


Audiovisual frame story as a method of critical consciousness sharing in indigenous research

Sarivaara, Erika

University of Helsinki, Finland (Erika.Sarivaara@gmail.com)

Määttä, Kaarina

University of Lapland, Finland (Kaarina.Maatta@ulapland.fi)

Uusiautti, Satu 

University of Lapland, Finland (satu@usiautti.fi)



ISSN: 2243-7681
Online ISSN: 2243-769X

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 15 March 2014

Revised: 19 April 2014

Accepted: 10 May 2014

Available Online: 11 May 2014

DOI: 10.5861/ijrsp.2014.773

Abstract

This article introduces a new method for data collection in critical indigenous research. The method is based on the critical theory and pursuit of increasing awareness and emancipation in indigenous peoples. Issues related to the colonization and assimilation processes among indigenous peoples are very sensitive and often unspoken, taboos. How to study issues like this? The sample research was conducted among the non-status Sámi people who have Sámi ancestors and speak the Sámi language but are not officially recognized as Sámi. Their identity formation and sensitive experiences were obtained through a new method that is here called an audiovisual frame story as a method of critical consciousness sharing in indigenous research. The paper investigates the grounds and implementation of the method, and evaluates its usefulness for studying indigenous peoples' experiences and their emancipation.

Keywords: consciousness sharing; frame story; critical theory; audiovisual; film; indigenous research; identity; experiences

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1. Introduction

Themes of indigenous research often well from inside the communities, and these topics are usually sensitive. This harks back to the history of colonization of indigenous peoples which have had many kinds of consequences such as various mental stressors (Hudson, 2011; Smith, 1999). The purpose of our article is to contemplate the possibilities of an audiovisual frame story as a method of critical consciousness sharing in indigenous research – especially when it comes to analyses of sensitive and taboo issues.

This article is based on Dr. Sarivaara's (2012) doctoral dissertation in which she researched identity formation and language revitalization in non-status Sámi people. The non-status Sámi are defined as a group of people who are of Sámi descent, but they do not have an official Sámi status. The term “non-status” means that they lack the official status of Sámi people because they do not fulfill the criteria of Sáminess, as defined by the Finnish law of the Sámi Parliament. Pursuant to the Finnish law on the Sámi Parliament, a person is considered a Sámi if he/she considers him/herself a Sámi and if (1) the person him/herself or at least of one parent or grandparent of his/hers has learned Sámi as the first language, or (2) the person is a descendant of someone who has been registered as a Fell, Forest or Fishing Sámi in the land, taxation or census register, or (3) at least one of his/her parents has or could have been registered as entitled to vote in the elections of the Sámi Delegation or the Sámi Parliament (Act on Sámi Parliament, 1995; adopted on 17 July 1995). Some of the Non-status Sámi have revitalized the Sámi language and started to use it actively; this was the target group in this study.

One of the methods used in this research was a sort of frame story that was presented to the research partners in the form of a film. This article introduces the method. We will discuss what kind of opportunities this method presents to indigenous research. We will focus on (1) the grounds of using the method, (2) issues that have to be considered when designing and applying the method, and (3) how to collect data in a reliable manner.

The Sámi are the only Indigenous people within the area of the European Union, and they are recognized as an Indigenous people in the Constitution of Finland, and as Indigenous people they are also allowed to enhance their language and culture (Keskitalo, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2012; Sarivaara, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2013a). Traditionally the Sámi have had gatherer-hunting culture, and the source of livelihood was based on multiple livelihoods such as fishing in seas and lakes, bird hunting, and berry picking for thousands of years. The Sámi society was well organized in traditional Sámi communities, the *siidas*. These communities were spread all over the Northern Fennoscandia. *Siida* was characterized by solidarity and respect, for example, land resources were divided between and within *siidas* (Hansen & Olsen, 2004; Saarikivi & Lavento 2012).

The Sámi have experienced the history of colonization. An intensive process of colonization started hundreds of years ago in the region where the Sámi live in Finland. According to Rauna Kuokkanen (2006), colonization is based on an ideology and types of action that were created during the Renaissance; it entails making use of other peoples' lands and resources and enhancing settlement in their territory.

In Finland, the definition of a Sámi is mainly based on the knowledge of Sámi language. According to the definition, a Sámi is a person who considers himself or herself a Sámi, provided that this person has learned Sámi as his or her first language or has at least one parent or grandparent whose first language is Sámi (Samediggi, 2008). According to official statistics, there are about 9,900 Sámi people with an official Sámi status in Finland (the population of Finland is 5.4 million) (Sámi Parliament, 2011). The 1990s was an important time for enhancing the Sámi's rights, culminating in the question of who can and who cannot be accepted as Sámi. As a result of assimilation, some Sámi people have lost their language. The language shift has diminished the

possibility of becoming officially accepted as Sámi and thus, being a member of the Sámi electoral register. Consequently, the reforms taking place in the 1990s initiated the struggle for acceptance of Sámi identity.

In addition to the method, this article brings out a group of Sámi-speaking people who are in a non-status position in the Sámi community. The research phenomenon is very sensitive. According to the definition of sensitive research themes, (1) personal, stressful, or sacred themes, (2) themes that concern deviation or social control, and (3) themes that a research participant considers benefitting the one with the ruling power (Boeije, 2010; Lee, 1993). In the research literature, the target group of this research has been described as a mixed population who has almost always been regarded non-indigenous. In addition, at the individual level, the concept of mixed population has a negative connotation and therefore, the concept is rarely referred to: being full-blooded is a virtue while half-blooded a vice, a burden (Lähteenmäki, 2004).

For one reason or another, the non-status Sámi do not belong to the electoral register of the Sámi Parliament as this gives the official Sámi status. The people who are listed in the register have an officially proven Sámi identity. This means that the identity of the non-status Sámi contradicts with the social identity. In other words, the identity negotiation has not succeeded with the official organs representing the Sámi.

Basically, identity has a subjective and an objective side. The first refers to the individual person's experience of himself or herself whereas the latter means features perceived by the other people (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity negotiations are versatile and reciprocal interaction through which a person defines his or her position in relation to the other people living in the same community or society. The ethno-political discourse of the Sámi has emphasized an essential viewpoint to Sáminess (Valkonen, 2009). Discourse leaning on essentialism defines the ideal and aspired Sámi identity leading to a situation in which the non-status Sámi identity becomes stigmatized. A stigmatized identity refers to a persistent quality of an individual that evokes negative or punitive responses from others. It overlaps with otherness and the exercise of power (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). A stigmatized identity is set for an individual person by the environment and limits the person's opportunity to function in a certain community. This kind of identity defines the person as different, second-rate, and outsider.

When a research theme has a sensitive, invisible, and partly negative nature, it is reasonable to approach it with multiple methods (Bernstein, 2001; Botha, 2011). In this study, the researcher had to realize that the non-status Sámi could not necessarily or would not want to talk about their experiences if the only research method was interview. This was described by one research partner as follows:

But simultaneously, I and my identity are at the mercy of all viewpoints, and I can say nothing about anything. One has to act in a riptide. I have not entered the stage yet. You have let everyone know that you are Sámi, you are wearing gákti and everything, and you have faced questioning. I have not come out of the closet yet. But I know that it is so windy out there, that I rather keep the door closed. (Research partner no. 4).

The experiences the target group might be too hard to reveal or they have not processed them at the level that they could profoundly discuss them in an interview. Therefore, the solution was to create a film that presents the phenomenon to the research participants concretely, and to help the participants to verbalize their experiences. In addition, the purpose of the film was to empower the one watching it. The method was supposed to help and enhance the subjective description of the phenomenon and pay attention to the local and narrative feature of knowledge.

2. What Kind of a Data Collection Method an Audiovisual Frame Story is in Indigenous Research?

2.1 The Grounds of Using an Audiovisual Frame Story

Research questions or hypotheses always direct the data collection. The purpose in this research was to

acquire information about how the non-status Sámi perceives their identities and language revitalization. An audiovisual film was created to function as a frame story for igniting critical and conscious thinking in the research partners. Here, the participants are regarded as and called research partners, because of the empowering nature and purpose of the research. The research theme was a very sensitive one and necessitates personal knowledge about the phenomenon. Dr. Sarivaara herself is a non-status Sámi woman who has revitalized the Sámi language as her home language and speaks it on a daily basis. She is, therefore, familiar with the phenomenon which is crucial for the creating a film that would be interpreted and understood correctly by the research partners.

The method introduced in this article is based on and developed from method is called the method of empathy-based stories (MES) (see Eskola, 1997). The purpose of the method is to provide research participants with a frame story that they are supposed to continue by telling what they think could happen or what could have preceded the situation described in the frame story. The word “empathy” is a little misleading in the translation as it does not refer to empathetic action as such (e.g., in a caring or compassionate manner). One may need to have a certain amount of empathy before being able to experience accurate sympathy or compassion. There are studies that directly measure empathy and its development, and then the word is rightly linked with its care element (see e.g., Mercer et al., 2004). Likewise, some researchers have used the name empathic design in research strategies (e.g., Thomas & McDonagh, 2013). However in this case, we would prefer a word that describes the purpose of the method better: instead of empathy, a better word would be for example “reflection” or “critical consciousness”, in the same way for example Hernández et al. (2005) have used the method of the Cultural Context Model in family work aiming at an effort to develop critical consciousness. Next, we will introduce the basis of the method in detail.

Our implementation of the method is grounded on the critical indigenous research approach as it attempts to pay attention on the special features of indigenous research (see also Sarivaara, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2013b). The critical research tradition aims at liberating and empowering people from inequitable social circumstances (Chambers, 2006). Thus, critical theory analyzes such societal conditions that prevent people from realizing their potential. Paulo Freire presented the idea of critical thinking, or *conscientization*. He defined the term as “a critical comprehension of man as a being who exists in and with the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 452). We consider this approach one way of applying critical theory to enhance indigenous research. Our studies have shown that consciousness not only toward the ruling powers but also toward the indigenous community is needed (e.g., Sarivaara & Uusiautti, 2013; Sarivaara, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2013ab).

The critical research approach promotes the subjectivity of knowledge and equality. Typical research methods are participatory ethnography and action research, and other participatory methods (e.g., Collins, 2009; Díaz de Rada, 2007; Ecclestone, 1996) and approaches that involve the researcher inside and within the social reality of the research target. Methodological choices are based on the researcher’s understanding of the reality and his or her opportunity of obtaining information about it. These ontological and epistemological presumptions direct the research process.

Sámi research is a part of global discourse of indigenous research (Hart, 2010). The goal of indigenous research paradigms is to construct new viewpoints to research by questioning and deconstructing the prevailing values, viewpoints, and knowledge systems. These research paradigms can offer new means of analyzing indigenous cultures which partly decreases the chances of misinterpretations. Therefore, Sámi research means research that is conducted from the Sámi point of view. Primarily, the purpose of Sámi research is to produce emancipatory information and to change and renew research through critical discussion (Lämsman, 2008). Emancipatory information relates to critical social sciences and power.

Based on the aforementioned critical research tradition, we call the method “critical consciousness sharing”. The specific implementation of the method that will be described in detail in this article is the audiovisual frame story as a method of critical consciousness sharing in indigenous research (cf., Moustakova-Possard, 1998).

Therefore, the film was a fiction used for igniting thinking in the research participants, not a film shoot among the target group, like for example Seljevold and Johansen (2013) did. They used filming as an ethnographic tool to observe language usage, which is very different from the purpose of film in this research.

Eskola (1997) used written frame stories to ignite and obtain participants' thoughts. Likewise, the key idea of the audiovisual frame story is to have the research partners view the film and write about what they have seen (see also Eskola, 1997; Suoranta, 1995). According to Eskola and Suoranta (2008), the method is quite usable when the purpose is to analyze people's thoughts and perceptions of a certain phenomenon or to analyze the logic of their thinking. This method allows the participants to define what they want to include in their stories and how. However, their written stories are always linked with their previous experiences, and, therefore, their writings also necessitate role-taking either from their own or someone else's point of view. In this context, role-taking means that the participants had to imagine how the person in the film, in the frame story, might feel and act. This role-taking could also ground on the participants' own experiences. The outcome is a reflection of those ways of action or behavior models and feelings that the research partner has had in similar situations or about the situations he or she has participated through his or her social connections somehow (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008). The key element in the method is therefore the frame stories—regardless of the form of the story—which is called "orientation". The method we are describing in this paper had an audiovisual orientation, a short film. The research partners were asked to fill out a semi-structured questionnaire after watching the film. The questions were designed to help their critical reflection on the content of the film. In practice, the data collection procedure started by sending the research partners the DVD film together with the questionnaire by mail. The research partners were asked to (1) watch the film, (2) answer the questions, and (3) send the film and answers back to the researcher by the deadline.

3. The Design and Implementation of the Audiovisual Frame Story

3.1 Script

The film necessitates a synopsis or a screenplay. Dr. Sarivaara designed the content of the film so that it would make the research partners identify themselves with the story and talk about their own experiences. The frame story presented in the film describes the people living in the North and Sámi culture, and views the Sámi community from the inside. The starting point of the film was to open the inner power structures of the Sámi community and the unspoken themes of Sáminess. In order to understand the frame story, the viewer had to know the Sámi language, the Sámi history, and the Sámi culture. Therefore, the film would not necessarily speak to outsiders in the way it would speak to the local people as the complex, inner power structures that are often hidden can be difficult to recognize by an outsider. While on the other hand, an outsider can naturally perceive new points of view that may not be apparent to members of the community.

3.2 Technical Know-how

Making a film necessitates technical expertise. In this research project, a documentarist and media teacher from the Sámi Education Institute participated in the film making. Dr. Sarivaara had also taken courses of film making in order to be able to reflect the reality diversely and multi-sensuously. The film making was preceded by collecting feedback about the planned content of the frame story from students from the media courses. Their feedback functioned as the pre-study, and based on the research partners' ideas and perceptions the film had its final form.

3.3 Main Character and Plot

The idea in the film was to have a person who would be willing to give face to a non-status Sámi person and through the film act as the example of a contradictory and non-acceptable Sámi identity. The basic message of the film is connected with the experience of the limits of ethnicity and identity negotiations: how the non-status

Sámi defines him or her identity in relation to the official Sámi people and how they define the non-status Sámi.

The film used in this research was about six minutes long. The first 30 seconds and the last 30 seconds of the film are the most touching and probably speak the most to the viewer. The purpose was to ignite thoughts and feelings first, then continue developing the theme in the film, and get back to it at the end of the film. The film presents the two levels of being a Sámi: the social recognition as a Sámi and the official status of a Sámi. The film starts with a very traditional picture of Sámi reindeer herding interrupted by the main character's words: "They call me 'riuku' and it does not feel nice because I don't see myself as a total riuku". "Riuku" is a vulgar expression which refers to the non-Sámi women because they are considered outsiders. Therefore, the first scene presents the core of the research theme.

In this audiovisual frame story, the main character is not recognized as a Sámi in the village the person lives. According to the surrounding Sámi community, something is missing. In the Sámi culture, family ties and relatives and the place of residence are of primary importance. If you are not known and you do not belong to a recognized Sámi family, how could you be a Sámi? The main character feels a sting because of being called as "riuku" and categorized as an outsider although the main character's ancestors were Sámi and roots are in the traditional Sámi area, in a locality called Inari. Calling someone "riuku" is associated with people coming from South-Finland to the Sámi area, with people who are ethnically totally non-Sámi. This is why the main character is upset.

Calling someone "riuku" can be seen as a form of exclusion and probably internalized racism of sorts. It is a Sámi convention of dividing Sámi people into "us" and "others", and the purpose is for example to highlight the Sámi pride. However, the convention has sometimes unethical features because the target of calling "riuku" can find it derogatory and unequal.

Likewise, the final 30 seconds of the film discuss a very sensitive and bruising theme, the assimilation of Sámi into the dominating Finnish culture. This theme concerns both the non-status Sámi and the official Sámi because naturally they share the same history as they are descended from the same Sámi people. The difference is that the non-status Sámi families have experienced the assimilation process earlier than the official Sámi families. In the film, the main character says that it is sad that her grandmother had disdained the Sámi her whole life. The scene is accompanied with music composed by Sámi musician Mari Boine "Mearrasápmelažžii" ("To the Coastal Sámi", in English). The lyrics explain why the main character's grandmother felt so much hatred and shame toward her own people: "remember who taught her, remember what she has experienced". These words express that the colonization is not the Sámi's fault but they were made to give up their language and identity.

The questioning and linguistic purism experienced by the non-status Sámi is concretely shown in the reindeer fence scene in which an elder woman wonders and questions the main character's Sámi language skills. In the scene, the main character is supported by a woman living in the village. Visually, the main character is presented as traditional Sámi women who does reindeer herding and who obviously has a strong Sámi identity. The paradox of the film is situated in the mental picture shown in the film and the speech of the main character: they are contradictory. The main character reveals her inner thoughts and turmoil related to Sáminess. On one hand, she is a Sámi and on the other hand, she is not.

In places, the film provides a stereotypical picture of the Sámi reindeer herders because only a fraction of the Sámi earns their living from reindeer herding. The research had fifteen non-status Sámi as research partners and only two of them were reindeer herders. On the other hand, the main character of the film is a Sámi-speaking math teacher at middle school also working as a project leader. Thus, she represented both modern and traditional occupations which actually provide a truthful picture of the northern life.

3.4 Questionnaire about the Contents of the Frame Story

The research partners were asked to watch the film and write about their thoughts and experiences with the

help of a semi-structured questionnaire. Critical reflection was encouraged. The data collection in the whole study was divided into two parts; the first part consisted of interviews, and in the second part, the film was utilized to help data collection. The semi-structured questionnaire was chosen as a method because it allowed the research participants to autonomously reflect and write about their thoughts. In this study, it was considered important to collect data both by interviewing and with questionnaires without the researcher being present in the answering situation. The second phase is in the focus of this article.

The questionnaire consisted of nine items and seven of them focused on the thoughts ignited by the frame story. There questions were:

(1) What do you think this film wants to tell? What is the message of the film?

(2) What kinds of thoughts and feelings did the film arouse in you? Why? (e.g., Did the film arouse contradictory feelings, or a feeling of relief, annoyance, excitement... Did you experience realization, was the film true, what kind of a viewpoint and whose viewpoint was presented in the film?)

(3) Did you like something in the film? Why?

(4) Did you dislike something in the film? Why?

(5) Have you had similar experiences than what the main character had? What kind of experiences?

(6) What does the film on the one hand express and on the other hand leaves unspoken/unexpressed?;

(7) What more would you like to say about the film?

The purpose of the questions was to make the research partner profoundly reflect on the content of the frame story from the point of view of the main character. In addition, the questions were supposed to lead the research partner discuss his or her own relationship with Sáminess and his or her experienced identity. The audiovisual frame story thus functions as the stimulus of critical reflection and way of data collection (see also Nicholls, 2009).

3.5 How Did Research Partners Perceive the Data Collection Method?

According to the research partners' answers, they had experienced many kinds of feelings, such as sorrow, wonder, and empathy. Some of them had identified with the main character. At the same time, they had been encouraged to reflect on their own identification in the Sámi community. Especially, they discussed the social and societal exclusion of the main character. The theme of limits and exclusion from the Sámi community aroused discussion the most. The purpose of the film was to make the research partners reflect on the definitions of Sáminess from the individual and societal perspectives: what does Sáminess mean to themselves and what is its societal role? The film presents the categories of Sáminess from the main character's point of view.

According to the questionnaire, many of the research partners recognized the main character's experiences of Sámi identity and the various sides of its definition. The audiovisual frame story also highlights the question of the current official Sámi definition which is seen unfair and rolling back Sáminess.

Question: *What do you think this film wants to tell? What is the message of the film?*

The research partner's answer: *It is the definition of Sáminess that is not right! It does not serve its purpose, the strengthening of Sáminess, promotion of the Sámi language and culture. The main character of the film speaks the Sámi language, participates in the local life, is descended from the Sámi, is local, appreciates the Sámi culture, and is Sámi. And still she is excluded.* (Questionnaires, Research Partner no. 7)

4. Discussion: Method of Critical Consciousness Sharing in Indigenous Research

The data collection with the audiovisual frame story was implemented by combining visual research methods with written texts. This solution had many reasons. The primary purpose was to use versatile methods within the common research methodological framework and to use creativity in bringing out the research theme. The second purpose was to try new methods and combine interdisciplinary approaches. Visualization was realized in the form of an audiovisual frame story, a film, that the researcher herself had screen written, directed, and, for the most part, filmed too. The method represents ethnographic research methods in which each picture, voice, and the structure of the film in general must be reasoned through the research objectives (Pink, 2007). Data collection can include various methods that are used diversely and multi-sensuously (Hunter & Brewer, 2003). According to visual ethnography, visual information is as important as written information (MacDougall, 1997).

Likewise, it is worth noticing that the audiovisual frame story had many purposes and roles in the research process. First, it functioned as the data collection method igniting the research partners' feelings and making it easier to discuss the sensitive research theme. Second, the film was a visual part of the research and it was constructed through ethnographic information processing (Pink, 2007). The film covered the research questions, the research framework, theoretical thinking, the researcher's and the research partners' experiential worlds, and artistic creativity.

Third, the purpose of illustrating the research theme in a visual form was to surpass the taboos, myths, and silence related to the theme. The film functioned as the means of making the phenomenon visible and as an emancipatory motive, empowering factor. The research partners could reveal and compare their experiences with the one's presented in the film. Pink (2003) argues "that in any project a researcher should attend not only to the internal 'meanings' of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers" (p. 186).

The data collected by the questionnaire was analyzed first by categorizing the answers into themes and then with qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). The research partners provided profound elaborations about the theme. Therefore, the audiovisual frame story provided abundant data which shows that the film and the related questionnaire had made reflection easier and laid the foundation to the discussion of the research partners' feelings and experiences.

In addition, it is relevant to analyze whether the film and the questions presented to the research partners influenced the contents of their answers. This question has to be evaluated for the reliability and functionality of the method (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Patton, 2002). Would another kind of plot and script provide different kinds of data? It is a fact that the answers are connected with the film. As such, the film however seemed to reach a wide spectrum of emotions in the research partners. Furthermore, the research partners were asked to assess the truthfulness of the film and whether they considered that something was uncovered by the film. In all, the method was regarded positively among the research partners, and, thus, viewed as a suitable way of approaching such a sensitive phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

In qualitative research, the researcher has indulged in the research: the researcher's personality is one of the most influential parts of research. The methodological choices reveal how the researcher sees the reality and the possibilities of obtaining information about it (Foster & Bochner, 2008). The constructivist epistemology grounds on the researcher's consciousness and deliberate emphasis on the research participants' voices. The purpose is to highlight marginal and strengthen the awareness of special population groups, increase life management and empowerment (see also Botha, 2011). Several research approaches have started to emphasize similar perspectives, such as women studies, action research, narrative research, or indigenous research. These research approaches also have quite tight connections with critical theory (see e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Although qualitative research does not aim at generalization in the same way quantitative research does, theoretical generalization is possible. Moreover, qualitative research does not form one unified research tradition but includes several different approaches and techniques. This also means that there is not just one criterion for the evaluation of reliability (Patton, 2002). It is important to evaluate how the researcher's choices have influenced on the reliability of the research. Careful description of the researcher's position increases reliability. Likewise, the researcher's subjective relationship with the research theme can increase understanding about the phenomenon and the research partners' stories. On the other hand, they can also blind the researcher and prevent him or her from seeing something that an outsider would discover from the data. The researcher always reads the data through his or her own values, understanding, recollections, and personal features. Therefore, the researcher's interpretation is equally right and truthful than the research partners' stories are (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

This research showed that the use of audiovisual frame story method of critical consciousness sharing in indigenous research gave a significant increase to data collection and provided valuable, profound data. On the other hand, making a film is time-consuming and laborious, and requires multiple skills of the researcher. However, the audiovisual frame story appeared a very useful method for having as versatile understanding of the research phenomenon as possible. Especially, sensitive themes concerning indigenous people can be discussed at a new dimension through a film. Finding actors in these films is, naturally, a challenge of its own, but one's the faces for sensitive themes have been found, the film that is used as a frame story for critical reflection can enhance indigenous people's consciousness and processes of empowerment.

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