

## Developments and Challenge in Social Science Research in Northern Finland

Ludger Müller-Wille

Volume 40, numéro 110, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/022573ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/022573ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Müller-Wille, L. (1996). Developments and Challenge in Social Science Research in Northern Finland. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 40(110), 277–280.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/022573ar>

---

# Developments and Challenges in Social Science Research in Northern Finland

**Ludger Müller-Wille**

Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland (1994-96)  
Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal (Québec) Canada

In 1988 and 1989 respectively, I made statements in Finnish Lapland, at the Centennial Anniversary of the Geographical Society of Finland and at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the University of Lapland, to the effect that there is currently a lack of intensive anthropological and sociological studies and research into the process of changes among the Finnish and Sámi populations of northern Finland (Müller-Wille, 1989, 1991).

Now, some years later in 1996, a year after Finland joined the European Union, this trend has still continued, although it seems that interests in the cultural, socio-economic and political conditions in northern Finland and neighboring areas will increase quite noticeably in the near future — an encouraging development. This change in attitudes, approaches and priorities promises an exciting and enticing research atmosphere that will, I hope, lead to new research directions and to the analysis of the current situation within the framework of arctic or northern social sciences.

At the time I made the above statements, I reviewed the evolution of social science research in northern Finland from its beginning by focussing mainly on the years after Finland's independence in 1917. For that purpose, I defined social sciences in the broadest sense to include ethnography and ethnology, linguistics, humanities, cultural history, human geography and, last but not least, sociology among other fields.

The scientific interests in northern peoples and environments has a long European-based tradition in northern Europe. In fact, its beginning can be seen in Joannis Schefferus' ethnographic compilation and treatise of the Sámi, first published in 1673. In the Finnish academic tradition, as of the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> century and shaped by Swedish academic institutions, the scientific endeavors were strongly related to the emergence of a unifying identity among Finnish people as a culture nation leading to an independent state. Through field studies, scientists provided evidence by tracing the cultural roots of Finno-ugric peoples and their relationships with other cultures.

In brief, the major scientific contributions can be summarized in two groups.

The first group were the ethnographers and linguists of the XIX<sup>th</sup> and the early XX<sup>th</sup> century, who provided a large amount of detailed and descriptive information on Finnish, Sámi, Russian and Scandinavian cultural variations in northern Fenno-Scandia and Kola, called Sápmi by the aboriginal Sámi.

---

The second group — active between the world wars, 1920 to 1940 — consisted mainly of natural scientists and geographers who were keen to study the specific features of arctic and subarctic environments and the existing resources, mineral and others, in the wake of Finland's economic and political northern expansion to the arctic ocean coast in Petsamo. Human geographers looked particularly at the relationship between humankind and the natural environment as well as at the ensuing changes caused by economic and political developments.

Research into human conditions, at that time, looked at the spatial conflicts between Sámi reindeer herding and Finnish small-scale farming, preservation of nature (the forerunners of wilderness protection) and the predicaments and rights of aboriginal peoples such as the Sámi, in comparison with other northern regions such as in the Québec-Labrador peninsula (Tanner, 1944).

The Winter War (1939-40), Continuation War (1941-44), and Lapland War (1944-45), the evacuation of all civil population from northern Finland, the total devastation of the northern regions by German forces, and the Reconstruction Period (1945-55) required different priorities and goals in research, which were then clearly applied to socio-economic and practical programs to attain an acceptable level of socio-economic well-being and security in northern Finland. Subsequently, from the 1950s into the early 1980s, major scientific efforts emerged in northern Finland in order to understand the socio-economic and cultural changes caused by the wars. These research areas can be described as follows.

- Two State Commissions on Sámi Affairs conducted studies in the early 1950s and again in the 1970s, proposing actions by the state government to recognize Sámi rights to land and its use and self-determination. Some results were achieved, however, major issues still need attention.
- Human adaptability studies among the Skolt Sámi as part of the International Biological Program looking at physical and psychological aspects of adaptation.
- Large-scale sociological studies into the "Finnicization" of the Sámi population, expressed by the loss of ethnic identity and distinctness.
- Socio-economic impact assessment studies in the wake of hydro-electric developments, the creation of national parks and recreational areas in Finnish Lapland in the 1970s.
- Studies into Sámi language development, folklore, history, and aboriginal knowledge; the ecology of reindeer herding; political processes towards self-determination among the Sámi.
- Since the 1950s, several foreign cultural and social anthropologists have conducted research in northern Finland on Skolt Sámi individualism; ethnicity in culture contact between Finns and Sámi; introduction of snowmobiles into reindeer herding; and on economic change and leadership in Sámi society.

- 
- Encompassing studies on Finnish Lapland as a whole were conducted by Finnish and foreign, mainly German, human geographers and economists who focussed on demography, economic change, and general developments. German human geographers have shown a preponderance to focus on agriculture, forestry, reindeer herding, regional development and infrastructure.

From the above, it could be assumed that everything seems well in the broad field of social sciences in northern Finland. Certainly, these researches made enormous contributions and accumulated large amounts of data. However, it seems that there is a need for a renewed approach to look at current socio-cultural, economic and political processes in northern Finland within a broader geographical, political socio-economic and cultural context.

Today, in 1996, I still argue that social science research in the North is in disarray for the very reason that there is a feeling of uneasiness with respect to who does research, why and how. These conditions and circumstances clearly relate to the relationship between majority and minority in the context of northern Finland, Finland as a whole and internationally, meaning here the relationship between Sámi and other minority researchers and Finnish or foreign researchers representing the majority (Keskitalo, 1994).

This uneasy relationship also has an impact on the conduct of community-based anthropological and/or sociological field research which seems to be lacking currently from the research scene. Still, there are clear signs of change which could give some indication of what type of research needs to be pursued in the future.

Recently, there have been changes and developments in the educational and academic field in the North which provide a stronger base to conduct research in the North by the North. More educational and scientific centers have been established such as the University of Lapland with its slogan "Expert of the North". There is increased action and participation by the Sámi research community, *i.e.* through the regional Sámi Area School Center in Inari (Finland) and the proposed Sámi Scientific Center (Sámi Institute/Sámi College) in Kautokeino (Norway). These developments will strengthen intra-Sámi linkages. The political and socio-economic changes since the late 1980s have caused the disappearance of Northern Finland's encapsulation from the east, with the opening of Russia and the emerging dynamics of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region and, finally in 1995, with the northern extension of the European Union.

What then are the issues that might be on a priority list for a social science agenda and a research program focussing on northern Finland and its neighboring regions? The following areas seem to be of importance to northerners and their institutions.

- Aboriginal environmental knowledge and its connection with modern scientific analysis;
- social and economic processes in majority-minority relations;
- aboriginal rights and governance;

- mobility, migration and centralization of people;
- spatial, socio-economic and political conflicts over the exploitation of different types of resources in the same place (e.g. the parallel existence of reindeer herding and mining);
- tourism and the impact of designated wilderness areas for recreation and enjoyment by Europeans;
- the impact of politically and economically created boundaries on northern populations;
- reliance on local resources in the interest of balanced development.

Thus, in conclusion, let me try to answer the following question: how can such an agenda be carried out? This can only happen in a spirit of openness void of superiority, hierarchical thinking, dominance and exclusion recognizing the strength in cooperating among various disciplines and institutions and acknowledging the fact that, in northern or arctic research, a shift has occurred from activities emanating from the south to actions carried out by the North. With the development of a lively educational infrastructure, research on northern conditions today is conducted in the North, by the North, and for the North to expand the global and holistic understanding of the processes in human-environmental relations under specific natural conditions. Social scientists have the responsibility to contribute to this understanding in a morally and ethically sound way.

#### NOTE

This article is a revised version of the test lecture with the title *Social Science Research in Northern Finland: Where Do We (Go) From Here?* given by the author on December 19, 1994, to attain the docentship in social anthropology at the University of Lapland, Rovaniemi (Finland).

#### REFERENCES

- KESKITALO, Alf-Isak (1994) Research as an Inter-ethnic Relation. *Arctic Centre Reports* 11/*Diedut* 7/1994. Rovaniemi (First published in 1976).
- MÜLLER-WILLE, Ludger (1989) Finnish Lapland Between South and North : Developments in Anthropology and Human Geography since the 1920s. *Terra*, 101(1): 67-77.
- (1991) Indigenous Nations and Social Sciences: Minority-Majority Relations in Sápmi, Finland. In *Samesymposium*, edited by Marjut Aikio and Kaisa Korpijaakko, *Lapin yliopiston hallintoviraston julkaisu*, 15: 151-170. Rovaniemi.
- SCHEFFERUS, Joannis (1673) *Lapponia*. Francfort : Christian Wolff.
- TANNER, Väinö (1944) Outlines of the Geography. Life and Customs of Newfoundland-Labrador. *Acta Geographica*, 8.