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## Discourses on illegal hunting in Sweden: the meaning of silence and resistance

Erica Von Essen<sup>a</sup>, Hans Peter Hansen<sup>b</sup>, M. Nils Peterson<sup>c</sup> and Tarla R. Peterson<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Department of Bioscience - Wildlife Ecology, Aarhus University, Rønde, Denmark; <sup>c</sup>Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA; <sup>d</sup>Department of Communication, The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, USA

### ABSTRACT

The first rule to poaching is that you do not talk about poaching. If you do, you do so behind a veil of anonymity, using hypotheticals or indirect reported speech that protect you from moral, cultural or legal self-incrimination. In this study of Swedish hunters talking about a phenomenon of illegal killing of protected wolves, we situate such talk in the debate between crime talk as reflecting resistance, reality or everyday venting. We identify four discourses: the discourse of silence; the complicit discourse of protecting poachers; the 'proxy' discourse of talking about peers; and the 'empty' discourse of exaggerating wolf kills as means of political resistance. Our hunters materialize these discourses both by sharing stories that we sort into respective discourses and by providing their meta-level perceptions on what they mean. Specifically we examine whether Swedish hunters' discourses on illegal killing are (1) a means of letting off steam; (2) a reflection of reality; (3) part of a political counter-narrative against wolf conservation; or (4) a way of radicalizing peers exposed to the discourse. We conclude that illegal killing discourses simultaneously reflect reality and constitute it and that hunters' meta-talk reveals most endorse a path-goal folk model of talk and action.

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### Introduction

Poaching often operates with a logic of 'shoot, shovel and shut up' (Liberg et al. 2012). It has historically relied on a folk culture of looking the other way for its continuance (Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014; Brymer 1991; Forsyth, Gramling, and Wooddell 1998). Within this folk culture, surrounding communities protect the identity of poachers from law enforcement by feigning ignorance and exercising non-cooperation with authorities to show solidarity with the accused (Jacoby 2001; Manning 1993; Brymer 1991; Bell, Hampshire, and Topalidou 2007). This complicity may be most familiar in the cases of poaching as folk crime and poaching as organized crime (Ayling 2013). In many cases, complicity is grounded in perceptions of state regulation of wildlife as unfair and illegitimate (Von Essen and Allen 2015; Hagstedt and Korsell 2012). This becomes particularly clear in a recent context of *socio-politically motivated* illegal killings of protected wolves. Turning away from the law and protecting one's own people during wildlife crime is problematic inasmuch as it erodes the legitimacy of law, authority and the viability of the wildlife populations that suffer illegal take (Von Essen and Nurse 2016).

In the following paper, we examine the talk surrounding illegal killing of wolves (*Canis lupus*) in Sweden aiming to provide context for wildlife crime

centered on political resistance. Specifically, we focus on: how killing wolves is talked about, how it is *not* talked about and what these discursive practices mean and reflect in the present sociopolitically charged climate over wolf management. Hunters may exaggerate the occurrence of poaching to make a point to authority that the situation in the countryside is desperate and in need of change, but they may also enter into a complicit silence over the identity of actual offenders (Brymer 1991; Pohja-Mykrä 2016a). This is grounded in the controversy in the now-protected status of wolves in rural communities following the EU Habitats Directive, specifically, the perceived incompatibility of the wolf's recolonization with rural lifestyles and livelihoods (Sandström, Johansson, and Sjölander-Lindqvist 2015; Von Essen et al. 2015; Bisi and Kurki 2008) and the threat it poses to domestic or untethered hunting dogs (Peltola and Heikkilä 2015; Pohja-Mykrä 2016b). Limited take of wolves is permitted in state-initiated culls, but hunters contest the adequacy and form of this cull, noting the extreme difficulty of navigating legal injunctions issued by animal rights NGOs to stop the hunt, arguing they often have to take care of things themselves (Von Essen and Allen 2017b). At present, the actual extent of illegal killings of wolves in the Nordic countries is greatly debated (Pyka et al. 2007). Some

estimate up to a third of all wolf mortality is constituted by illegal hunting (Liberg et al. 2012). But because illegal wolf killings are not talked about with any certainty, we know about the crime mainly through its indirect indices: mysteriously disappearing wolf territories, lost radio collars, rumors, gossip, anecdotes and hearsay (Pyka et al. 2007; Von Essen 2015; Von Essen and Allen 2015; Brännström 2017).

It is the latter sort of discourses on illegal hunting that concern us in this paper. That is, we examine the discourses (or 'stories') that hunters use when discussing the crime, along with *meta-reflections* on how they view discursive practices pertaining to illegal hunting in their community. In so doing, the paper gives voice to an otherwise silent practice that may fall through the cracks in standard interviewing studies. We argue that a void in discursive communication still constitutes communication given that silence, non-response and evasion communicate (Chang and Butchart 2012) and may have a political role to play. How, then, do these discourses relate to the practice of illegal hunting? We show talk and action are linked in self-referential cycles of meaning and help constitute one another (Holt and Cliff 2006). In order to say something about the actual occurrences of the crime, then, as well as its relative support among hunters, it is imperative to first apprehend the talk.

On the basis of a literature review focusing on the following principal fields: wildlife crime/green criminology; environmental sociology, media/communication and linguistics, we have identified that illegal killing discourse is generally seen as one or more of the following:

- (1) a means of letting off steam;
- (2) a reflection of reality;
- (3) part of a political counter-narrative on the part of hunters; or
- (4) a way of radicalizing those peers exposed to the discourse

## Method

As part of the four-year research project *Confronting challenges to political legitimacy of the natural resource management regulatory regime in Sweden – The case of illegal hunting*, we conducted a comprehensive in-depth interview study with the Swedish hunting community from 2014 to 2016. It aimed to ascertain Swedish hunters' trust in decision-making institutions at various levels – from the European Union enacting the Habitats Directive to protect wolves to local county administrative boards overseeing their management – but also to capture hunters' compliance with and faith in hunting regulation and policy, their personal experiences of large carnivores and their

attitudes toward illegal hunting. Given a substantial portion of the debate around illegal hunting now centers around the poaching of wolves (Hagstedt and Korsell 2012), the majority of illegal hunting talk in the interviews reflected this focus. A few respondents talked more broadly about poaching, either of commercially motivated ungulate poaching or the illegal killing of large carnivores other than wolves, including wolverines, raptors, lynx and bear.

Because the *climate of opinion* around illegal hunting, as conveyed through discussions about it, was sought rather than ground-truthing estimates of the *actual crime*, the stories of ordinary hunters who surround, potentially protect, or police illegal hunters were deemed the most important to elicit. Indeed, their reported speech of other peers contained both external and internal evaluations of locutions on illegal hunting, through which they simultaneously convey their own attitude in the process (Labov 1972). These hunters held diverse vocational and geographical backgrounds, comprising industry sector workers, academics, businessmen and retirees. They ranged from 21 to 90 years of age. Men and women, new 'urban' hunters as well as traditional lifestyle hunters in the countryside, were interviewed to capture the increased demographic diversity and transition of the Nordic hunting community (Hansen, Peterson, and Jensen 2012). Hunters were interviewed in all parts of Sweden, including the counties that have notably high wolf populations and therefore illegal killings: Dalarna, Värmland and Örebro. These are referred to as wolf counties. We did not wish to bias the sample too in favor of these regions as 'ordinary' hunters' talk was sought, but they were important to include.

Respondents were recruited for the study from three principal sources: contacts of the Principal Investigators (PIs); from membership pools of the hunting associations in the counties; and the largest online gathering of hunters in Sweden, *robsoft*. Because of the delicate nature of questions asked pertaining to law-breaking or hostile attitudes toward certain wildlife, policies or institutions, indirect interview techniques (Rubin and Rubin 2011) were used based on prior successes in the context of wildlife poaching (Nuno and St. John 2015; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014). These typically included respondents expressing opinions hypothetically ('what I or my neighbor would do in a particular situation'), speculating about how peers thought or acted, or otherwise communicating anonymously about illegal hunting. Hunters were also comfortable providing meta-level perceptions of talk, which formed an important data source.

The research operates from a point of view that anecdotal talk, while difficult to link directly to motives (Vaisey 2009) or dispositions toward illegal hunting or harvesting (see also Boonstra, Birnbaum,

and Björkvik 2016), provides a vehicle for ‘secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives’ (Van Maanen 1989). Such anecdotal discourse aligns with the shoot, shovel and shut up mentality often ascribed to illegal wolf hunting (Von Essen and Allen 2017a). We critically reflect on the relative validity of anecdotal evidence and indirect and direct reported speech (Holt and Cliff 2006) in law-breaking interview contexts in terms of what it can and cannot tell us as a source of data, especially for a politicized subject. We conducted 39 semi-structured interviews with hunters lasting 1.5–2.5 h. They were recorded, transcribed and open-coded using the coding software Atlas.ti. We coded 30 inductive themes and recoded them in terms of discourse, which distilled the selection down into four principal discourses. Selected quotes from these discourses were translated from Swedish to English.

## Results – the discourses of illegal hunting in Sweden

Four discourses emerged from researchers’ coding of respondents’ reflections: silence, complicit silence, proxy discourse and empty discourse. None of our respondents identified the discourses by name as such; rather their stories comprise talk which we separated analytically into the respective discourses. Hunters’ own ‘stories’, including reported speech, are thus one character of the discourses. Another character involves respondents’ meta-level perceptions of the way other hunters talk about illegal hunting. The latter largely constitute reflections on what silence means as a discursive practice and the motivations behind what they see as empty threats of illegal hunting online. The discourses were not mutually exclusive and may operate within the same community. Indeed all respondents communicated using all four discourses, rather than there being four distinct groups of hunters to corresponded using only one discourse each.

### The ‘strong silent’ discourse

All respondents stated that where illegal hunting took place in Sweden, it was enacted in a ‘shoot, shovel and shut up’ custom. As a meta-discursive reflection, respondents also suggested this clandestine mode of operations was a necessary adaptation to a hostile public climate in which unlawful hunting was damning to hunters’ reputation both as individuals and as a community. They affirmed that the crime was aired more openly historically than in the present, ‘I don’t know anyone who talks about it [today]’ (R15). In the past, several respondents speculated, everybody knew the poacher, but today his identity and actions would be known to a much smaller circle. As one

hunter argued: ‘It’s certainly very quiet about it’, which he took to mean ‘something is going on’ (R22). To him, both denying and keeping silent about it indicated the kind of evasion that suggested it operated beneath the surface. Another explained even legal wolf killings would be known to a ‘special group only. And there’s a strong code of silence to it, as to who pulled the trigger. You know, if the wolf-huggers find that out ...’ (R1).

Another respondent suggested that ‘Illegal hunting’s pretty extensive. More than you might expect’ (R2). A third respondent agreed that illegal hunting probably took place on a greater scale than anticipated, connecting the crime to a particular *quietly* resentful type of hunter: ‘Those who don’t speak up but really let it seethe ... knowing there’s no one around who *doesn’t* want the wolf gone, they’ll go ahead and shoot it and they won’t say a thing afterwards. I think those sorts of people are on the increase’ (R15). When speculating as to who these people might be, a fourth respondent from a ‘wolf’ county (Värmland, Dalarna, Örebro) said: ‘We are talking about skilled hunters here. They’re entrepreneurs and they don’t take no shit. They don’t talk about it’ (R25).

Several versions of those who ‘just take the law into their own hands’ (R32) without saying anything were articulated across the respondent sample. Speaking about premeditated wolf kills, a hunter suggested that: ‘In these cases, I think you’re dealing with those who stay completely quiet about it’ (R5). While ‘the ones who actually do it don’t talk about it’ (R25), other respondents intimated that their dealings were somehow still indirectly known to or suspected by members of the local communities, but that ‘The big challenge is in talking about it openly. It’s so sensitive’ (R15). Another respondent explained poaching was tacitly known but openly denied: ‘I have met people who have poached wolf and lynx. They don’t say a word about it. You just know they’ve done it. They’d deny it till the end, I know that much (R39)’.

### The ‘complicit silence’ discourse

The observation that the big challenge lay in communities hushing up illegal hunting, as one respondent argued, ‘Nobody around here dares to say anything’ (R10), was shared by about six respondents. As a meta-level reflection, hunters communicated that illegal hunting of wolves was ‘completely dependent on the fact that no one says anything’ (R5). One hunter noted that bonds of silence would be strong, particularly in kin-based hunting teams: ‘I guess if you know hunter A is out illegally hunting wolves, then, yeah, I’d say this was wrong but I probably wouldn’t snitch him

out' (R32). Another respondent based around a major city in Norrland suggested:

Around here it's not a closed group in the same way as it might be inland. Closed groups, you know, you have family or a village where you're all a bit cohesive and can keep secrets. I don't think that's possible here (R14).

What was possible, nevertheless, was for illegal hunting to take place in a community that was steeped in sympathy and shared semantics for the injustices associated with wolf conservation (Von Essen et al. 2015). A key meta-level perception about the constitutive role of talk came from those respondents who saw it as refreshing but also dangerous for members of the local community to openly express views sympathetic toward lawlessness, or attitudes highly critical toward wolves, even if they themselves would never break the law. A northern hunter explained the talk-action relationship it in the following terms:

Neighbors will go around saying they're too scared to let their kids out. 'And now I've got to abandon my sheep farming. I can't do it anymore'. I think that gives hunters who are already on the edge morally speaking the push to make this exception in their otherwise law-abiding behavior (R15).

Another agreed: 'I think there's a tolerance both from hunters and some non-hunters that a dead wolf is a good wolf, and that's on the increase' (R15).

Hunters communicated that it was especially problematic when a person of some local authority, legitimacy or political position expressed sympathy toward illegal hunting of wolves. Of a County Administrative Board employee in a 'wolf' county, a hunter contended that he knew he was 'not too keen on having wolves either' (R29). But he added that his support for illegal hunting was not explicit as he 'won't bite the hand that feeds him'. Rather, it was in the things he did not say, and how he sympathized with farmers who had lost livestock, that gave hunters the impression he had conflicted loyalties regarding wolf conservation.

### The 'proxy' discourse

Even though we did not ask them about their own practices explicitly, nearly all hunters in our study communicated adamantly at some point that they themselves had no direct experience of illegal hunting. Instead they shared 'proxy' or indirect stories on illegal hunting. Respondents invariably made strong attempts to distinguish themselves from poachers. Poachers were initially described as criminals-at-large, as persons who would cheat on their tax returns and own weapons illegally, and not as someone with whom the respondent would ever have hunted. As the interview unfolded, respondents broached the

topic of illegal hunting from a safe distance or behind a 'veil of anonymity' (Scott 1992). In this way, they spoke indirectly about knowing someone who in turn knew someone who had been implicated in poaching. Respondents also discussed the crime on a general or hypothetical level, not tied to specific persons or regions. Five respondents, for example, spoke to us about specific methods of shooting and hiding the crime, such as which caliber and rifle to use for which game.

At other times, respondents spoke of law-breaking, as occurring, but primarily as a remote phenomenon. Hunters in northern Sweden would speculate it was an occurrence that was mainly limited to *southern* Sweden where flagrant offenses like 'shooting fourteen deer from a car like in Skåne' (R13) could take place; hunters in southern Sweden, in turn, speculated poaching was more common the tight-knit inland communities of the north where great distances between homes meant 'you've got twenty kilometers to your closest neighbor, no one will notice you shooting' (R1), and law enforcement was sparse. 'I think this occurs a bit more up in Norrland than it does here' (R36). The same hunter added the culture there was such that 'They are more likely to look the other way'. One respondent said his ethics changed depending on where he hunted and that transgressions may be rationalized somewhere and condemned elsewhere: 'There's different subcultures [...] in southern Sweden I would never consider stepping onto my neighbor's land, but up here I can do that. I do that, I must admit' (R9). He added that in Norrland, it was a bit like the movie *Jägarna*.<sup>1</sup>

Imparting this safe distance to poachers was particularly evident in respondents' frequent blaming of foreign 'outsider' hunters as the culprits: 'hunters from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for example' (R21); opportunistic or slob-hunting Danes (R1, R7, R17, R20, R27), trophy-hunting Germans (R25, R27, R31, R7: 'They go for the antlers'), Frenchmen (R31), gold-rushing Norwegian tourist hunters clearing the Swedish mountains of grouse (R14) or Sami in the north (R13, R14, R20). Importantly as a meta-discursive reflection, some respondents were cognizant of the fact that outsiders tended to be blamed more so than local hunters generally, contending stories about illegal hunting 'tend to get more extreme when they involve a foreigner or outsider. You don't hear the same stuff about locals' (R31).

As part of the proxy talk, when discussing the details of illegal hunting closer to home, respondents used euphemistic discourse in the interviews, e.g. of 'taking care of', 'sorting out' or 'solving' problems with wolves rather than speaking directly about taking their lives. 'The hunters took care of it [the wolf problem] in their own way, so to speak' (R13). The same respondent also used the language of wolves 'getting

lost up here without anyone reporting them. You've certainly heard a lot about that' (R13). 'Doing their thing' (R20) was another way of referring to the Sami killing wolves illegally. Another said: 'The Laps take care of it. In some strange way, they always manage to sort it out. So you don't really fret over it up here' (R14). Speaking of an 'unholy alliance with the Sami that's pretty well accepted', R9 noted the absence of wolves in the north was not coincidental: 'It sure isn't because they don't like being here' (R9). Taking care not to incriminate himself, a hunter said 'Well, without having personal experience with it, where my cabin is I've found the wolves have a tendency to disappear. There have been two territories in the process of formation and they've suddenly vanished without a trace and no one knows what's happened' (R22).

In one telling reflection, a Stockholm hunter noted that when he went north to hunt, 'People will just smile at you and go, yes, the wolf's gone now. It's like ... I mean I don't have any evidence, no one I know, nothing I could do. But I know what they're talking about' (R22). Knowing illegal hunting through anecdotal evidence only, often a few links removed from the offender, was another way in which respondents discussed the crime behind a veil. These anecdotes sometimes converged into the equivalent of urban legends. One such included knowledge of hunters who would shoot wolves in the abdomen with a shotgun slug so that it would die slowly after having run off onto someone else's land where neither the location nor the bullet could not be traced to the shooter. This, indeed, surfaced as a horror story in multiple and geographically diverse hunters' narratives.

One hunter recalled with skepticism how 'There's this someone who's shot a lynx and dumped it from the bridge over the river in Urshult. There's someone, and everyone tells that story. No one knows who it is. That story started ten years ago' (R10). Others said: 'You'll hear these horror stories that hunters at the big estates down in Skåne sic their trainee students on big raptors so that the ungulate populations in the area can increase' (R32). He added: 'I don't know if that's just talk or whether it really happens' (R32).

These legends without a clear author or origin were also used to fuel paranoia among hunters so as to *justify* or *neutralize* illegal hunting. One such story was the rumor that large carnivores had been secretly reintroduced to Sweden by rogue conservationists (for more on the meaning of this particular rumor, see, e.g. Theodorakea and Von Essen 2016; Ghosal, Skogen, and Krishnan 2015). A hunter in northern Uppland making a meta-discursive reflection said 'You've all but tired of these stories you hear from every hunter about seeing a van from "Orsa björnpark" [zoo] in the woods. I don't know how many times I've heard that'. 'You know, I hear these absolutely crazy stories' (R38) a hunting course instructor admitted, considering the idea that they all

originated with one pathological liar in the hunting community.

Another story was a colorful exaggeration of the wolf's ferocity locally, to highlight the desperation of the situation and in so doing rationalize extreme measures like illegal killing. One respondent said: 'The wolves there they'll come into your yard. And they're big, they have sharp teeth and they aren't afraid of people' (R18). A vast majority of respondents recalled second-hand or hypothetical stories from elsewhere where domestic dogs, livestock or even children had been endangered by wolves, though they could rarely place these events in time and space: 'Rumor has it, people with an ordinarily high moral standard in hunting, in other hunting issues, they make an exception when it comes to the wolf [...] that's what I hear personally. When their neighbor's sheep get attacked and there's wolf tracks over your yard where kids usually play ... At that point ...' (R15), he trailed off, intimating illegal hunting of wolves was a likely resort.

### *The 'empty' discourse*

Despite illegal hunters being characterized by our respondents as the quiet type in many cases, there were also 'loud-mouths' in the hunting community who openly bragged, exaggerated or threatened illegal hunting. The following theme is almost entirely meta-discursive in that hunters reflect on talk among their peers. Respondents note, for example, that threats are frequently couched in masculine jargon. They appear on social media (forums, Facebook groups, comments under internet news articles), at the local shop or within hunting teams. Respondents suggested the anonymous nature of Internet posting could affect such jargon or headlines. 'You can't trust in everything that's on there' (R10). On the extent of illegal hunting being judged by inflammatory news items, one said: 'I don't think it's as common as the media makes it out to be. It just gets sensationalized' (R21). The respondent gave the example of a wolf collar tracker that stopped working, at which point the media 'gets it to be a certain way [...] it's easy to say it's shot and gone. But the reality might be different. It's hard to say' (R21).

Others agreed: 'It's easy to write one thing on Facebook or on social media. In reality I think it's extremely rare that you'd act on it. So I think it's given a greater significance than in reality' (R8). Other respondents said: 'Whenever there's talk about it, I don't think it's really happening [...] the talk's always bigger' (R5); 'It's one thing to sit around and talk about being pissed [...] I don't think anyone would actually risk [illegal hunting]' (R35). Boastful hunters in comments sections of news articles were dismissed with the reasoning: 'Too often there's just

talk and nothing happens [...] it's not reflected in reality' (R32).

The empty discourse was viewed as unfortunate by several hunters, partly because it put hunters in a bad light before non-hunters, and partly because such talk was might facilitate erosion of sporting ethics – as when one declared the need to 'get rid of them right away' (R29), or said: 'I shot that pig-devil, stuff like that [...] I think it makes for worse hunting when you have less respect for the game' (R17). Such disrespectful talk, one argued, '... is not right' (R1). For the most part, however, the jargon was seen to be exaggerated and divorced from the actual illegal hunting taking place. 'These loud-mouth frogs are not the biggest problem [...] they're harmless (R15)'. 'Those who don't do nothing are always the ones talking about doing something (R25); You can sit and talk and exaggerate saying, "hell you know I've shot fifteen bears." No, you haven't' (R37).

One respondent intimated a false consensus effect may be at play, explaining in part the prevalence of the caustic rhetoric encouraging or bragging about illegal kills online. By this, he meant that hunters might post what they think their peers in the hunting community feel, perhaps to belong or conform to expected hunter norms: 'I'm sure no one's actually done these things. They've just made them up because it's expected ... they think others do these things' (R10).

A minority of hunters in this study did suggest that because of the anonymous nature of social media, where there was no risk of incrimination but opportunity to speak honestly, estimates of illegal hunting could well be true. 'I think the majority of what is written is true, you know' (R13). Another hunter also valued Internet forums, like robsoft, for bringing out the civic-mindedness in hunters, so that when someone misbehaved, others would speak up. 'Online you're less afraid to speak up, like when someone behaves poorly' (R17). The implication was that people would be more candid about their beliefs generally in these settings and that stories of illegal hunting ought not to be easily dismissed when posted anonymously.

## Analysis

The first rule of poaching, it appears, is that you do not talk about poaching in any straightforward way. If you do, you do so at a safe distance, geographically, demographically and morally. This paper considers Scott's (1992) veil of anonymity as a heuristic for Swedish hunters talking about illegal hunting without incriminating themselves. Indeed, in many respects, the sorts of anecdotes, rumors and counter-narratives voiced by hunters bear hallmarks of Scott's *hidden transcripts*, inasmuch as they are orally

transmitted, circumspect, euphemizing in character, news-on-the-wind like talk. In the discussion that follows, we break down the discursive functions of crime talk among Swedish hunters.

Specifically, we consider the results in three dimensions of crime talk: (1) they are a means of letting off steam, part of everyday jargon and should be not be seen as political in character; (2) they reflect some elements of reality and/or behavioral intentions and should be considered seriously as the dissemination of counter-narratives to the public in a political conflict over wildlife management; or (3) that their primary function is in radicalizing peers. In so doing, we collapse our original four dimensions into three, now treating the 'truth-reflecting' interpretation as also constituting potential means of disseminating a counter-narrative. We do so because we believe our results point to the relevance of hunters pointing out high occurrences of illegal hunting specifically as means of alerting society to the need for political change.

Furthermore, (1), (2) and (3) are not irreconcilable and may coexist. That is, the same discourse may let off steam, constitute political strategy and at the same time inflame the debate and push it outside normal political channels. In this sense, our identified discourses may be said to follow a structuration dialectic of simultaneously reflecting and constituting reality. What we can assess, moreover, is the relative concentration of the three dimensions in the discourses identified here and, on the basis of the results above, argue for or against the likelihood of a particular dimension having a strong role to play in the discourse in our particular case study. This may say something about actual occurrences of the crime as well the relative support of illegal killings of wolf in the hunting community.

### Letting off steam?

First, then, we can consider talk from these interviews and moreover the talk *about* talk by hunters, in terms of letting off steam (Levin and Arluke 2013). The meta-level perceptions on what discourses mean from the 'empty discourse' section seem to at least partly affirm this. That is, if hunters – who are critical of the political regime – openly state that much discourse on illegal killing has a character of 'all talk' or otherwise contains questionable elements that make them doubt the authenticity of the anecdotes, they seem to be suggesting stories perform some other function for those who author or reproduce them in their communities.

These other functions tend to be characterized in terms of providing an outlet for aggression, recreation or cultivating group solidarity (Foster 2004). That is, they serve a primarily expressive purpose for those who communicate them (Armstrong and Bernstein

2008). Boonstra, Birnbaum, and Björkvik (2016) argue that anecdotes within rural working communities form part of an important everyday jargon that is just that: jargon. They contend that the kinds of discourse one might encounter here are likely to be critical toward bureaucracy, scientists or the regulatory regime but that this may be so under even favorable circumstances. For instance, this type of discourse may occur even when rural hunters do not oppose wildlife management in a particular place or time. Inasmuch as the everyday jargon of Swedish hunters can be likened to that of Boonstra et al.'s fishermen, they are 'coping mechanisms' (Watson 2015); they alleviate the demands and burdens associated with being a hunter. The hunting sociology literature, which demonstrate an increased pressure on contemporary hunters generally (Knezevic 2009; Skogen and Thrane 2007; Von Essen and Allen 2017b), features many ethnographic accounts of hunters venting in various ways that while often aggressive, tend to be 'directionless' in terms of wanting to effect external political change (Krange and Skogen 2011).

Furthermore, some of the everyday resistance literature on rumors, anecdotes and hidden transcripts implicitly or explicitly support the assessment that such talk is largely apolitical. Here, wolf-aggressive threats and hunters' declarations of desperation are interpreted more as sense-making in a world of increased uncertainty (Theodorakea and Von Essen 2016). Wolf threats are hence toothless. This is especially the case for rural communities where such stories become a way of asserting identity. Anecdotes perform the role of social glue and points of mutual recognition at times when external influences challenge traditional organization. For hunters especially, they face internal change following processes of modernization and (Drenthen 2013) that are arguably exacerbated by contemporary conservation projects. Hence, such discourse looks inward toward solidarity, cohesion and identity (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007) more than outward to challenge political authority.

This phenomenon may be most obvious when discourse is used to isolate and denigrate outsiders as real poachers as illustrated here in the 'others poach, but not me' proxy discourse (Heley 2010; Fischer et al. 2013). Hence, the finding in this study that relatively well-off Swedish hunters routinely talk about the poorer, sloppier or less ethical hunting standards of southern European hunters under the proxy theme may be genuine political posturing, but it may more straightforwardly also be an everyday solidarity exercise under globalization. In fact, discourses distinguishing local or national hunters from outsider or foreign hunters are present in most hunting cultures and it is as much a way of community sense-making as it is done with the intent of securing political rights

or change in favor of the locals (Fischer et al. 2013; Colomy and Granfield 2010; Bell, Hampshire, and Topalidou 2007; Silvy et al. 2017).

What does this mean for the sorts of talk by hunters in this study? Are they meaningless as predictors for actual behavior? Perhaps, but despite our cautions over politicizing everyday talk, we do not dismiss them so readily. For one, if they *are* mere means of letting off steam, this predicates on the assumption that there has been a critical build-up of said steam within the hunting community to the point where it is oozing out into the public sphere as an increasingly caustic discourse around illegal killing. A further argument for taking seriously the talk on illegal killings as political statement and not mere directionless venting is the fact that the Swedish hunting community cannot be said to have exhibited this tendency in the past – it is recent. Consequently, we are compelled to look for causes for its occurrence beyond the horizon of 'everyday sense-making' (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007).

### *Reflecting truth or political stratagem?*

Those everyday resistance scholars who attribute political agency to the subaltern, and political intent to indirect communication, would more favorably regard hunters' stories of law-breaking and reported speech expressing readiness to illegally hunt as political. It does not matter that they also let off steam; they perform a role of popular aggression (Scott 1992; Hollander and Einwohner 2004). These scholars may disagree on the transparency of this political motive to the individual interlocutor, but as a whole, the perpetuation of certain rumors (such as the gut shot wolf, the repeatedly surfacing stories of the same crime and insistence of the wolf's increased fearlessness locally) are part of a populist counter-narrative to wolf conservation (Theodorakea and Von Essen 2016; Skogen, Mauz, and Krange 2008; Figari and Skogen 2011).

This discourse, however, may reflect actual events in addition to a political strategy. From this perspective, hunters telling stories of illegality, noting specifically how it is commonly occurring and heard in their community, forms part of their veil of anonymity. Short of confessing to personally hating the government, breaking the law or recalling an actual personal experience with a fearless wolf, respondents can draw in middle-men and indirect story-telling to impart a safe distance from the deviance, morally and legally (McLaughlin 2007; Levi 1999; Von Essen and Allen 2015). They sometimes even utilized hypothetical stories, of what they would do, but usually of what they thought a neighbor or another hunter they had met in another part of Sweden, would do. In a recent article in the popular magazine *Filter*, a law



enforcement officer in Jämtland, Sweden, stresses how it is essential to allow for anonymity in reporting and wolf talk and that the indirect ways in which crimes are reported must be taken seriously and followed up on (Brännström 2017).

The use of reported speech here, combined with the informal way of reciting it (i.e. not making claims to verbatim quotations), involves a reduction of responsibility that give hunters more leeway to transgress more rules and 'play with taboo modes of expression' (Bergman 1992, p. 117). This was especially clear in reported speech like 'people will just smile at you and go "yes, the wolf's gone now"' and recalling someone who had said 'hell you know I've shot fifteen bears'. The use of words like 'go', 'like' and 'tell' to recall the talk of others also claims less commitment to authenticity than the word 'say' (Holt and Cliff 2006) and enables the speaker to 'split off from the content of the words' (Goffman 1974, p. 512).

Inasmuch as use of reported speech enabled hunters to position others at center stage, albeit making their own attitudes slip through in the recollection, the use of meta-talk involves circling back to center stage by explicitly reflecting on and evaluating the meaning of the talk. Indeed, the reported speech put the meta-discourse in the interviews revealed significant skepticism on the part of Swedish hunters that the acts behind the caustic discourse were actually a true reflection of events. We believe their assessment on this score must be taken seriously. In the 'wolf' county of Dalarna, for example, and further north, there was no uncertainty around wolf poaching occurring even 'more than you might think'. But under the 'empty discourse', respondents also highlighted the important fact that loudmouths circulated illegal hunting discourse in an overly showy and exaggerated way. Following the loss of inhibition allowed by anonymous posting, it 'got to be a certain way' [i.e. sensationalized] with the implication the format had an additionally distorting effect on the truth behind certain events or wolf kills.

### **Radicalizing fodder for hunters?**

Some respondents found the discourse on illegal hunting problematic inasmuch as it was speculated to exert a radicalizing effect on those hunters who were exposed to it on a daily basis. As respondents suggested, their presence may be enough to 'push some people over the edge' via a false consensus effect. These hunters would overestimate the sympathy they had from their hunting peers, or they would be sufficiently inflamed by the exaggerated rhetoric, extreme anecdotes (of secret releases, wolves waiting for kids at bus stops and more) and drumming up of emotions relating to wolf conservation and its treatment of hunters, that they would be prompted to

break the law. Inasmuch as rumor research concedes the potentially harmful characteristics of such talk, they observe that the latter ultimately promotes and displaces rather than resolving hostility (Foster 2004). The question here, then, becomes: does it transfer hostility onto other persons to the point of them taking action against local wolves?

We do not see this as a foregone conclusion, especially given respondents made the surprisingly sophisticated meta-discursive argument that derogatory jargon used to refer to game would trigger 'worse hunting' because it effected a light-heartedness around shooting. The discourse hence held a prescriptive and constitutive role. This line of argument has been observed by James Boyd White in his theory of constitutive rhetoric (Boyd White 1985). In the hunting context, Ilundáin-Agurruza (2010) notes this rationalizes and facilitates increasingly sloppy hunting. The argument tends to operate on a structural or political level, where language is used knowingly to drum up feelings and actions among its audience.

Respondents did not, however, speculate as to whether this radicalizing effect was an intentional move on the part of those who reproduced the discourse or a byproduct of it. In the reflections presented here, it appeared more as though this held a *personal* function for the ones who voiced it: to look 'cool', seasoned, macho. Indeed, one respondent's insisting that illegal wolf killers did at least in some narrow circles command respect as 'doers' (rather than talkers) not content to be pushed around by the state, would suggest that there could be social benefits from implying illegal killing. It became clear through this reasoning and the reflections from the 'silence' discourse that hunters display cultural bias toward a folk model of talk and action as path-goal (Holt and Cliff 2006). This model involves seeing talk and action as disjoint entities and with it, the favoring of action and strong silent types; the implication of linearity in terms of empty talk having to stop for action to start; failure to regard talk as action and the demeaning 'empty' talk. This is significant, inasmuch as hunters appear to be aware of the full extent to which talk is constitutive of action and that their discourses turn illegal hunting into acts worth condemning or recognizing: 'What those actions mean and how worthwhile they are, however, is inherently subjective and based on what we say about them' (Holt and Cliff 2006, p. 21).

If the discourse radicalizes and co-constitutes the reality of illegal killing, we must be seriously concerned with the responsibility of these anonymous 'loudmouths' for inflaming the debate. That is, should they be further moderated on social media so as to not drum up antagonism within the hunting community? Clearly, this is an issue that has bearing beyond the hunting context and points to emerging

challenges of civil behavior in online political debates. The online magazine *Jaktojägare*, of the National Hunters' Association in Sweden, removed its comments section under news entries in 2016. In a critical discourse analysis, this setting had been identified a year earlier as a breeding ground for radical opinions and caustic discourse by hunters (Von Essen 2015). Further research may find value in applying Boyd White's constitutive rhetoric theory to hunters' discourse on these sites and generally, but would do well to heed the insights from this study that the constitution may be unconscious. Here it will be imperative to consider the cultural context of such talk; Swedish hunters in a meta-discursive reflection implied they were less prone to 'walk the talk' than most, contrasting themselves to, for example, Frenchmen. We suggest, therefore, that future research need to first identify the communicative practice of a particular culture against which to analyze illegal killing talk.

## Conclusion

There has been significant controversy in the media and within official law enforcement surrounding the actual extent of illegal killing of large carnivores and its relative support within the hunting community. This research aimed to clarify the situation for Sweden by, first, separating the sorts of talk – and the way of talking about it – into four primary discourses.

These were the silent discourse, the complicit discourse, the proxy discourse and the empty discourse, reflecting our thematic analysis of interviews with hunters. We suggested the four discourses could be considered in regard to their meaning in the context of potential political resistance, which profoundly envelops the wolf conservation situation in Sweden. We engaged with the following interpretations: illegal killing discourse as letting off steam, a reflection of true events, part of political strategy or as radicalizing peers. We argued that these readings were not mutually exclusive but were played out in a structuration dialectic whereby the discourse was reflective and constitutive of reality, a means of everyday coping, and a political strategy.

It may be tempting for researchers to focus on hunters' direct stories of illegal hunting. But the meta-level perceptions of how hunters understand discourse about illegal hunting may be more instructive in terms of revealing potential dimensions of resistance to wildlife management. Combining talk and 'talk about talk' helps us paint a more robust picture of reality and should therefore be seen as a methodological and epistemological advance. Indeed, hunters' meta-level perceptions of discourse are important inasmuch as they indicate Swedish hunters

believe there is a relatively low concentration of actual truth behind the discourse and that it needs to be examined for non-descriptive motives and functions. Going forward, we believe this to be important for law enforcement and wildlife managers to keep in mind: rather than respond with increased policing and deterrence to illegal killings, they might work out long-term solutions that target the underlying motives behind such discourse, within hunting communities.

## Note

1. Jägarna (1997), 'The Hunters', is a classic Swedish thriller about a Stockholm police officer who moves back home to Norrland to investigate poaching, finding that his brother is involved.

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## Notes on contributors

*Erica von Essen* is a hunting sociologist whose research focuses on dissent, resistance and law-breaking in the context of wildlife. Her Ph.D. thesis focused on illegal hunting in Sweden. She is particularly published in scholarly wildlife ethics debates and applies a political perspective to human-animal relations.

*Hans Peter Hansen* is a researcher at Aarhus University in democratic theory and critical utopian action research, where he applies his societal and political perspectives in the context of natural resource management conflicts and planning. Today, he is involved in both the practice and the theory of wildlife management in Denmark, active at the Bioscience department.

*M. Nils Peterson* is an associate professor at the Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources at NCSU, where he uncovers the drivers of human behavior in relation to wildlife conservation. Peterson's area of expertise is on human-wildlife conflicts, hunting issues and environmental literacy.

*Tarla R. Peterson* is a professor of communication with a long background in environmental planning, conflict mitigation, discourse studies and wildlife management. She has served as Boone & Crocket chair of Wildlife Conservation

Policy and today publishes papers on democracy and environment.

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