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“You Can Hold the Potatoes”: Trust as Relational Praxis Amongst Sámi Communities in Norwegian Sápmi

Trust is never a static or objective concept. In Norwegian Sápmi, it takes shape within a context marked by historical and ongoing dispossession, institutional marginalisation, and the complex terrain of reconciliation (Anderson & Dankertsen, 2023; Kuokkanen, 2020). In this lecture, I explore trust as relational praxis: not a fixed or objective category, but rather something to be forged, through an ongoing relationship of being recognised, understood, and engaged with as a dialogical equal (Buber, 1923; Kuokkanen, 2007). Trust, in this framing, is not reducible to just belief in another’s reliability—it is how relationships are enacted, tested, and negotiated in everyday life.

The title of this lecture stems from a moment during fieldwork, when I was invited by a close Sámi interlocutor to join her and her sister on a trip to their family’s island north of Bodø. Correctly sizing me up as a “city boy,” they gave me a single task, “hold the potatoes,” while they prepared the boat for our row across the fjord. While humorous and seemingly mundane, this gesture came to symbolise an unfolding trust. It was a small, but meaningful, invitation to step briefly into their world through shared responsibility, in spite of our differences.

Taking this encounter as a starting point, I trace how trust - and distrust – are lived in moments of humour, wager, frustration, and resistance (Baier, 1986). Drawing on long-term ethnographic research conducted in Norwegian Sápmi, and in dialogue with interlocutors, this lecture will explore how trust materialises—and often fails—across uneven terrains of recognition, repair, and ongoing settler colonialism. In doing so, I argue for the need for a deeper reckoning with trust as a social and ethical praxis that both enables and limits the possibilities of reconciliation today.

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