challenges they experienced; and what solutions they envisioned. This interest has driven us to a discourse analysis strategy that focuses on presenting the participants' representation through their own descriptions and reflections (Winther & Phillips, 2010). By focusing on the participants' descriptions and reflections concerning child welfare practice that are in line with Sámi children's rights, we wanted to reveal how the participants use understand Sámi children's rights and how they use power to form Sámi child welfare accordingly. The discourses they are involved in and establish, due to their power in the child welfare system, are revealed by code word as knowledge of cultural issues, how they deal with their power to define and design the service for Sámi children and families have been the practical analytical strategy. The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service, which is the ethical board for social research in Norway.

Theoretical Framework and Central Concepts

It has been suggested that, in any society, there is a dominant worldview that is held by most members of that society (Olsen, Lodwick & Dunlap, 1992). Alternative worldviews do exist, but the majority of a society does not usually hold them. In light of

this point, there is reason to suggest that working with indigenous peoples often requires that the social workers act outside of the dominant worldview found in the international field of social work and particularly in fourth world territories. This facilitates a good dialogue and a bridge of understanding between the different groups that make decisions that influence and enhance the development of Sámi child protection services. Based on this hypothesis, we have investigated how the different groups that have power formal, practical or informal - frame the field of Sámi child protection services.

We use Foucault's (1996, 2004) concept of discourse as a theoretical framework in our analyses of the interviews to direct the attention towards the power to outline the field of Sámi social work. According to Foucault "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1977, p. 27). Discourses conceptualizes the language in a given field produced by "the inseparable relation between knowledge and power" (Mik-Meyer & Villandsen, 2007, p. 21). Researchers has taken inspiration from Foucault power analyses and define his concepts in multiple ways, but it is common to define discourse as a power-producing way to talk about and understand the world (Winther & Phillips 2010, p. 9, Mik-Meyer & Villandsen, 2007, p. 21). We use this definition in our analyses. A policymaker's orientation includes prioritising wishes and handling conflicts of interest among policymakers such that organisations can

improve the welfare of all (Maignan, Gonzalez-Padron, Hult & Ferrell, 2011).

Policymakers are important when considering change since they are central in processes of implementation. At the same time, they are actors that participate in a given discourse that they share. The policymakers' discourses are a defining frame that provides guidance for the thoughts and actions of leaders. This shared common view about and within a particular field makes policymakers participants in a commonality.

Policymakers have to make decisions and must base them on some elements of the discourse. This provides the framework for their policy, laws, rules, resources and, not least, interpretation of what is possible. They are helping to preserve opinions in that they must make decisions within this framework. We can identify the existence of one discourse in our empirical data that is related to improving the position of Sámi culture and rights in Norwegian society, as well as a discourse on the challenges of safeguarding those rights.

Findings

Knowledge about Sámi language and cultural issues

The vast majority of the participants emphasised the importance of knowledge of Sámi language and culture among professionals. As one participant conveyed it: *We think that it is important to have knowledge and understanding of Sámi language and culture when we work with Sámi children and families.* Furthermore, another aspect of language

that many spoke about was the importance of letting Sámi children and families express themselves in their own language. As one person said: *To express feelings can certainly be difficult. If you are a Sámi speaker and have learned the language from childhood, you have learned the language and nuances that are important when expressing yourself. This, I think, disappears.*

The vast majority of the participants from the group of Sámi politicians and government leaders spoke about how they worked in order to improve the position of Sámi culture and rights in Norwegian society. This was done through collaboration with Sámi organisations and educational institutions, and by making Sámi issues central in the planning process. While Sámi matters were central in their work, several said that they did not work with this issue in a more particular way. Many placed emphasis on the importance of having professionals who were Sámi speakers and had cultural knowledge working in Sámi communities. Furthermore, many expressed the importance of Sámi culture and the need for it to be visible in everyday life. This happens through festivals, people wearing the traditional Sámi *kofte*, and the celebration of the Sámi national day, which was considered an important event. In addition, Sámi culture should be visible on the Norwegian national day.

Invisible Sámi identity in the system

Although the vast majority of policymakers agreed upon the importance of promoting knowledge of Sámi culture, in reality, this was hard for most participants to see in practice. This was reflected in different ways in their work practice. One way this lack of cultural awareness was visible was connected to Sámi foster homes. The Regional Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat) recruits families to provide foster homes. As part of this effort there are national campaigns by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs aimed at recruiting foster homes. According to many social workers, these campaigns have not worked in Sámi areas. The campaigns have not been customized to communicate properly with a Sámi population. The themes of the campaigns have not taken into consideration cultural differences; for example, how to communicate about sensitive issues such as being unable to care for a child. Bufetat said that they recruited families to provide Sámi foster homes but, in many cases, these families were perceived by the local child welfare office as not proper Sámi foster homes due to their lack of adequate knowledge of Sámi culture or language skills. This insufficient attention to cultural differences was also mirrored in the action plans with suggested home measures that were made for individual families.

Bufetat offers a range of programmes as alternatives to placement outside the home. Many of these programmes relate to parent management, while poorly reflecting cultural differences and not providing large portions of the written material in Sámi. The same applies to the written expert reports, which rarely mention that a child should be placed in a *Sámi* foster home even though the child is Sámi. In some acute cases, the local child welfare office has asked for emergency Sámi homes but there have not been any available, so the children have been offered Norwegian emergency homes instead. In such situations, the local child welfare office has rejected the offers and found Sámi foster homes that had not participated in the training course offered by Bufetat, rather than accepting a Norwegian foster home. This scenario of finding a foster home that was not prepared to be a foster home was perceived as rather complex. During interviews, the caseworkers said that they often had to weigh the pros and cons of what was most important for the child - continuing in a Sámi environment or being placed in foster care. For these caseworkers “the best for the child” was to remain in an environment where Sámi language and culture predominated. As one participant said:

The law seeks to ensure that, if a child has come into foster care, the child should later return to the biological parents. Problems arise if you place a 2-year-old Sámi child in a Norwegian foster care home, and the child is then returned to their biological parents. This child will have problems

communicating. Then I think that you do not have the children's best interests in focus.

As many of the participants have experienced, the system or law takes cultural differences into account in different ways. This situation makes the treatment of cultural differences in child welfare work seem rather arbitrary. It is very dependent on the individual caseworker and her/his cultural awareness. This practice of dealing with cultural differences – or lack thereof - means that much assessment is performed in a less systematic way.

During interviews, several Sámi politicians expressed, in different ways, how central Norwegian authorities tended not to prioritise Sámi health care in social work. This was explained by the idea that Sámi communities are far away from, and have little contact with, Oslo and the greater society. The lack of understanding for the needs of Sámi communities was also due to the Social Services Law. In Norway, there is comprehensive legislation regarding child welfare, health and social services. Public supervision in Norway focuses on ensuring that health and social services are provided in accordance with national acts and regulations. However, as one Sámi politician said during an interview:

But one has to think completely differently when it comes to the Sámi. What is common in regular Norwegian municipalities would not fit here. For example, if

you want a family to get financial help according to the Social Services Law, everything else should have been tried first. We can't practice that here because we have to take into consideration the culture that exists here. We cannot demand that people here might sell their snowmobile or river boat or something. It has to do with the quality of life for people.

Many Sámi politicians expressed, in various ways, the challenges of operating under the Sámi Language Act. This legislation states that the Sámi and Norwegian languages are equal and that they are equal in the Sámi-language administrative areas. Implicit in this political aim of being a bilingual municipality is the need to find people who have the necessary expertise and knowledge of Sámi language and culture. This was a rather difficult aim for the municipalities to achieve and was poorly understood by the government. As mentioned during an interview:

We have said that we will be a Sámi municipality and give the Sámi services in the same way as those services we give in Norwegian. This is a rather demanding task that is not understood by the government office when it comes to the challenges we Sámi communities face.

During interviews, some of the government leaders spoke about how it was not possible for municipalities or child welfare services to indicate Sámi background on the forms they used. Information about a child being Sámi had to be written on the form by hand. This information might be easy to forget to include on the form, or it could easily

disappear. Thus, it was not easy to access ethnic background in this system.

Government leaders said during interviews that, in the end, the municipalities had the principal liability when it came to child welfare and securing the Sámi community a service that was adjusted to their needs.

The great majority of child protection service leaders said during interviews that they shared a common understanding in their local child protection offices of the importance of being aware of Sámi culture and language in social work in Sámi communities. This view was particularly shared among those who had a Sámi background. However, it immediately became more difficult when it came to the world outside the local offices of child protection services. The perception of the Norwegian government office for the welfare and protection of children and families on the importance of taking into consideration Sámi culture and language in social work was different from that of the local child welfare offices. As one participant said:

We have three levels of government: municipal, county and state. And the farther you go up the harder it is...that Sámi is forgotten. So I feel that we must constantly remind them to remember Sámi children. You feel often like a cuckoo - one is repeating the same thing all the time.

It was not that the Sámi children are “forgotten” by national authorities in social work but rather that there is an absence of cultural awareness in the administrative system and language.

The problem of not having enough professionals with knowledge of Sámi language and culture in Sámi communities is related to all areas of social work. The consequences of not having enough professionals in child welfare has made the situation critical for the Sámi children and families involved. The following problem was described by many during interviews. When a Sámi child has been relocated by the child welfare office, a spokesperson for that particular child is appointed and contacted by the county board. In many cases, the county board does not have professionals with knowledge of Sámi language and culture who work with Sámi children in foster care. Therefore, the letters sent from the county board with questions for the appointed spokesperson to ask and discuss with the foster child who has been reassigned are written in Norwegian. This means that each spokesperson, based on their own cultural awareness and relevant language knowledge, decides how to translate the questions from Norwegian to Sámi in an understandable way for the child to discuss his or her situation in his/her mother tongue. This scenario demonstrates that adequate access to the Sámi language is not built into the system. The appointed spokesperson’s cultural awareness and language skills determine how they make the questions from the county board understood to a Sámi-speaking child.

Complex Sámi identity

Another aspect of language that many mentioned was related to the importance of speaking Sámi when sensitive issues are discussed; for example, when communicating with the biological parents of a Sámi child about whether or not he or she should be taken away. . Moreover, the importance of letting people use their own language when talking about themselves was also mentioned. Many said during interviews that they perceived Sámi issues as complex to deal with because: *It is about identity and who you are. In our municipality, we cannot say that all people are Sámi just because we are part of the Sámi-language administrative area.* These words reflect the difficulty that Sámi politicians and government leaders come across in their work. Many of the municipalities that operate under the Sámi Language Act have inhabitants that are not Sámi. In some of these municipalities, the Sámi community is a minority. It is therefore difficult to present the municipality as only Sámi. Furthermore, many who were interviewed said that the inhabitants of their municipalities had been deeply divided about being part of the Sámi Language Act when this was decided in the 1990s. As part of the Sámi Language Act, all public signs should be written in both Sámi and Norwegian. One of the most extreme reactions to this occurred in the early 1990s, when the Sámi municipality name on one of the municipal signs was shot at. This act of shooting the Sámi name of the municipality can be perceived as a reaction by some

inhabitants to the Sámi Language Act. It reflects how complex and sensitive this issue has been and how deeply it is rooted in the soul of the people.

In general during interviews, both Sámi politicians and Sámi child welfare leaders expressed frustration, in different ways, that it is only the reindeer-herding lifestyle that is thought of as Sámi culture. As many of them said: *Sámi culture is much more, and it is diverse. But the focus is always on reindeer herding. Yes, it is important, but we must also lift the others, such as Coastal Sámi culture, or yes ... you know what I mean.*

Reindeer herding has often been regarded as the defining feature of Sámi culture.

Although the practice of reindeer herding is central to the Sámi way of life, Sámi culture is diverse. In these discourses, it became apparent that many people searched for words when trying to explain what Sámi culture and identity is all about. It often ended in:

You know what I mean. This struggle to express what Sámi culture is may be perceived as the result of years of academic research in Sámi communities mainly conducted by ethnographers and anthropologists with a focus on reindeer herding and land rights.

Researchers have been central in the process and discourse of what Sámi culture encompasses and have contributed to defining Sámi culture as less diverse than it actually is. There is a need to challenge and deconstruct Sámi stereotypes - in particular,

the fixed meaning and notion of what Sámi culture is - and to include definitions that embrace the Sámi peoples' sense of being and knowing, as a plurality.

Possible ways of dealing with challenges

A primary goal of the municipalities included in the Sámi Language Act is to be bilingual. As the majority of the participants in this study have said, the main challenge for most municipalities is to achieve this goal. So, what needs to be done to achieve this aim?

Education, quota system and incentives

Most Sámi politicians, Sámi child welfare leaders, and government leaders expressed the urgent need to have enough social work professionals with expertise and competence in Sámi culture and language. Many spoke about the need to focus on language and create cultural awareness on the complexity of Sámi culture. They articulated the need to develop an understanding that there are nuances to Sámi culture and that culture is not static. Many expressed the importance of education as a way of improving language skills and cultural awareness. Cultural differences and cultural understanding should be a strong focus in welfare service education, thus enabling professionals to be better equipped. Moreover, in order to deal with this need, some

municipalities have started language and culture centres and collaborated with Sámi organisations, universities, and the Sámi Parliament. Although many are already collaborating, a need for further cooperation was emphasised.

Furthermore, many municipalities strive to acquire more professionals with knowledge of Sámi language and culture by providing grants to people who want an education in the field of public health. A quota system has also been used to eliminate language problems. Language differences between Norwegian medical workers and their Sámi patients have prevented appropriate treatment and diagnosis. Training Sámi-speaking nurses, physicians, and public health workers through a medical school quota system has eliminated some language obstacles, though the number of trained personnel remains below what it should be. Sámi politicians suggested announcing positions for which Sámi speakers would be given priority, or promising better wages for positions where Sámi speakers are sought, as other ways to help eliminate the lack of professional Sámi speakers in public health. Offering better wages seemed to be a difficult approach for government leaders. As some of them said: *We have to see everybody. We can't only take one group or differentiate in our system.* What all policymakers shared was the challenge to find and recruit people with *both* the required professional competence -e.g. nurses and doctors -and the language and cultural competence.

Need for more collaboration

Many child welfare leaders interviewed expressed a desire for closer collaboration with the Sámi Parliament. It was articulated by some that: *They (Sámi Parliament) must begin to talk to those who work with children and not only with Bufetat and local politicians.* Their message was that the Sámi Parliament should talk to the child welfare services in order to know what challenges exist. Based on these findings, the Sámi Parliament could work to change the law. Another area that was mentioned by many as being important was cooperation with local schools. Social workers often agree to have conversations with children at school in the cases where they cannot enter the home to talk with the child. In these situations, they ask the teacher which language the child masters best. I was told that many teachers without Sámi background react with surprise when posed this question. They do not understand the reason for asking, whereas teachers with a Sámi background are more concerned about ensuring the Sámi background of a child. As one child welfare leader said: *When greeting a Sámi-speaking child for the first time, it is important to use Sámi. The child will feel safer; it is a language they recognize and identify with their parents.* According to many participants, it is immediately possible to see if a child is Sámi-speaking when they go and say hello in Sámi. They light up. The act of speaking Sámi gives them confidence. This was mentioned as being important for conversations in which the child is asked to describe his/her own situation and feelings. The desire for closer collaboration with

Bufetat and Bufdir was also mentioned by several social workers. Many wanted the different methods, prevention measures and programmes offered as an alternative to placement outside the home to be adjusted to the Sámi language and culture. The perception was that the cultural differences found in Sámi culture were not considered.

In the interviews, many Sámi politicians expressed how their municipalities collaborated with neighbouring municipalities in specific areas and how collaboration was extended to new areas. They mentioned student exchange, for example, whereby students from one municipality visit another and vice versa. This was to make the learning environment in small schools more robust. Another method of collaboration was through competence centres; for example, a crisis team plan being reworked in close collaboration with local organisations.

Discussion: Framing and forces

Findings suggest that policymakers involved in Sámi social work see many of the same challenges, such as the lack of human resources and the importance of keeping the Sámi in mind in social work; however, they are viewed in different ways and to different degrees. The lack of ethnicity inclusion in the child welfare system makes it harder for the caseworkers to ensure the rights of Sámi children. This group of policymakers had

similar ideas when it came to how to deal with these problems through education, quota systems and more collaboration. This study reveals that the omission of ethnicity as a category in the administrative system indirectly contributes to neglecting the rights of Sámi children and families.

Policymakers draw on field discourses but must affirm some elements that they consider significant. On the other hand, they are key participants in discourses in the field; i.e. they advance changes. When someone wants change, they must enter a debate that policymakers are invited to join. In this way, policymakers are drawn into the discussion and become key players in the discourse. Thus, they are also key drivers of discourses. As such, policymakers have a double role, where they are both a conservative force and, to a certain extent, a stabilising force, as well as being agents of change who are constantly engaged in the development and promotion of new ways of thinking. Many are not conscious of this dual role and, thus, are not aware of the potential they possess to initiate change. There is reason to believe that several feel trapped with little room to manoeuvre. We show how this duality is part of policymakers' role and, with this point of departure, have discussed how this can drive the development of Sámi social work forward. It leads to actual change in that decisions are made by policymakers and have the potential to continuously contribute to change as they participate in the discourse. To involve policymakers, therefore, provides the

potential for further development of Sámi social work. Policymakers have the possibility to start a process that can lead to a change in the administrative system of child welfare by including ethnicity on the forms and in the overall system.

Our findings suggest that changes are related to more technical aspects of culture such as the conservation of language and culture. On the other hand, policymakers are potential agents of change who are continually engaged in the development and new ways of thinking. This is particularly relevant when policymakers are challenged on how to deal with complex issues in Sámi social work.

Concluding comments

The findings from this study suggest that Sámi social work practice is mainly guided by those working in the field but limited due to the exclusion of ethnic background in the administration of the child welfare system. This makes Sámi ethnicity invisible and easily forgotten in the practice of child welfare. Inclusion of the Sámi identity is up to the caseworker's own knowledge of and sensitivity to Sámi background. We must reconsider ethnic registration in the child welfare system and act at a systematic level. Such system-level change will require commitment from central authorities and the child welfare system. The administrative task of registering ethnic background would

help child welfare to ensure that Sámi children and families have access to fundamental service rights.

The participants of this study, policymakers such as Sámi politicians, Sámi child welfare leaders, and government leaders who are responsible for Sámi social work, have dual roles; one of creating change and one of preserving. We show how this duality is part of a policymaker's role and how this can drive the development of Sámi social work forward. It leads to actual changes in that the policymakers make decisions that have the potential to continuously contribute to change as they participate in the discourse. To involve policymakers therefore provides the potential for further development of Sámi social work.

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