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# HISTORY, PLACE, AND BELONGING ON A SWEDISH-SPEAKING ISLAND IN FINLAND

## ABSTRACT

This article brings together the themes of identification, belonging, and community. Based on ethnographic research on a small island in Finland with a majority of Swedish-speakers, it provides a distinctive approach to the research on the minority, which has often focussed on quantitative measures of identity and ethnicity, positioned against the Finnish-speaking majority. The article carefully unpicks markers of identification and commonality, while illuminating contradictions and tensions within the community. The article contributes to theoretical debates on identity, belonging, and community, by bringing them together, thus illuminating the way in which identifications, commonalities, connectedness, and groupness shape how participants view themselves and others. It also provides a knowledge contribution to existing conceptions of Swedish-speaking Finns, by providing a case study of a subset of the minority that challenges the often uncritical use of the word identity in debates about the minority. It demonstrates the importance of grappling with the complexities of identification, not content with stating that the minority is diverse but *showing* how this diversity can be manifested.

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Keywords: belonging, identification, Swedish-speaking Finns, community, connectedness

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Minna<sup>1</sup>, the wife of my landlord at the fieldsite, offered to pick me up from the nearest city to the mostly Swedish-speaking island of Västö<sup>2</sup> in Finland, as I arrived on a weekend and there were no buses to the island. The car journey gave us the opportunity to get to know each other. She told me about how she had moved to the island after meeting her husband, who was from Västö. He did not want to move to the city since he had an established life on the island with family, friends, and hobbies, such as fishing and hunting. I told her I was interested in conducting participant

observation in different free-time clubs and Minna dryly remarked: 'There are plenty of those here and everyone is involved in all of them.'

There is a ferry connection to the island, with a ferry leaving every 20 minutes. Minna was mindful of this and adjusted her speed accordingly with precision so we would not need to wait for the ferry. Once on the island, Minna passed the main buildings on the way to the house I had rented and pointed out the church, youth club, the school, pre-school, the flower shop, and the two grocery shops.

Despite the darkness I got a sense of the size of the island, only about 3 km<sup>2</sup>, with fewer than 500 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>

Minna dropped me off at the house I had rented, not far from the 'centre' of the island. This is where I got my first sense of the hospitality of the islanders: the house had been set up with furniture and kitchen equipment, even tablecloths and decorations. Hans, Minna's father-in-law, would later provide me with food, books, and magazines over the three months I spent on Västö in the autumn of 2012.

This introduction to the geography of the island and the people living there gave me a taste of what life on Västö was like. During my time on Västö, I discovered how the island and its distinct qualities contributed to the way islanders identified themselves as hospitable and stubborn, and the meanings these identifications took on in their everyday lives. Above all, I discovered a deep sense of belonging to Västö, rooted in history and traditions, and expressed in everyday interactions.

The island was one of the four locations where I undertook ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD, examining belonging and identification among the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. Often described as an 'elite minority', they hold a special position in the country. With linguistic rights protected by the constitution of Finland, Swedish-speakers, as a minority of only 5.2 per cent (Statistikcentralen 2020), are often described in public discourse and in academic and statistical studies as happier, healthier, and better off economically than the Finnish-speaking majority (e.g. Hyyppä and Mäki 2001; Saarela and Finnäs 2003). As such, the minority is a unique example of language minorities in Europe. While qualitative and ethnographic research on the minority has been conducted (e.g. Mattson 2011; Ådahl 2007), knowledge derived from statistical studies is

more common in the literature (e.g. Sundback and Nyqvist 2010; Kreander and Sundberg 2007). A number of studies have sought to demonstrate the variability of the minority by making use of large-scale statistical data. While this research (e.g. Ståhlberg 1995) suggests that there is regional variation when it comes to identifying as a Swedish-speaking Finn, we need to understand more about the forms identification takes and the lived experience of Swedish-speakers, which is what this paper seeks to do.

Key sociological and qualitative studies of the position of Swedish-speaking Finns (e.g. Allardt and Starck 1981) have generally viewed the minority as an ethnic group with both unity and inner variation. In this study, however, I wish to move away from the view of Swedish-speaking Finns as an ethnic minority, instead focusing on the more complex, multi-faceted, and situational forms of identification and belonging of individuals. The aim of the study is to fill the gap in understandings of 'Finland Swedishness' using frameworks that move beyond rigid classifications of ethnicity in order to paint a nuanced picture of the everyday lives of different Swedish-speakers, without essentialising the minority as a specific kind of group.

This is not to negate the importance of language to identification. Swedish-speaking Finns are often simultaneously part of several different speech communities, defined in their simplest form as communities where one language (or variations thereof) clearly dominates social interactions (Ana and Parodi 1998), as they can often also speak Finnish, regional dialects of both Finnish and Swedish, and other languages. Linguistic identities and habitus are not necessarily exclusively built on the minority language a person speaks, and a more nuanced and complex picture of

speech community membership is needed to accurately represent the complexities of the multiple identifications Swedish-speakers may have, both on the individual and collective level (May 2011: 162). Speech communities are created through extensive interaction (Morgan 2004: 3), and the role of language in making meaning and maintaining social norms within different fields is of interest in the pursuit of understanding the different forms identification takes. In the context of this study, how this is done through the local dialect is of particular importance. Language helps us participate in and find our place and position within a social context. Therefore, being a member of a speech community ‘includes local knowledge of the way language choice, variation, and discourse represents generation, occupation, politics, social relationships, identity, and more’ (Morgan 2004: 4). This is because members are aware of the cultural hegemony of a speech community, meaning they also recognise its boundaries, the ‘other’ (Bourdieu 1977).

This article explores how a subset of members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland negotiate history, place, and nature and the ways in which they come together to create a sense of community and belonging, not only unique to the minority, but the specific area in which they reside. In giving an empirically grounded view of how members of the minority situate themselves within the social environments in which they live their lives, we need to look beyond the identity of ‘Swedish-speaking Finns’, while not rendering it irrelevant or meaningless. This paper therefore fills a gap in theoretical understandings of ‘Finland Swedishness’ by moving beyond ethnicity and contributing to our knowledge of how concepts such as community, identification, and belonging intersect, making use of original empirical data.

I will begin by outlining key theoretical considerations, specifically relating to ideas of belonging, identification, and bounded communities. I will then briefly discuss the methodology used in my study. The empirical section of the paper discusses how history, kinship, and place are manifested in the everyday lives of islanders, through storytelling, traditions, and rituals, and the close relationship with nature that many islanders have. These considerations are then used to form an understanding of how islanders identify themselves and the commonalities and shared vocabulary that history, kinship, and place have produced over time. I will discuss how outsiders are viewed on Västö, and how locals use the commonalities that are part of their everyday vocabulary to relate to visitors, thereby strengthening their own sense of distinctiveness. The conclusion will bring together the findings outlined in the article, and show how identification as Swedish-speaking Finns was seen as less relevant to participants’ everyday lives than I expected.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: BELONGING, IDENTIFICATION, AND BOUNDED COMMUNITIES

Identification, belonging, and community emerged as central themes in this study, rather than the minority status of Swedish-speaking Finns itself. This is at least in part related to the bounded nature of the community studied. I will therefore begin by reviewing key debates around these concepts.

Rather than making use of the concept of identity, which has become somewhat of a lay term, this study will make use of Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) range of alternative concepts that are particularly useful when examining how actors view themselves in relation to others. The authors argue that the

term identity is used in everyday discourse for various purposes. For example, lay individuals can use it to both distinguish themselves from others, and to express sameness when deemed appropriate (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4–5). However, these everyday uses of identity should not be conflated with analytical uses of the concept. Therefore, instead of summarising or merging the various everyday uses of identity for analytical purposes, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) call for a complete reformulation of the concept as a category of analysis. This is because: ‘Conceptualising all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and all self-identifications in the idiom of ‘identity’ saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2).

In light of this, in order to better explain how people sharing common attributes come to define themselves in a way that takes into account ‘the contingent and variable relationship between mere categories and bounded, solidary groups’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 9), Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14) propose alternative analytical concepts. *Categorical identification* refers to identification that is based on sharing specific categorical qualities, while *relational identification* is based on one’s position in a relational web. Identification can take both the form of identifying others and identifying oneself in these ways.

Also central to the focus of this paper are Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000: 19–21) concepts of commonality, connectedness, and groupness. These refer to people feeling a sense of belonging to a group either due to sharing a common attribute or relational ties. This, in addition to *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, a feeling of belonging together, can result in groupness. According to Jenkins (2011: 3), identification is

concerned with both similarities and differences that we detect based on various cues, helping us locate others and ourselves in the social world, giving it meaning.

Viewing belonging as a concept linking the individual to the social, and examining everyday lives of participants to gain an understanding of it, is particularly helpful when considering social practices of those on Västö (May 2001: 364). May (2001: 368) defines belonging as ‘a sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings’. Closely tied to identification, it requires positioning oneself in relation to others. This also entails finding one’s place in relation to social values and norms prevalent in the social context one is in, contributing to an individual’s sense of self. Furthermore, belonging entails a role in not only maintaining the prevailing norms and culture of the group, community, or society, but also taking part in changing and developing these. The degree to which this is possible is dependent on power structures and an individual’s position within these. Indeed, in choosing to belong we must also conform to the norms of the group at least to some degree in order to be accepted. Freedom of choice and conformity come together within the concept in complex ways (Guibernau 2013: 61–64). Being familiar with a group or place does not alone suffice in creating belonging: we must be accepted by others (May 2001: 370).

The sense of belonging is often strongly connected to place and kinship (Gullestad 2006: 111). Kinship encompasses both social and natural domains (Strathern 1992: 20). Edwards (2000) has argued for kinship to be conceptualised as a way to relate people to place and the past. This doesn’t mean an abandonment of the idea that kinship is about relating people to one another, but provides a new layer to the concept, closely relating it to place and memory. For example, customs of eating and drinking

can be specific to a place or a group of people, thus taking on different meanings in different contexts. Eating and drinking can be associated with both the structure of the everyday and have particular associations with particular times of the year and important events, acting as symbols of belonging and kinship (Sutton 2001: 16). An interest in the history of the local community (memory) can act as an expression of belonging and kinship, along with various cultural categories that become important for a community, such as nature (Gullestad 2006: 111–113). Nature can be ascribed with different meanings as a cultural category. As Gelter (2000: 78) points out, in Scandinavia this often takes the form of seeing nature as an escape from urban life and going back to one's roots.

The final key concept of the study is community. A much contested concept for the social sciences, it can carry a range of meanings. Frazer (1999: 76) notes that communities can be thought of as a value. They can act as a vehicle to bring together aspects such as trust, solidarity, and mutuality, presenting itself as a potentially idealised entity. On the other hand, community has also been viewed as a descriptive category. Communities can be communities of interest, bringing together people through commonalities rather than a spatial area (e.g. Hoggett 1997: 7). Communities can also be localities, where the geographic area itself is what defines its boundaries. Of course, Frazer (1999: 76) notes that in reality, community as a value and community as a descriptive category overlap and are intertwined, making it difficult to draw definitive boundaries around definitions.

Cohen's (1987) view of communities as 'communities of meaning' is particularly relevant. Here, community is viewed as a concept used by the people who are being studied, thus giving it life and meaning. Community is therefore used

'first, to refer to the people residing within the place; and, second, to express a relational concept' (Cohen 1987: 14). The people residing within a place share perceived commonalities which they use to represent themselves as separate from other communities. A community has a sense of place and past, with boundaries to the outside world. While members of a community can attach different meanings to the parts that make up a community for them, these parts nevertheless provide a common vocabulary that reinforces members' shared sense of community.

It is also important to consider what belonging to a community entails. Belonging as a concept goes beyond relating oneself to something, and implies a deeper sense of relation. We all relate ourselves to a number of different communities to some extent, however shallow this engagement might be. While belonging requires us to position ourselves in relation to others (May 2001), it also implies a deeper, personal affinity, where one feels comfortable and at ease.

Västö can be seen as grappling with confrontations between the local and the outside. The complex ways in which islanders relate to each other and those on the 'outside' necessitate the use of a variety of analytical tools. Belonging, identification, and community as concepts allow us to consider the lived experience of islanders while not being limited by rigid definitions, boundaries, and categorisations often prevalent in literature on Swedish-speaking Finns.

## METHODOLOGY AND THE FIELD SITE

This paper is based on three months of fieldwork on Västö in the Autumn of 2012, conducted as part of 12 months of fieldwork for my PhD. I took an ethnographic approach to researching the Swedish-speaking minority in

Finland, specifically making use of participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Located in the region of Ostrobothnia, where just under half the population is Swedish-speaking (*Österbotten i siffror 2019*), Västö is a small island of about 3 km<sup>2</sup>, near the mainland, with a population of about 500 people, over 90 % of these Swedish-speakers. There is a ferry connection to the island and no bridge. Västö is made up of small fields, gardens, and some forest, with a small island centre that includes two shops, a church with a church hall, school and pre-school, a bank, as well as a small bar and the local youth club. Central to life on the island is fishing, which used to be an important source of livelihood for islanders. Nowadays locals often work outside of Västö, at sea or on the mainland, or make use of the work opportunities arising from the limited local services on the island.

I had secured a house to rent by getting in touch with the Island Committee. My contact there provided me with a list of phone numbers of her friends who she knew were involved in the various free-time clubs on the island. The first person I called was Sofia, who invited me to a meeting of the local Red Cross the following evening. From this meeting on I had no need to contact more people on the list, as word about my presence on the island started to spread. Through the Red Cross meeting I was invited to meetings of other clubs and soon I was in a position where I had to decline invitations as I had made previous commitments. In total I attended a varied number of meetings at 14 different clubs and conducted ten interviews. Interviewees were recruited at the meetings I attended (see tables one and two for further details on participants and participant observation<sup>4</sup>).

Participant observation provided me with the opportunity to observe how participants experience and enact social interactions within

the community, their sense of groupness with others, and the sites of belonging they identify with. According to Jorgensen (1989: 13), participant observation is particularly suited for studies where meanings and interactions are seen as important, when the topic of the study is observable in the daily life of participants, and when the aim is to generate theoretical interpretations. As I was interested in how Swedish-speakers create and maintain meanings and function together in their daily lives, this was an appropriate approach.

Swedish-speaking Finns are more likely than the Finnish-speaking majority to take part in free-time and voluntary activities (Kreander 2006; Kreander and Sundberg 2007). It was inevitable that in choosing to focus on recruitment through clubs, I have only been able to study a subset of those on the island, namely those socially engaged and active within their community, and it is possible that this has resulted in some bias. Importantly, it may well be that the ways of being together socially and the meanings attached to these are specific to those attending clubs. Not all Swedish-speakers seek out these types of interactions and activities, and those who do can be more sociable and interested in engaging socially with others, which cannot be assumed to be the norm. However, recruiting participants in this way enabled me to obtain an in-depth picture of some of the ways in which Swedish-speakers interact and come together and the meanings this holds for them in terms of identification and belonging.

In order to gather rich data, I followed Rubin and Rubin's (2005) model of depth interviewing, which emphasises a focus on 'nuance' and 'subtlety', rather than 'hard facts' (Rubin and Rubin: 47–48). This was a particularly suitable approach for my study, where I have sought to explore issues of identification

and belonging that can be difficult to pin down. Depth interviewing was also an opportunity to depart from current understandings of the topic, as it helped me discover themes that are relevant or important to Swedish-speakers, beyond my own assumptions and those underpinning previous studies.

The aim was to conduct a minimum of 10 interviews. This was naturally contingent on saturation and as analysis of both fieldnotes and interviews was ongoing, saturation was reached at eight interviews, when no new themes emerged (Braun and Clarke 2019). Should this not have been the case, further interviews would have been conducted.

It should be noted that I am a part of the Swedish-speaking minority myself. I grew up in a bilingual family where Finnish and Swedish were spoken. Having moved to Scotland in 2006, my use of Swedish at the time of the study was minimal and I had never visited Västö prior to beginning my research. Of course, neither the position of the researcher or the groups that the research is focused on should be essentialised. As all our social roles are situational and multiple (relating to factors such as gender, age, and class, among many others), our status as ‘insider’ might change at any given moment (Kusow 2003: 592). I got to experience this change in status continuously throughout my research. For example, upon arriving on Västö, I discovered that despite being fluent in Swedish, I had difficulties in understanding the dialect of the locals, and language was indeed used as a marker of difference between islanders and me.

Having outlined the key theoretical and methodological considerations relevant to my research, I will now consider the main empirical themes arising from the data, namely history, kinship, and locality; the importance of nature, local traditions, how islanders characterised

themselves, and the local meanings of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.

## HISTORY, KINSHIP, AND LOCALITY

History, place, and kinship can play an important role in the formation of a sense of belonging and identification (e.g. Gullestad 2006). While from the outset, the aim of the study was to examine the lived experience of Swedish-speakers as a group distinct from Finnish-speakers, it quickly became clear that this form of identification was not what most people on Västö were primarily concerned with but rather, the distinction between their island and the mainland.

Many participants in the study took a keen interest in the history of Västö and had extensive knowledge of it. A local history research group had been established, and those interested met weekly to discuss the history of Västö. The group was commonly referred to as the dialect group, as they were working on a dictionary of the dialect of the island. Solveig, a woman in her 20s, ran the group, while other group members were older, most of them retired. At the first meeting I attended, Solveig explained to me that the publishing of the dictionary had been delayed on several occasions and as the meeting proceeded I began to understand why this might be: the meetings were unstructured and conversation easily got side-tracked. As everyone was familiar with each other, discussion topics oscillated between common acquaintances, home life, the retelling of stories from the island, and there was not much practical focus on writing the dictionary itself.

Solveig had brought with her a collection of pictures and newspaper clippings, and most of the first meeting I attended was spent

looking through these as a group. Older group members identified people they knew from the pictures, sharing stories about them and the locations of the pictures. The process echoed that which Cohen (1987: 134) describes in his ethnography on Whalsay, where a local had a collection of pictures of islanders. Other locals would look through them and while not everyone recognised the people in the pictures, the names and stories associated with them were known and could be regarded as ‘common currency’ of the community. Similarly, as I spent more time on Västö, some of the stories I heard that evening were retold in my presence, shaping daily interactions through a shared vocabulary of history. Past and present were closely connected as demonstrated by the following fieldnote extract about a story I heard several times during my stay on the island:

Bengt tells the group that he has written a short text about how electricity first came to the island. He begins by stating that this was on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October to which Gitta exclaims: ‘But did you realise it’s the 25<sup>th</sup> of October today!’ Everyone laughs and marvels at the coincidence. Bengt continues his detailed story and concludes by saying that Birger, who worked at the co-operative shop and was in charge of the electricity supply, would ‘flash the lights’ twice at 10 pm to signal that the electricity was about to be disconnected and it was time to go to bed. Bengt explains how even today, if the lights flash due to an electricity supply issue, islanders say ‘Birger is telling us to go to bed!’ (Fieldnotes, the Dialect group, 25/10/2012)

The reading of the text prompted older participants to share their memories of that time, for example how people had started to worry about

Birger if the lights did not blink at 10 pm. As on Whalsay, this ‘common currency’ was used by individuals to create their own unique connections to the historical characters and events that were discussed. People who were long gone still featured in the lives of those on Västö, forming a part of shared history, as well as helping individuals place themselves within it and increasing their attachment to the place (Gullestad 2006).

The term ‘collective memory’ was first used by Halbwachs (1992) to describe the ways in which social structures and institutions construct individual memory. Groups, such as an island community, construct memory though being situated in space and time, and individuals undertake the work of remembering. Authors such as Nora (1996) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) have furthered this analysis of collective memory by situating it in the modern context. Nora (1996) argues that collective memory is used to interpret the past of a group, even as these memories become removed from the past. Those in a position of power can define the representations of collective memory that are deemed to be relevant as traditions lose significance and meaning. Collective memory, therefore, is a construction, manipulated by the powerful (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). It is therefore important to question why the collective memories repeatedly referenced by participants were the ones that were viewed as relevant and they were indeed related to positive and triumphant moments, or examples of resilience in the face of hardship.

Edwards (1998) has also studied the ways in which the past is used to compose and formulate belonging and identification locally. Certain elements of the past are selected as being relevant to belonging to a place, and the ways of belonging to a place shape that place. In her study of Alltown, a post-industrial English



town, Edwards describes the way the local Natural History society meetings provided an arena for locals to discuss past and present in the form of anecdotes and legends, much in the same way as the Dialect group on Västö did. This retelling and preservation of the past guarantees a future for the locality: 'To lose the past would be to lose a present identity which could not, in turn, be projected ahead' (Edwards 1998: 163). This, according to Edwards, should not be dismissed as nostalgia, but a way to build connections that are durable and can last into the future.

Islanders also located me within their history. People often asked where I stayed on the island and I found it difficult to describe. A man called Kaj had lived in the house I rented until he passed away and eventually, once I introduced myself the reaction was often an exclamation of 'Oh you're the one who lives at Kaj's!' I was initially often referred to as 'the one who lives at Kaj's' which gradually changed to just 'Kaj's girl'.

In Gaffin's (1993) study of placenames on the Faroe Islands, he concludes that placenames both create meaning and embody it (Gaffin 1993: 67). Names have connotations that can be used to describe personality traits. For example the nickname 'Landmaster' refers to the owner of a large piece of land at the outskirts of the village. The nickname therefore implies that the person has more land than most and was therefore 'pompous' (Gaffin 1993: 61). Understanding the connotations of the nickname therefore presupposed a certain shared vocabulary (Cohen 1987) and an understanding of cultural categories (Gullestad 2006) of the area. My nickname was perceived positively by islanders as it held connotations of the person who had lived in the house I was staying at, someone who had been well-liked by islanders. As in Gaffin's (1993: 62) study,

a newcomer 'has a verbal badge of membership in the community and the landscape'. If I introduced myself and included information on where I was staying, islanders had a familiar reference point and an opportunity to reflect on their memories of Kaj, creating a sense of familiarity and the opportunity for them to position me within the landscape.

The book the dialect group was working on was also to include a map of Västö, with different areas marked out in dialect. A heated discussion took place in relation to this, with everyone suggesting what could be marked out: swamps, fields, bays, and wells. The group quickly decided that there would not be enough space for everything, demonstrating the extensive knowledge members had of the geography of the island, and what different areas had been referred to as for generations. The conversation easily slipped to more anecdotes and participants were reminded of people and events from the past when talking about the different parts of the island, demonstrating historical and cultural, as well as geographical, knowledge. Gaffin (1993: 62) had a similar experience on the Faroe Islands as he was attempting to construct a similar map with different placenames. In speaking to long-time residents who helped him with this, he found that people could spend hours talking about placenames: the type of land, past events that took place there, people, and relationships. For him, this made him 'realise that simple words for specific locations brim with associations. Placenames are mnemonics of social knowledge. They bring social history to the present and help to understand and preserve relationships' (1993: 62).

According to Degnen (2016: 1646), place attachment is: 'a collective, relational, and embodied process, caught up and experienced via social memory practices and via embodied, sensorial registers'. This highlights how

profoundly social place is as a concept. As Degnen argues, place not only holds significance for individuals due to them spending a lot of time there, but both their own history and those of others are fundamentally linked to that place. Again we see how individuals actively express social memory through contemporary conversations with others who share the place they inhabit.

These dialect group meetings gave me a sense of the importance and weight many islanders placed on history, ancestry, and place. Gullestad (2006: 111) writes that ‘combining kinship and place reinforces the attachment to place’, as can be seen in the interactions I have outlined. Discussions on the history of the island, one’s place within this history, and the knowledge of the geography of Västö, demonstrated a familiarity and personal relationship with the island, across generations. This kind of local history research reinforces and reflects the idea of the past of the island ‘belonging’ to islanders through their kinship ties. The local past is not distant, but instead something that is an integral part of belonging. As those on Västö identify with the island, the island must have an identity of its own. This identity is created through history, traditions, practices, and values. History and its pervasiveness in conversations on the island can be used, to cite Cohen (1987: 133) as a ‘cultural resource’ that reinforces and reproduces the boundaries of the community.

Fundamentally, Gullestad (2006: 113) argues that this kind of understanding of and approach to the past is more than just a connection through kinship or neighbourhood: it is about having ‘roots’. In order to feel you have these, you must possess knowledge of the past and be able to express your roots culturally, in dialect as well as using the right words, references, and symbols. Those on Västö, while also

part of the wider Swedish-speaking minority of Finland, were first and foremost part of their local island community where they were able to express their sense of belonging and reproduce it through the use of cultural resources. I will now continue by exploring the significance of the geography of the island for locals, and the role this plays in creating this sense of belonging.

## NATURE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ‘NATURAL’

On one of my first days on the island an older man came up to me and introduced himself when I was helping to make soup for the annual Autumn archipelago fair. He proudly explained to me that about half of the people on Västö worked on ships and that the younger generation carried on this tradition. The importance of seafaring as a career for many on the island became apparent to me after spending some time on Västö. Fishing had for a long time been a key source of livelihood on Västö but as its lucrateness diminished, seafaring was increasingly seen as a good career option. I had the opportunity to interview Peter who explained to me why he had chosen this career path:

When I was 17 I moved to Åland<sup>5</sup> for a seafaring course and ever since I’ve worked at sea, on different ships. I’ve never considered not living here [on Västö]. That’s why many boys from here work at sea: so they can live here. I mean it’s not that easy to find jobs in this area. Unless you commute to the nearest city. My heart is in the archipelago, that’s where my home is. So you have to be as close to that as you can. And Västö is close. [laughs] (Interview, Peter, 32)

For Peter, working at sea enabled him to live on Västö. He presented this as a natural choice and continued: 'My dad was a fisherman but it's difficult to make a living like that now. Hunting and fishing and old stuff like that has been around for centuries. I think we've been pretty good at preserving that and passing it on to young people as well.'

Peter emphasises how people on Västö have traditionally been able to benefit from the nature surrounding them, and young people still partook in the same activities as their parents or grandparents. This can be compared to Cohen's description of crofting on Whalsay (1987: 100). Locals would idealise the practice and describe it as a 'way of life', despite the fact that the practice was now of little economic significance. Similarly on Västö, it was no longer possible to make a living fishing (although some retired people did use it to supplement their pensions) but continuing the tradition was still seen as an important part of island life. Indeed, the sea has always been important to islanders, as a source of income but also symbolically and emotionally. Place, and the opportunities afforded by it through geography, resources, and history (Gullestad 2006), create cultural practices that are still important today beyond economic benefits, tying islanders to the past.

Similar observations have been made about former mining communities. For example, Robertson (2006: 7) notes that: 'mining's physical and social legacies are often central to a community's "sense of place" and may serve as a foundation on which local identity is structured and maintained'. The landscape of a former mining town can reinforce the sense of who the people living in it are, even though the practice of mining in itself is no longer viable. As place, it provides an arena for attachment and rootedness and a sense of belonging to it can act as a foundation for identification. Even

though the past of mining communities often includes considerable hardship, with hard work and meagre earnings, those living in them attach meaning and commitment to these places (Marsh 1987). Mining communities can become cohesive, with common hardship bringing people together and after the industry's demise, stories of these past hardship are told and retold, becoming folklore (Robertson 2006). In these communities it is often important that the heritage of the mining past is passed on through generation, for example in the form of Miner's Galas, providing a space to express and exhibit tradition. The aforementioned Autumn fair on Västö can be seen as an expression of this 'emotional regeneration' (Stephenson and Wray 2005).

Västö was often idealised, described as a 'beautiful', 'idyllic' place, 'unique' in its way of life, and 'difficult to leave'. Parallels can be drawn with Mewett's (1982: 240–241) work on the Isle of Lewis. He describes how islanders were forced to 'exile' from the island to seek education and employment due to limited opportunities on Lewis. People on Västö however often overcome these obstacles, through moving away for a few years to go to college or university but often returning in order to pursue careers that let them live on the island, even if it means several hours' commuting and being away from home for long periods of time at sea.

Conditions have changed and the kind of life people on the island led 100 years ago is no longer possible. Like 'exile' for those on Lewis, the necessity to often work away from Västö acts as a reminder of the unusual position of the island within the wider society, and therefore what it means to be an islander: both the difficulties associated with it and the rewards described by participants.

Those participants who wanted to stay on Västö often discussed island life in terms of 'authenticity'. This is illustrated in the following

fieldnote extract which is from the day I participated in the annual elk hunt:

On the way to the hunting lodge Marie tells me that her favourite thing about hunting is that all kinds of people do it: 'Bankers and farmers, communists and right-wing extremists'. After a long day where no elk were shot we take the boat back to the hunting lodge. On the boat Marie tells me about how much she enjoys her job as a teacher and life on the island. She tells me she had studied theology and started work on a PhD but says that it was an escape from reality for her. 'That is not real, this is,' she says, gesturing towards the sea. Marie talks about her daughter who is vegan and how she cannot understand why she would not eat meat as 'we should eat what nature provides for us'. (Fieldnotes, the elk hunt, 14/10/2012)

For Marie, then, life close to nature was 'real', as opposed to the studies she abandoned. Marie sees a certain inherent value in living as close to nature as possible, and mirrors this idea in her choices when it comes to food, education, and hobbies.

Gelter (2000: 78) describes the Nordic lifestyle of being close to and part of nature as *friluftsliv*. This is indeed a term used in Norwegian and Swedish, and there is a Finnish equivalent (*ulkoilmaelämä*). *Friluftsliv* can encompass different types of activities taking place outdoors, as well as the exploring of its resources through hunting, fishing, and foraging (2000: 81). Gelter (2000: 82), however, is mainly interested in *friluftsliv* as a philosophy, a way for people to see themselves as a part of the 'more-than-human world'. It allows people to connect to nature on a more profound emotional level, through practices connecting them to nature,

as well as connecting with one another in an environment where people are dependent on each other, leading to a greater sense of connectedness. People on Västö lived very close to nature and also, to an extent, off nature, making use of the food and other produce it offers. Nature here is an arena of work, with practices such as foraging and hunting, which would at one time have been essential, but also one of peace and tranquillity. Maria and Peter, along with other participants I spoke to, describe an engagement with their environment that goes beyond taking part in activities and making use of resources: nature to them is a place where they can experience a sense of belonging. Importantly for identification and belonging, it is also positioned against an 'other': the urban, worldly, and modern.

The examples I have provided here parallel Gullestad's (1992: 206–207) analysis of the importance of nature for Norwegians. Nature represents authenticity, peace and quiet, and independence. The idealisation of self-sufficiency that Maria hints at when discussing what one should eat implies that what is 'natural' is good. As Gullestad points out, 'natural' here is of course a cultural construction 'with the function of clouding its own culturalness' (1992: 206). Marie rejects certain forms of culture, such as higher education, due to them not being 'real' and 'natural'. The cultural value put on nature is, as it is for Gullestad, related to other cultural categories important to those on Västö such as independence, hospitality, and helping those in need, and preserving history and traditions. These will be discussed in more detail next but it is evident that the idea of nature as described by participants is closely connected with place, kinship, and history, playing a key role in belonging and identification.

## TRADITIONS AND RITUALS

An important way in which history and kinship were expressed in the everyday lives of participants was through traditions and rituals. As already discussed, young people on Västö play an important role in preserving traditions such as fishing and hunting. Another tradition the younger generation were in the process of reviving during my time on Västö was the *revy*, a type of cabaret performance that consisted of short humorous sketches and songs. It was common for youth clubs in the Ostrobothnia region to put on these performances, a tradition dating back several decades. I had seen photos from the 1950s of groups that had organised the *revy* on Västö at a meeting of the dialect group.

I saw some of the rehearsals for the performance. The humour was almost exclusively based on jokes only locals would understand, heavily relying on specific references, stereotypes, and broad dialect, exemplifying the shared vocabulary of Västö. These can be seen as overt markers of identity, bringing people together through symbols, language, and reference points that would be lost on someone who was not from Västö or had not lived there for an extensive period of time. Parallels can be drawn with Fortier's (1999) study of Italian émigré culture in London, where she observed the performative acts in the daily life of St Peter's Italian church that produced this culture. In acts such as the weekly Mass and the annual procession, 'elements of the past are cobbled together to mould a communal body of belonging' (Fortier 1999: 59). By inhabiting this space and taking part in its explicit expression of collective memory, participants build a sense of belonging through elements of the past.

All 200 tickets for the *revy* were sold, meaning almost half of the islanders were attending, with many disappointed they did

not get tickets. Taking part meant witnessing expressions of a shared vocabulary and the cultural categories that mark similarity and therefore reinforce identification and belonging among locals.

Traditions relating to nature, such as fishing and hunting, and the tradition of the *revy* as a site through which symbols and language could be used to reproduce the sense of community, related to the island as a whole. However, there were also some more specific traditions relating to food and drink that were important to both free time clubs and other social gatherings.

Coffee was used as a tool for bringing people together. At most of the clubs I visited, there was a break halfway through the meeting when coffee was served and people abandoned the activity of the club in order to socialise. Of course, casual conversations took place throughout the meetings but this was a time explicitly set aside for interaction. Sutton (2001) has argued that food and drink can structure the everyday and provide links to the past while creating new memories. This was the function of coffee breaks at meetings, as participants often reminisced about shared past experiences, and shared information about common acquaintances. Conversations also often had a strong focus on events that structured the year. As I visited the island in Autumn, these were the Autumn fair (often referred to as 'the start of the year' on the island), elk hunting season, and berry and mushroom picking, followed by the annual Red Cross charity auction.

It is clear that traditions and rituals provided structure to life on the island, closely tied to nature, but also to social interactions on a smaller scale, by taking the time to drink a cup of coffee together. Overall, these traditions act as vehicles for what is integral to identification and belonging on the island: place, history, and kinship. They provide an arena for remembering

the past (Sutton 2001) as well as ways to make new shared memories. I will now turn to discussing how people on Västö saw themselves, as part of the community and formed by the aspects of place, history, and kinship I have explored above.

## BEING A VÄSTÖBO

As shown throughout this paper so far, belonging to a group or community involves knowledge of various cultural symbols and the meanings they take on in the everyday lives of the people of the community. Throughout my fieldwork, participants emphasised that they saw themselves and each other as hospitable, helpful (*hjälpssam*), and stubborn (*envis*). My research also shows how hospitality and stubbornness were a part of the vocabulary of the community (Cohen 1987: 65), thus forming a part of its collective identity.

Islanders could be very hospitable and keen to make people they did not know feel at home. This was demonstrated to me early on through Hans, the landlord's father, who provided me with books, magazines, berries, and fish throughout my time on Västö. Beyond providing me with food and ways to pass the time, Hans in a very practical way illustrated to me the extent to which islanders made use of what nature provided them.

Similarly, as I visited a meeting of the local elk-hunting club, it seemed 'obvious' to participants that any guests would be taken care of. There was an annual 'exchange' between hunting clubs on Västö and the Åland islands but this year no one from Västö was actually going to Åland. Upon discussing this at the committee meetings it was quickly self-evident that accommodation for those arriving from Åland would be provided by local families and hunters regardless. Islanders often spoke about

opening their homes to anyone in need and this was a practical expression of the much talked about commonality of hospitality on Västö.

Hospitality was also expressed through the various ways in which islanders exhibited their trust in each other and even strangers. For example, participants told me that they would not lock their front doors. At a few of the free-time club meetings I conducted participant observation at, participants discussed break-ins that had taken place the previous summer. A man had come to the island on a boat and stolen alcohol and cash from houses. He had knocked on the door of Bengt, an elderly man, and Bengt had invited him in and offered him a sandwich, as he 'looked unwell'. He struggled to communicate with the man who did not speak Swedish and found him to be acting suspiciously, but as he did not seem to be well, Bengt felt it was right to help him. The break-ins had not prompted islanders to lock their doors or cars. As one elderly participant exclaimed to other islanders at a dialect group meeting where the events were discussed: 'You cannot completely lock up your house, what if someone is having an emergency? Of course they would have to be able to get in!'

While participants generally expressed and emphasised their trust in each other, rifts and conflicts could also be observed, albeit in subtle ways. For example, as there were two different shops in the village, locals tended to go to one specific shop. As one participant explained to me, this was based on the shop your parents would go to. 'Crossing the line' between shops was not something that was generally done. Certain class differences were also hinted at. For example, Margareta told me during the elk hunt that some people on the island also hunt deer. However, this was only 'for the selected elite', which didn't include her.

These types of internal divisions that exist beyond the surface are not uncommon in communities that present themselves as cohesive. For example, Mckenzie (2015) has in her ethnographic study of an English estate called St Ann's, described the estate as 'one community, many differences, but ultimately "being St Ann's" is important' (Mckenzie 2015: 136). However, tensions within the estate did exist, for example between the host community and new arrivals from the West Indies in competing for housing, jobs, and women. Similarly, Rogaly and Taylor (2009) found that while individuals living in English estates in some contexts identify as a unified group (for example, for the purposes of obtaining funding), they are in fact 'divided by roads, loyalties, definitions, representations, and experiences' (Rogaly and Taylor 2009: 134).

In her ethnographic thesis on the island of Koppars, Ådahl (2007: 111) describes segregation between Swedish- and Finnish-speakers on the island, with Swedish-speakers perceived as part of the 'upper social classes'. She also examines the relationship between those classed as 'local inhabitants' of Koppars and 'outsiders' (Ådahl 2007: 116). Similarly to Västö, these included summer dwellers and people who have moved to the island to marry or work. This can make fitting in and being viewed as part of the community extremely difficult, as the social ways of being are rooted in history and place, which are hard to access for those who have not grown up locally.

Sara, who had moved to Västö upon retirement had experienced this first hand. As a diplomat's wife, she described being viewed with suspicion as locals thought she might be 'posh, fancy, and self-important'. She explained that 'as an Ostrobothnian, I'm just a normal person' and how attitudes towards her gradually changed. Despite this, she has never been able to let go of her status as an outsider:

At the needlework course, they've become more relaxed in my presence, as an outsider, that's how they see me. It's a small place, they're not as open with people they don't know, sometimes I'll hear two women gossiping and it's not like I know what about, I'm not good with names and they're all related in some way. But it's all good fun! [laughs] (Interview, Sara, 65)

This description of someone describing themselves as an 'outsider' demonstrates that while outwardly locals were open to outsiders, belonging could be difficult to achieve.

Many interviewees described islanders as stubborn (*envisa*). Gitta explained this to me over a cup of coffee in her house:

Maybe on the mainland they've had better starting conditions (*förutsättningar*) to cope with life, they have had bread and flour, stuff we have had to buy, potatoes. It was common for people to go to the nearest village and sell fish and buy flour. I think we're very stubborn (*envisa*). Because it has been a prerequisite to be able to manage to live on the island in the past. So it wasn't a matter of giving up at the first obstacle, no. See what I think it is, and this is my own private kitchen sink philosophy, you don't need to climb over all the stones you see, but you try to find a way around them! [laughs] (Interview, Gitta, 70)

This is an example of what was echoed by the majority of interviewees, and something that often came up during participant observation: how islanders felt that nature and (partially) past physical conditions as described earlier in the chapter had affected the people on the island today. This echoes Edwards' (2000)

observations from her ethnographic study of Bacup, where ‘the harsh physical environment, a distinctive dialect, idiosyncratic characters and unique traditions are among some of the hooks on which distinctiveness can be hung’ (Edwards 2000: 185). Similarly on Västö, stubbornness, a sense of stoicism, and resourcefulness were qualities presented as resulting from historically adverse conditions, enabling islanders to get through tough situations without giving up. Following Cohen (1987: 133), the past is used here as a ‘cultural resource’ that can be utilised to emphasise difference and therefore strengthen the community boundary. On Västö, history and geography (with its challenges) are used to weave a complex web of folk history that becomes a part of how the community and people in it are viewed, creating cultural categories that help people identify themselves and others on the island as distinct from both Swedish-speakers and Finnish-speakers on the mainland.

Of course, as an island with only a ferry connection, Västö can be referred to as a bounded community. Parallels can be drawn to Cohen’s study on Whalsay (1987: 60–65), a Shetland island community. Asserting difference to those on the mainland in both cases was key in defining the boundaries of the community. How these were negotiated will be discussed more in the following section.

The relatively harsh conditions on Västö were not merely a thing of the past as storms could affect the ferry connection, although life on the island was now much easier. The ferry in itself had become a symbol of safety and trust for many and I did not speak to anyone who would have preferred there to be a bridge. Ted explained this to me during his interview:

Well the ferry obviously separates us from everyone, there’s a different kind of safety

here. It’s like, my aunt can send her two boys who are five and seven to the shop, you can’t do that in the city. And you know that if something happened there’s people here, they take care of our children, care for each other in a whole different way. (...) People from the city say that we’re helpful, considerate (*hjälp samma, omtänksamma*). My grandmother gave me a good example, there were people working on the island and there was a storm so the ferry couldn’t run. They had a place to stay, beds and couches, like ‘come in, feel at home’, even though they were strangers. (Interview, Ted, 24)

Ted’s comments link hospitality to the geography of the island, that is, its relative isolation. This sheds further light on the examples of hospitality I gave at the beginning of the section: it is not merely a matter of trust towards people not from the island driving locals to be open and helpful, it is because islanders trust in *each other* first and foremost, and the safety they perceive the geographical conditions of the island to provide. Locals understand the conditions of where they live and the problems these might cause, and are willing to help those in need. On the other hand, the ferry did ‘protect’ islanders to an extent, as they could easily see who left and came to the island, and this was something people did pay attention to. This was a very concrete representation of the boundaries between the island and the mainland. Baldacchino (2017) has indeed argued that bridges act as a physically permanent link to the outside, posing a potential threat to the ‘way of life’ of an island, defined by boundedness.

Examining ideas of hospitality and stubbornness on Västö reveals complex and sometimes contradictory processes across time and space, and they are key when it comes to



perceptions of ‘what people on Västö are like’. The sense of community participants experience on the island depends on this. As with Cohen’s (1987: 60) description of the people on Whalsay, those on Västö attribute certain similarities to each other, contributing to a sense of mutual belonging. Stubbornness, stoicism and hospitality on Västö are historically and geographically rooted and expressed through traditions and rituals. Crucially, the shared vocabulary islanders used to speak of themselves was used to distinguish them from ‘outsiders’. I will now turn to exploring how this was expressed.

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Similarly to Whalsay as described by Cohen, Västö is surrounded by water, providing it with secured boundaries. These boundaries are also secured by ‘a densely knit web of kinship and a powerful sense of historically founded discreteness’ (Cohen 1987: 24). Maintaining difference is therefore essential to the survival of the distinctiveness of the island and as this is a prerequisite for a sense of community, it is of interest to examine what happens when the boundaries of the island are perceived to be breached.

Identification helps us locate others and ourselves socially, and this is done through judgments on similarity and difference (Jenkins 2011: 3). One way for me to observe how islanders reacted to outsiders was simply to observe how they behaved when I was present, as I was not from the island nor did I speak their dialect. At my very first Red Cross meeting, the day after I arrived on the island, one of the women remarked: ‘I saw you in the shop today. Or I saw someone I didn’t know so it must have been you!’ It was not common for people who did not live on the island to visit outside the summer months, which was why I did not go

unnoticed. People who I had not met before would come up to me to talk as I was cycling around the island on the bike Hans’ wife had lent me.

Outsiders could also be seen as posing a potential threat to the people of Västö and their way of living. As per Cohen (1986: 3): ‘people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries’. Community, therefore, is by definition exclusionary. Ahmed and Fortier (2003) remind us that rather than seeing community as a harmonious utopian ideal, we must contend with the negative impacts it can have—who it excludes, the power relations that shaped it, and the hidden considerable emotional labour that goes into creating and maintaining communities. The latter can be seen in previous sections of the paper where I have described how the ‘common currency’ of the island was maintained. As community necessitates the creation of an ‘us’ and ‘them’, it perpetuates the creation of social differences.

This became evident when I was invited to a cultural heritage protection meeting at the local school. Ten islanders were in attendance and the meeting began with a presentation by two women, neither one of them native Swedish-speakers; their Swedish however was very good. The aim of the project they were working on was to map out and identify what was distinctive about inhabited areas in the Ostrobothnia region. This included photographing and preserving distinctive buildings, and mapping out any local archaeological finds.

After laying out the aims of the project, we had a coffee break as was customary at all meetings. This took place in the teachers’ room. Marie proudly explained to the guests that on the island the teachers’ room was not only for teachers; students were also free to come in and spend time there. The mood was fairly awkward and many of the islanders did not make a big

effort to converse with the guests, something I found unusual.

As we went back into the classroom I began to understand why this was the case. As the guests discussed measures to preserve and renovate old houses, Maria spoke up and said that people have to be able to live how they want, and that buildings should not be viewed as more valuable than people. She also asked about the potential cost and availability of building and renovation materials in a somewhat challenging manner. One of the presenters pointed out that the project would not lead to any new regulations for conservation. Maria said with a wry smile 'Good, we on Västö are free people so...' A man from the local historical society angrily stated that he had recently built a house but was not allowed to build it the way he wanted to: 'The environment became more important than the person.' One of the guests carefully stated that there are laws that do need to be followed, but that she is not responsible for these. The man quietly muttered that laws were merely 'the opinion of one person.'

The mood was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and tense. The presenter reiterated that the project was merely descriptive but would result in seminars on how to 'respectfully' renovate old buildings. The man spoke up again: 'I knew that already, it's the authorities that decide, not the people. There are new rules every decade and that's why all the buildings look different.' The presenter stated that that was the case everywhere in Finland and then, with a laugh, said 'But it's good that there is discussion around this!' This seemed to slightly lighten the mood and Maria said with a wink: 'we're good at that [discussion] here on Västö.'

The presentation continued with pictures the guests had taken, and both stated how warmly they had been welcomed in the houses they photographed and how everyone

had invited them in for coffee. I wondered if word had spread about these unusual visitors and islanders had done some research on the project prior to the meeting, which resulted in them worrying that their freedom would be restricted by further regulations. This resulted in a defensive attitude and a demonstration of wanting to make their own decisions since they were the locals and therefore knew what was best for the island. The duality with which outsiders are approached on Västö can be seen in this example: the women working for the project were 'just guests' when they were visiting houses on the island and thus treated much in the same way as I was, along with the hunters from Åland, and even the man who was stealing from houses the previous summer. However, at the meeting they were perceived as embodying a threat to the freedom and self-determination of those on Västö due to their profession. This showed the way in which islanders did not necessarily view individual outsiders as a threat to their ways of being, but how these people could act as symbols of outside world of decision-making and political control islanders could not influence.

This negative attitude which emerged due to not being able to decide on matters relating to the island was also reflected in local council meetings, taking place in a town on the mainland. I attended one where Västö had their own representatives in attendance, three women I was familiar with. Marie in particular spoke up at the meeting, protesting the expenditure of repairing and rebuilding a school on the mainland loudly. During the drive home she continued to complain about this and the reason soon became clear: the school on the island needed repairing and was furthest down the list. The extra expenditure would mean that it would take even longer to renovate the local school. There was a strong sense of islanders not

being fond of having their decisions made for them, and a suspicion of not being prioritised or treated fairly.

These examples demonstrate how strong willed and stoic islanders could be. They wanted to have the freedom to influence decisions that would affect them, and indeed might have been used to this freedom throughout history due to their isolated location. Interferences or threats to freedoms were not welcome, although individual outsiders were treated in a hospitable manner. Being governed from elsewhere is often presented as threat to a community, as governance and self-determination are closely tied to questions of identity and belonging (Pietka-Nykaza and McGhee 2020). In recent years, debates around sovereignty, often referred to as 'control', have become increasingly prevalent, with for example the UK leaving the EU and Scottish and Catalan campaigns for independence. In their study of English and British identity discourses, Fenton and Mann (2019), draw on and adapt a Barthian approach to ethnicity in examining boundaries of national identity, while acknowledging these are produced through social interactions in the everyday (Gullestad 1997). They (Fenton and Mann 2019) found that three main themes emerged from their interviews on views on Britain-England and the EU: decline, standardisation, and control. Out of these, standardisation and control are particularly relevant to my research context. Standardisation refers to a sense of being 'over-governed', with multiple rules and standards. This can lead for some to a loss of distinctiveness, 'flattening' everything out. We see this in the islanders who complained about the standardisation of buildings that meant a loss of individuality. Closely related is control and the Brexit debates often referenced a 'loss of control' and being 'controlled by Brussels'. Islanders wanted to

'stand alone' and make their own decisions regarding the community they relate to. (Fenton and Mann 2019: 94)

Of course, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is not perhaps as straightforward as it seems. Strathern (1982: 95), in her study of kinship ties in the English village of Elmdon, points out that what participants refer to as the 'real Elmdon' 'contains within itself connotations of both openness and closure'. The meaning of 'real Elmdon' switches, to refer to those born there, with specific familial ties, or those long associated with the place. So too, on Västö, do we see shifting definitions of what it is to be a Västöbo, from lineage and occupation to surname. Much like Elmdon, there are two particularly prevalent surnames on the island that signify historical roots to Västö. As we have seen, incomers, while welcomed, struggle to access the sense of belonging and rootedness to the community that those who can demonstrate an attachment to the history of the island can. There is a range of idioms present within a bounded community that can be evoked to express sameness and otherness, and these are often situational.

Identifications are by nature exclusionary as they rely on asserting both similarity and difference. The events at the school demonstrated this well as islanders drew boundaries between themselves and the guests in two different ways: by explicitly being opposed to the guests' presence in the capacity of people from the outside potentially disrupting their way of life, as well as in the way they showed them hospitality. Designating them with the role of 'guest', as was the case with me, was welcoming but also a way of positioning newcomers as distinct from the locals. As a bounded community with strong relational ties and *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, those on Västö wanted to preserve what they saw as being distinctive about their community.

An important part of this was establishing a distance to outsiders.

## CONCLUSION: BELONGING ON VÄSTÖ

Geographically isolated and with a historical experience uncommon for people living on the mainland, the fact that islanders were Swedish-speaking Finns was not the focal point of their daily lives and therefore, not a key site of belonging, something I had to contend with as an unexpected outcome. The vast majority of islanders were indeed Swedish-speakers and therefore much of their day to day life could be led in Swedish. Furthermore, when visiting close by towns and cities on the mainland in Ostrobothnia, it was generally possible to obtain services in Swedish. As Mattson (2011) noted in her thesis on life histories of Swedish-speaking women, identification needs to be analysed within the context in which it is expressed. Identification is situational and variable, and we become aware of it at its boundaries. For islanders, these boundaries generally were not related to Finnish and Swedish but rather island and the mainland, and differences in dialect which meant that they rarely had to contend with situations where their status as a language minority was brought to the forefront.

This paper contributes to theoretical debates on identity and belonging. It shows the value of making use of Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) alternative concepts to identity as a category of analysis, as doing so has enabled me to present the empirical material in a way that illuminates the way in which identifications, commonalities, connectedness, and groupness shaped how participants view themselves and others. I would argue that my study suggests that there is potential value in making use of this theoretical framework when

examining language minorities as it reveals the complexities behind what is often referred to as a shared identity based on language skills. Furthermore, examining identification in conjunction with belonging and community reveals the interrelated nature of space, place, the individual, and the social. These are all affected by each other and cannot be separated if we seek a complete understanding of how people experience their everyday lives.

In this paper, I have shown how history, place, and traditions weave together to form the social fabric of Västö. In order to understand how islanders see themselves and their difference to those on the mainland, it is necessary to form an understanding of how previous generations have lived on the island and how circumstances relating to physical conditions on Västö have impacted on this. Examining the relationship islanders today have with this past history reveals the significance of traditions, rituals, and the shared vocabulary of the island that their sense of identification and belonging is rooted in.

Parallels have been drawn throughout with Cohen's study on Whalsay (1987: 60–65), a Shetland island community. A community, for him, is used 'first, to refer to the people residing within the place; and second, to express a relational concept' (Cohen 1987: 14). People residing within the place therefore share perceived commonalities that they use to represent themselves as separate from other communities. This paper has shown how hospitability and stubbornness become such perceived commonalities and are framed as defining features of a Västö identity.

A community has a sense of place and past, with boundaries to the outside world. While members of a community may attach different meanings to what for them makes up the community, these parts nevertheless provide

a common vocabulary that reinforces members' shared sense of community. On Västö, this was reflected in the way islanders spoke about the history, nature, and geography of the island in their day-to-day lives, and also in the practices they engaged in. Traditions, predominantly related to nature, were preserved through time, despite changes in employment opportunities. These were described by participants as important to them on an emotional level, since engaging in these activities brought them closer to what was deemed to be 'natural' and 'local', as well as tying them to the history of the island, reinforcing kinship ties.

Stories from the past of the island were often retold by participants during my time on Västö, to the point where I was familiar with many of them. To use Cohen's terms, these stories become a 'common currency' of the island that could be drawn upon in social interactions. Participants also placed themselves within these stories and the past of the island, through narrations of kinship ties and memories. Similar to what was found in Gullestad's work, these kinship ties mean that the island 'belongs' to the locals, resulting in a sense of belonging that is reproduced through stories from the past. Locals can tell these stories in their own dialect, which acts as a further marker of distinction between themselves and the mainland.

All these complex factors contribute to building up an idea of what is distinctive about Västö, therefore making it a community with boundaries, of insiders and outsiders. As May (2001: 369–370) notes, belonging exists in the everyday and practices related to it are often unconscious until they are interrupted. On Västö, these interruptions could take place as 'outsiders' arrived. The arrival of people islanders felt might be threatening to their way of life in some way led to a conscious emphasis of certain values and norms expressed in the shared

vocabulary of Västö, such as independence and self-determination, while the arrival of 'guests' led to participants emphasising the hospitality of locals. In both cases however, islanders drew boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

Drawing on May (2001: 368), belonging entails 'connecting individuals to the social'. For May, this is not merely expressed in interactions with others but also in how we relate to customs, values, and social norms that are held collectively. In order to be able to participate in whatever community or collective we want to belong to, we need to have an awareness of how to navigate these socially. On Västö, this takes place in social interaction in the everyday through dialect, historical references, and taking part in traditions and rituals. All these customs and practices are held collectively on the island and are reproduced in social interaction. However, as we have seen, internal divisions and groupings under the surface can produce tensions. Newcomers, for example, are generally not able to access the type of belonging to the community as 'true' locals can. Thus, while islanders often describe themselves as open, this is not always expressed in their actions.

Västö was clearly a key site of belonging for participants and accordingly, identification was expressed in these terms, emphasising commonalities among islanders in the everyday. In examining this everyday ethnographically, through the lens of belonging, identification, and community we become aware of how the interplay of these can produce distinctive forms of identification for a subset of a minority. Identification is about the similarities and differences that we observe. As the paper has demonstrated, categorical and relational identification among participants was very much focused on the community of the island and the 'other' was often people on the mainland, rather than the Finnish-speaking majority. Due

to the unusual location and specific conditions of Västö this is perhaps inevitable.

The findings of this paper point towards a need to not merely acknowledge diversity among Swedish-speaking Finns, but to try to understand the nature of it. This is where future research is needed. This study has provided an example of how questions of identity can be explored but this needs to be done on a larger scale if we want to understand who Swedish-speakers are. Conducting more qualitative research in diverse areas could provide a fuller picture of the various realities of life as a Swedish-speaking Finn. We need an understanding of the links between language use and identification, and how this translates to not only identifications, but needs of the minority in terms of legislation and policy, and how these may differ based on where they are located.

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## NOTES

- 1 All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.
- 2 The name of the island has been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.
- 3 Västö was merged with a nearby town in the 1970s in terms of local administration. These types of mergers have been common in the recent history of Finland, and are generally described by political actors as necessary for financial reasons. (Source withheld to preserve anonymity of participants.)
- 4 Tables one and two (below) provide further details on participants and participant observation.
- 5 An autonomous, monolingually Swedish-speaking archipelago at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia.

**Table 1: Details of interviewees**

<b>Name of interviewee</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Short biography</b>
Majsa	21	She was born and raised on Västö and currently studies in a city nearby but spends at least half of her time on the island and is very active in clubs there. She speaks Finnish but is more comfortable with speaking Swedish.
Margareta	25	She was born and raised on the island but moved away to study in a city in southern Finland. She returned to the island immediately after finishing her studies and now works in a village near Västö. She does not feel she is currently making use of her qualifications but enjoys the work and being able to live on Västö again. She speaks Finnish but feels more comfortable speaking Swedish.
Sara	65	She was born in a mainly Swedish-speaking village but has lived in several Swedish-speaking municipalities during her life, and spent the majority of her adult life working abroad. She moved back to Finland as she and her husband retired and decided to live on Västö even though she had no previous ties to the island. She speaks both Finnish and Swedish fluently.
Peter	32	He was born and raised on Västö and is currently working as a seaman on ships all over the world and therefore spends long periods of time away from the island. He has learnt to speak Finnish quite well through his job but is more comfortable speaking Swedish.
Gitta	70	She was born on the island and has lived there all her life. She has had several varying jobs, depending on the job opportunities on Västö. She does not speak Finnish.
Siv	47	Her parents are originally from Västö but she was born and raised in the city nearby where she still works. She moved back to the island as an adult. She speaks both Swedish and Finnish fluently.
Gunnar	84	He has lived on the island all his life and has worked according to opportunities on the island, ranging from lighthouse keeping to seal hunting. He only speaks a little Finnish.
Bengt	81	He has lived on the island all his life and worked as a seaman, which he studied for in Sweden briefly. He only speaks a little Finnish.
Ted	24	He has lived on the island all his life and would not consider moving away. He works at a factory just outside the island. He speaks Finnish but feels more comfortable with speaking Swedish.
Erik	66	He was born and raised on the island but moved to Sweden to study and worked there until retirement. He visited the island often during his time away and his wife is from Västö as well. They moved back to Västö when they retired which they always intended to do. He does not speak any Finnish.

**Table 2: Details of free-time clubs visited**

Name of club/meeting	Number of meetings attended	Average number of attendees	Approximate age range of attendees
Needlework course	7	15	50–80
The dialect group	6	8	30–80
The hunting club	2	30	20–70
The Red Cross	4	15	50–70
Planning committee for the home for the elderly	1	13	30–60
City council meeting	1	25	30–70
Meeting point	1	10	60–80
Cultural environment program	1	15	30–50
Martha society	2	10	60–80
Youth club	3	10	18–30
The Missionary sewing circle	4	10	60–80
Island committee	1	5	30–60
Theatre club	1	8	20–30
Dance class	1	20	30–60

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