

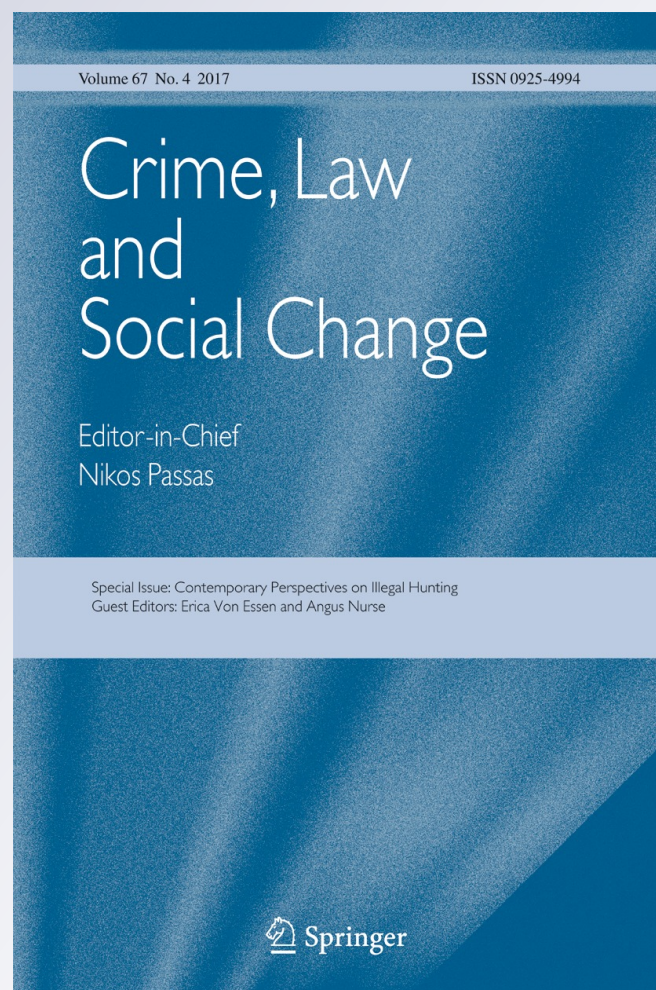
# *Community power over conservation regimes: techniques for neutralizing the illegal killing of large carnivores in Finland*

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# Community power over conservation regimes: techniques for neutralizing the illegal killing of large carnivores in Finland

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**Abstract** Certain weaknesses in large carnivore conservation policies have led to a form of political dissent and resistance against dominant conservation regimes, manifested most clearly in the drastic decrease in the Finnish wolf population in 2014. The illegal hunting of large carnivores has been carried out by a particular social group with the support of community members, and hunting violators have been viewed as benefactors by many of their fellow citizens. In the attempt to understand how rural communities sustain alternative ways of regulating their worlds, and how community members negate shame and stigma on behalf of hunting violators, the neutralization techniques presented in the sociological literature by Sykes and Matza provide an effective tool. In collecting the data, we used non-active role playing with empathy-based fictional stories. We obtained a total of 231 narratives from a core group of hunting violators, within which we identified the use of the nine different techniques. These discourses express how a rural identity and way of life is defended and how rural protests against conservation policies are expressed under the pressure of modern conservation regimes. The results address the importance of acknowledging biosecurity issues in wolf territories, of placing a value on local knowledge, and of strengthening trust between the locals and the authorities in implementing responsive and deliberative governance; they also suggest how to formulate effective deterrents to illegal killing and increase compliance with conservation regimes by informal sanctions, based on collective moral judgments and the perceived legitimacy of rules.

**Keywords** Conservation conflict · Illegal killing · Large carnivores · Neutralization techniques

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## Introduction

The illegal killing of large carnivores in Finland has challenged a policy of species conservation that relies on the *favourable conservation status* enjoyed by species in the European Union's conservation policy. In particular, the ecological sustainability of wolves is under consideration as part of the Habitats Directive (92/43/CEE) [1]. As a response to international conservation agreements the first national wolf management plan was implemented in 2006; the revised version was implemented in early 2015 [2, 3]. Since the time of the original management plan, the wolf population has declined drastically, from about 250 individuals in 2006 to 140 in 2014 [1]. According to calculations based on population parameters, as much as 25–30 % of the potential wolf population is missing because of assumed illegal killing [4]. However, a recent increase in the wolf population from 140 back to 240 individuals in 2015 has occurred during the preparatory phase of the new management plan.<sup>1</sup>

The management authorities tackling the conservation of endangered species have faced a real challenge in implementing conservation policies that have relied on parameters that measure ecological sustainability, i.e. population size, the extent of the range of a species and any changes occurring therein.<sup>2</sup> The illegal killing that threatens conservation status and undermines conservation efforts has been approached using a more punitive regime and increased penalties.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, wolf conservation in particular has led to disputes between administrators and the administered, and to conflicts among interest groups [1, 5]. Such hierarchical and multidimensional conflict is not solely a Finnish concern, but is commonly recognized around the wolf's present geographical range [6–8]. Wolf conflict manifests itself in several ways. The most negative attitudes towards wolves are held by hunters, livestock keepers and those living in wolf occurrence areas [5, 9, 10], and underlying such negative attitudes is commonly a fear of wolves [11–13]. Conflicting views on wolf conservation between stakeholder groups are filled with rumours and 'eco-power' [14, 15]; hunters and rural communities have for example been ignored or stigmatized as backward, irresponsible and lacking the foresight and expertise to act as wise stewards of wildlife [16]. Rural communities and hunters, on the other hand, may consider the values of the management authorities to differ crucially from traditional agrarian values, and may feel that their local knowledge is undermined under the pressure of ecological-technological dominance [17]. Wolves have become symbols of urban dominance in rural areas [18, 19]; rural power may thus be expressed through 'defensive localism', connected to non-compliance and resistance to conservation procedures affecting rural populations [20].

<sup>1</sup> According to the estimates of Natural Resources Institute Finland, available on the internet <http://www.rktl.fi/riista/suurpedot/>

<sup>2</sup> A national conservation status assessment is conducted for Finnish species using IUCN criteria, and results are published in the Red List.

<sup>3</sup> An amendment (232/2011) to the Criminal Code stipulates that any illegal killing of large carnivores will be treated as an aggravated hunting offence, and sentences were therefore tightened. In addition, the indicative value of game animals was raised in 2010 to make the financial gains of committing a hunting offence less attractive. The amount of compensation to the state varies according to whether the animal was a juvenile or adult. The indicative value for wolverine is up to €16,500, for lynx up to €2100, for bear up to €15,500 and for wolf up to €9100.

In Finland, the wolf conflict pertains to the marginalization of local knowledge and local people's shared emotions and values toward conflict-prone species, with a distrust of the authorities, with conflicting views with stakeholders, and with perceived normative and empirical socio-cultural legitimacy deficits in wolf conservation. These issues become particularly clear when local people argue that wolf conservation legislation violates their civil rights, including their right to security and property [21, 22]. According to Borgstöm [22], from a normative point of view, Finnish wolf conservation lacks socio-cultural legitimacy when it challenges local livelihoods, traditional forms of hunting and leisure activities to the presence of species that cause damage and fear among locals. Conservation measures have ostensive legal legitimacy, in terms of the representation of the relevant stakeholders and of transparency and accountability; they also have political legitimacy, in terms of the extent to which the main substantive features of the conservation regimes are acceptable [22]. The importance of the deficit in socio-cultural legitimacy among local residents and hunters in areas inhabited by large carnivore is nevertheless manifest in the fact that if a conservation regime does not correspond with people's everyday lives, it leads to non-compliance and defiance against the regime.

The perceived lack of legitimacy in conservation regimes is manifested in implicit and explicit forms. Most illegal killing of large carnivores, in Finland as in the other Nordic countries, takes the form of indirect defiance, combining elements of covert, private and non-communicative practices, but it also includes elements of explicit resistance via 'message crimes' against the authorities [17, 19, 23]. Local defiance is expressed not only in illegal hunting, but also in a rejection of the regulations, in the form of passive behaviour such as a feigned ignorance concerning the illegal killing of wildlife [12, 24]. Community support for illegal killing, and for the hunting violators themselves, can also take the form of tacit support and approval of the act, or even of overt encouragement or financial support, for instance in the form of free goods [25, 16, 23, 12].

Rural defiance undergirded by community support for illegal killings is a transnational phenomenon with historical roots [26, 27]. Community members may rationalize illegal acts on the basis that hunting or fishing is part of a traditional lifestyle [25, 28]. Community members may also support illegal acts because they share emotions with the hunting violators, such as a fear of large carnivores or frustration with the authorities [12]. Hunting violators may become righteous outlaws and be considered *good poachers* by many of their fellow citizens, and illegal killing may be widely regarded as acceptable, even positive, by local people [12, 24, 25, 29]. Illegal killing as a *socio-political crime* [30] thus represents complex processes, in which large carnivores have become a symbol of rural protest against conservation regimes [17, 31–37].

Our purpose in this study was to show how community members, i.e. the core group of hunting violators, negate the shame from the stigma and sanctions associated with violating the law, and to understand how rural communities sustain alternative ways of regulating their world under pressure from conservation regimes. In accomplishing this objective, the neutralization techniques introduced in sociological literature by Sykes and Matza [38] serve as an effective tool. Neutralizations are attempts to rationalize criminal behaviour, but they can also be seen as 'spatial discourses, demarcating the boundaries of spatial and cultural identities' [20]. Neutralization techniques allow us to see how rural identity and ways of life are defended and how rural protests against conservation policies are expressed in the context of the pressure of the

Europeanization of wildlife that has occurred in recent decades [20, 30, 39]. After describing and discussing these techniques, we conclude by exploring the implications of our findings for conservation efforts.

## Theoretical background

Illegal hunting as rural protest requires a normative approach, since traditional instrumental theories explaining illegal hunting are insufficient in cases where economic gain is not the main driver of illegal killing [30]. In social psychology, research on illegal hunting has been largely built on Sutherland's differential association theory of ho crime is learned in the socialization process [24, 40, 41], but is also based on the theory of neutralization, where neutralization techniques to justify illegal acts in a wildlife context have been previously studied in a variety of cases [25, 40, 42–44, 20, 24, 45, 23].

In this study, the justification of illegal killings of large carnivores performed by a core group of hunting violators is studied in terms of neutralization techniques. Sykes and Matza [38] found neutralization techniques justify deviant behaviour, and form a largely learned behaviour within a culture or sub-culture. Neutralization that qualifies hunting violations as *acceptable* serves as a strategic defence tool for offenders who have been caught, as well as a psychological mechanism allowing individuals to justify their illegal actions to themselves or to others. Neutralization can thus be used in seeking to reduce the blame following an illegal act, or before committing the act in seeking self-approval indicating it is acceptable to go ahead [38]. According to Lanier and Henry [46], the critical point is that this can also occur while actually contemplating the act, releasing the actor from moral restraint and allowing him/her to choose to perform the act in the first place. Rationalization of an illegal act is not just an after-the-fact excuse that someone invents to justify his/her behaviour, but an integral part of the actor's motivation for the act [47]). Importantly, neutralization techniques may also be seen as discourses whereby hunting violators defend a particular rural identity and way of life, thus expressing rural protest [20, 48].

Sykes and Matza [38] divided neutralization techniques into five major types. The first, 'denial of responsibility', refers to situations where the violation is due to external forces, beyond the individual's control. In effect, violators approach a *billiard ball* conception of themselves, in which they see themselves as helplessly propelled into situations. In the second type, 'denial of injury', violators distinguish the wrongfulness of their behaviour between acts that are wrong in themselves and those that are illegal but not immoral. A hunting violator may feel that illegal killing does not cause any significant harm, despite the fact that it violates the law. In the third type, 'denial of the victim', the injury is not actually seen as an injury but rather as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment; by subtle argumentation, the delinquent may move him/herself into the position of an avenger. The victim can then be transformed into a wrongdoer who deserves to be punished. The fourth type, 'condemnation of the condemners', occurs when violators shift the focus of attention from their own deviant acts to the motives and behaviour of those who disapprove of such violations. They may for example claim that their condemners are hypocrites or are driven by personal spite. The fifth neutralization technique, the 'appeal to higher loyalties,' means sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of smaller social groups to which the violator

belongs. The violator does not necessarily reject the norms of the dominant normative system, but other norms, held to be more pressing, are accorded precedence [38].

Following the work of Sykes and Matza, at least five additional types of neutralization have been identified. The first is the 'claim of normality' i.e. the claim that everyone is doing it (Coleman 1994). This involves a transfer of responsibility from the offender to a large, often vaguely defined group to which he/she belongs. The second, the 'denial of the necessity of the law' claims that the laws that are violated are unnecessary or even unjust [47]. The third, the 'metaphor of the ledger' refers to situations where the offenders' good qualities make up for their illegal acts [49]. The fourth, the 'defence based on necessity' is based on the rationalization that criminal actions are necessary in order to achieve vital goals or just to survive [50]. Lastly, the 'claim of entitlement' includes elements of getting one's fair share: offenders justify their illegal acts on the grounds that they deserve the income derived from them [47].

In examining community power over conservation regimes in the context of rural illegal hunting, we assume that the crimes are committed as part of a social group. Hunting violators usually belong to mainstream society, and generally adhere to the rules and laws of society, but they rationalize certain exceptions. Violators are affected and bound by moral and social sanctions in the community; thus a socio-political crime is committed not by the individual hunting violator alone but by the entire local community. Rural protests against conservation policies are not expressed by hunting violators alone; supportive community members may also perform acts of neutralization. Here we examine the occurrence of the whole range of neutralization techniques in the discourse of the core group of hunting violators.

## Material and methods

The data was analysed using qualitative discourse analysis [51, 52]. More specifically, the purpose of the analysis was to categorize the text obtained from the narrative responses according to the theoretical model of neutralization proposed by Sykes and Matza [38], to formulate a general view as to how rural life is defended via the justification of illegal acts, and finally, to assess the impact of rural protest as manifested in expressions of self-justification. While the study is qualitative in nature, descriptive statistics are used to clarify data categorizations and interpretations of the rationales offered.

To uncover and examine the neutralization techniques used by the core group of hunting violators, we defined those individuals who might influence whether or not a hunting violator decides to engage in illegal killing. Data was collected for two distinct groups of people: hunters and rural women.

We chose to collect data for hunters due to their close connection to actual illegal killings. An earlier study had shown that over the six-year period 2005–2010, all persons engaged in criminal activities concerning large carnivores named either in police investigation records or in district court sentences were male; of those listed in the court sentences, at least 83 % owned hunting licenses, and illegal actions occurred mainly in groups [23]. These findings suggest that most hunting violators are otherwise legal hunters, members of local hunting clubs, and members of the Finnish Wildlife Agency (FWA), which plays a legal and regulatory role in game and hunting management. Hunters represent approximately 5 % of the total Finnish population; while most

hunters are male, 7.1 % are female. Hunters and hunting clubs play an important role in game management, along with their significant social role in rural communities [53].

We also chose to collect data from rural women, as we were interested in the support given within families based on heteronormative perceptions. In terms of the formation of group attitudes, family cohesiveness can be said to be built upon shared attitudes. Women, however, generally still tend to be the primary caregivers in their homes and communities, and concern both for their own health and for that of their family is an important concern [54]. In the Finnish context, parents associations have been particularly vocal opponents of wolf conservation in response to the perceived risk faced by schoolchildren at bus stops [55]. Sometimes derogatorily classed as a narrative of 'hysterical housewives' [56], women's emotional rhetoric can nevertheless exert a powerful lobbying effect and in establishing an emotional regime mobilized against wolves [55]. Women are also shown to differ from men in terms of risk assessment or attitudes towards authorities, and there are gender-marked differences in attitudes towards the environment [57]. To collect our data, we chose women who were members of the Rural Women's Advisory Organization (RWAO), a nationwide organization which provides household and consumer advice, promotes landscape management, and supports small-scale enterprises in rural areas. With more than 60,000 members, the RWAO is one of the largest women's organizations in Finland, and is therefore a powerful development agent as well as a notable women's network in rural areas.

We collected data from FWA members in northern Savo in eastern Finland and in Satakunta in the west. Our RWAO respondents were located in Kainuu in eastern Finland, in Varsinais-Suomi in the southwestern part of the country, and in Satakunta in the west. These counties are situated outside the more northern reindeer herding area, and are known for the presence of a long-lasting conflict between the game-management authorities and the local hunters and other inhabitants. The data was collected during 2011, when the previous national management plan for wolves was still in force. We met with all the respondents in person, before or after their own meetings. The hunters were met with in connection with three shooting-test training courses organized by the local agencies of the FWA. The RWAO women were met with in connection with their annual meeting (twice) and with breadmaking classes (likewise twice).

In collecting the data, we used non-active role-playing with empathy-based fictitious stories.<sup>4</sup> After a brief introduction describing the research project and its methods, the respondents, met in person, were given a brief written story and were asked to respond to it with a written imagined continuation. Such projective techniques in data collecting have been found to be excellent methods in social psychology when dealing with sensitive issues [58, 59]. The method is also suitable in connection with ethical issues [60].

The story given to the respondents described a person meeting an old acquaintance in possession of an illegally killed large carnivore.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the story gave no information on the species in question, the hunting violator's sex, the setting, the killing method, or what had led up to the situation. The story

<sup>4</sup> This data were previously collected in the study of community support to illegal killing of large carnivores [12].

<sup>5</sup> In Finnish, the term 'large carnivores' is largely understood, in both formal and colloquial discourse, as comprising four species: the brown bear, the lynx, the wolf and the wolverine.



was made as short and as general as possible so as not to restrict the respondents' narratives. The use of the third person made it easier for the respondents to write about sensitive issues [61]. There were two versions of the story: one in which the person, hereafter the *community member*, sees the dead animal and reports the alleged illegal killing to the authorities, the other in which he or she does *not* report the hunting violator (see bold text in the narrative below). The respondents received one of the two versions of the story randomly; they then, in complete anonymity, wrote narratives to answer the two questions posed in the instructions. The respondents were also asked to indicate their age-group and place of residence. The story was as follows:

*“A car drove into a yard. An old acquaintance came up, displayed a large carnivore in the trunk of the car, and said that it had been illegally killed. The person who had been told this **said something/ said nothing** to the authorities about the illegal act. Imagine the situation.*

*Describe*

*a) what had led up to the situation, and*

*b) why the person told **said something / said nothing** about the illegal action to the authorities”*

The hunters' gatherings included a total of 220 hunters, of whom 173 chose to participate in the role-playing (response rate = 79 %). Of the 72 women at the RWAO gatherings, 63 chose to participate (response rate = 88 %). Considering the sensitivity of topic, the response rate was very good. We obtained a total of 236 narratives, five of which had to be excluded because of a lack of proper narrative. We finally accepted a total of 112 “said something” narratives and 119 “said nothing” ones (Table 1) for the actual discourse analysis. The validity of the sample size was evaluated based on the concept of saturation, i.e. the point after which the collection of more data does not provide any further light on the issue under investigation. In non-active role-playing the saturation point is generally achieved with 15 narratives per background story [61], and our data collecting was successful in this regard. In addition, the large quantity of data offers the possibility of examining the distribution of neutralization techniques according to core group (hunters or women), place of residence (urban/suburban or rural) and age (<40 or ≥40) for both background stories (“said something” / “said nothing”) (see Table 2; 3).

In investigating the neutralization techniques used, all the narratives provided by the respondents were taken into account. Narratives that were responses to question B revealed community support for the hunting violators and illegal acts. In addition, perceptions of community members concerning the neutralization of the acts performed by illegal hunters were uncovered by analysing the narratives given in response to question A. The discourses were categorized according to the ten neutralization techniques listed in “[Theoretical background](#)” Section.

**Table 1** Narratives accepted for the two versions of the background story ( $n = 231$ ). The hunters were mainly men; only three female hunters were present at the hunters' gatherings and took part in the study

| Core group | n, "said something" | n, "said nothing" | Total |
|------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Hunters    | 81                  | 88                | 169   |
| Women      | 31                  | 31                | 62    |
| Total      | 112                 | 119               | 231   |

## Results

The neutralization of illegal acts was found altogether 498 times in 209 narratives. Only 22 narratives did not contain any neutralization of illegal acts. Nine different neutralizations were found, whereas only the 'defence based on necessity' was missing. It is worth noting, however, that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish conceptually between certain neutralization techniques; this is discussed below where relevant. The results are shown in the contingency table (Table 3) and under the following sub-headings.

The contingency table (Table 3) shows that the frequency distribution of the neutralization techniques used mostly did not differ according to group. Hunters and women, urban/suburban and rural residents, and respondents in both age groups show similar distributions of the rationales they produce on behalf of the hunting violator. The neutralization techniques applied in the "said something" stories varied: rural respondents used more rationales than urban or suburban ones. In narratives built on both "said nothing" and "said something" stories, older respondents used more rationales than younger ones.

In one out of five narratives, ( $n = 48$ ), the species that had been illegally killed was named. It was usually a wolf ( $n = 36$ ); other species – brown bear ( $n = 5$ ), lynx ( $n = 3$ ) and wolverine ( $n = 4$ ) – occurred less often.

**Table 2** Distribution of women and hunters by age and place of residence. The mean age of hunters was 49.4 years, that of women 51.6 years

| Age group | n, hunters | n, women | n, % hunters | n, % women |
|-----------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|
| 20–29     | 12         | 2        | 7            | 3          |
| 30–39     | 25         | 14       | 15           | 23         |
| 40–49     | 49         | 12       | 29           | 19         |
| 50–59     | 42         | 13       | 25           | 21         |
| 60–69     | 30         | 14       | 18           | 23         |
| 70–79     | 10         | 7        | 6            | 11         |
| Total     | 168        | 62       | 100          | 100        |
| Residence |            |          |              |            |
| Rural     | 115        | 48       | 71           | 77         |
| Suburban  | 28         | 10       | 17           | 16         |
| Urban     | 20         | 4        | 12           | 6          |
| Total     | 163        | 62       | 100          | 100        |

**Table 3** Contingency table that displays the frequency distribution of the neutralization techniques used according to the core groups (hunters or women), place of residence (urban/suburban or countryside) and age group (<40 or ≥40) for both background stories (“said something”/“said nothing”). In the case of the neutralisation acts performed on behalf of a hunting violator, both background stories are combined, whereas in the case of the neutralisation acts performed by a community member, the background stories are dealt with separately. The varied number of respondents is due to the lack of background information given in the forms that the respondents completed. Six people did not give information about their place of residence, and one person failed to give age information

| Neutralisation of acts | Background story                              | Groups (n of respondents) | Used neutralisation techniques n / % |         |         |         |        |         |         |       |       |       |  |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|-------|-------|-------|--|
|                        |   |                           | NT1                                  | NT2     | NT3     | NT4     | NT5    | NT6     | NT7     | NT8   | NT9   | Total |  |
| Hunting Violator       | “Said something” and “Said nothing” combined. | hunters (n = 109)         | 45.27 %                              | 14.8 %  | 65.39 % | 1.1 %   | 4.2 %  | 4.2 %   | 31.19 % | 1.1 % | 3.2 % | 168   |  |
|                        |   | women (n = 56)            | 23.24 %                              | 8.8 %   | 43.44 % | 0       | 1.1 %  | 2.2 %   | 16.17 % | 0     | 4.4 % | 97    |  |
|                        |   | rural (n = 115)           | 45.25 %                              | 15.8 %  | 78.43 % | 1.1 %   | 3.2 %  | 2.1 %   | 32.18 % | 1.1 % | 6.3 % | 183   |  |
|                        |   | urban/suburban (n = 46)   | 22.29 %                              | 6.8 %   | 27.36 % | 0       | 2.3 %  | 4.5 %   | 14.18 % | 0     | 1.1 % | 76    |  |
|                        |   | age < 40 (n = 38)         | 13.21 %                              | 7.11 %  | 26.41 % | 0       | 3.5 %  | 1.2 %   | 11.18 % | 0     | 2.3 % | 63    |  |
|                        |   | age ≥ 40 (n = 126)        | 55.27 %                              | 15.8 %  | 81.40 % | 1.1 %   | 2.1 %  | 5.3 %   | 36.18 % | 1.1 % | 5.3 % | 201   |  |
| Total                  |   |                           | 203                                  | 65      | 320     | 3       | 15     | 18      | 140     | 3     | 21    | 788   |  |
| Community Member       | “Said something”                              | hunters (n = 34)          | 5.14 %                               | 1.3 %   | 2.6 %   | 25.69 % | 2.6 %  | 0       | 1.3 %   | 0     | 0     | 36    |  |
|                        |   | women (n = 11)            | 1.8 %                                | 0       | 2.15 %  | 6.46 %  | 1.8 %  | 0       | 3.23 %  | 0     | 0     | 13    |  |
|                        |   | rural (n = 33)            | 6.16 %                               | 1.3 %   | 4.11 %  | 22.60 % | 1.3 %  | 0       | 3.8 %   | 0     | 0     | 37    |  |
|                        |   | urban/suburban (n = 11)   | 0                                    | 0       | 0       | 8.73 %  | 2.18 % | 0       | 1.9 %   | 0     | 0     | 11    |  |
|                        |   | age < 40 (n = 15)         | 0                                    | 0       | 1.7 %   | 13.87 % | 1.7 %  | 0       | 0       | 0     | 0     | 15    |  |
|                        |   | age ≥ 40 (n = 29)         | 6.18 %                               | 1.3 %   | 3.9 %   | 17.52 % | 2.6 %  | 0       | 4.12 %  | 0     | 0     | 33    |  |
| Total                  |   |                           | 18                                   | 3       | 12      | 91      | 9      | 0       | 12      | 0     | 0     | 145   |  |
| “Said nothing”         | hunters (n = 81)                              | 7.5 %                     | 17.13 %                              | 17.13 % | 5.4 %   | 51.39 % | 8.6 %  | 22.17 % | 1.1 %   | 3.2 % | 131   |       |  |
|                        | women (n = 29)                                | 6.11 %                    | 3.6 %                                | 11.21 % | 1.2 %   | 13.25 % | 2.4 %  | 13.25 % | 0       | 4.8 % | 53    |       |  |
|                        | rural (n = 74)                                | 9.7 %                     | 15.12 %                              | 24.19 % | 3.2 %   | 41.32 % | 5.4 %  | 23.18 % | 1.1 %   | 7.6 % | 128   |       |  |

**Table 3** (continued)

| Neutralisation of acts | Background story                | Used neutralisation techniques n / % |         |         |       |         |        |         |       |       |       |  | Total |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|-------|---------|--------|---------|-------|-------|-------|--|-------|
|                        |                                 | NT1                                  | NT2     | NT3     | NT4   | NT5     | NT6    | NT7     | NT8   | NT9   | Total |  |       |
|                        | urban/suburban ( <i>n</i> = 32) | 4.8 %                                | 5.10 %  | 3.6 %   | 3.6 % | 20.40 % | 5.10 % | 10.20 % | 0     | 0     | 50    |  |       |
|                        | age < 40 ( <i>n</i> = 20)       | 1.3 %                                | 4.11 %  | 10.29 % | 3.9 % | 12.34 % | 1.3 %  | 4.11 %  | 0     | 0     | 35    |  |       |
|                        | age ≥ 40 ( <i>n</i> = 90)       | 12.8 %                               | 16.11 % | 18.12 % | 3.2 % | 52.35 % | 9.6 %  | 31.21 % | 1.1 % | 7.5 % | 149   |  |       |
|                        | Total                           | 39                                   | 60      | 83      | 18    | 189     | 30     | 103     | 3     | 21    | 546   |  |       |

Italic entries are the percentages of the used neutralisation techniques

The following codes for the neutralisation techniques are used: *NT1* denial of responsibility, *NT2* denial of injury, *NT3* denial of the victim, *NT4* condemnation of the condemners, *NT5* appeal to higher loyalties, *NT6* claim of normality, *NT7* denial of the necessity of the law, *NT8* metaphor of the ledger, *NT9* claim of entitlement

## Community support to hunting violators

### *Community members' argumentation in "said nothing" stories*

The community members' "said nothing" stories, whether from hunters ( $n = 81$ ) or women ( $n = 29$ ), contained a relatively high number of neutralization techniques (Table 3). In most cases, the narratives made use of more than just one technique. It was quite common, for example, for 'denial of injury', 'denial of the victim' and 'denial of the necessity of the law' to co-occur. In addition, 'denial of responsibility' was occasionally combined with other techniques, if the respondent considered that the hunting violator was in a situation where the society at large had forced them to take the law into their own hands. The following brief narrative contains all four rationales mentioned here.

*"The European Union defines the wolf as a rare species. But that isn't really the case in Finland, if you look at species status at the local level. But you are not allowed any exemptions. The community member who knew about the illegally killed wolf was a sheep-farmer who had suffered from wolf damage. Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /14*

The neutralization technique 'denial of injury' occurred for example when a community member felt that illegal killing does not cause any significant harm to the overall wolf population.

*"There are too many wolves anyway. Killing one off is hardly a sin". Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /20*

*"That person didn't care about one wolf's life. There are so many wolves running around that you can't even go hunting with a dog. How many dogs have already been lost in the woods because of those wolves." Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /6*

The above narrative also applies the 'denial of the victim' technique. The situation to which one most commonly referred was when people felt that the presence of large carnivores threatened human wellbeing by attacking livestock or hunting-dogs, or by a direct threat to human safety, as in the following narrative:

*"If people have to live in this kind of fear, it's some relief when someone does something to remedy the situation. The authorities won't help!" woman, "said nothing" 31/21*

*"There was another person who belonged to the same moose-hunting group, who remembered the Norwegian moose-dog. Now there was just one vermin animal less, and his own dog had a better chance to survive the autumn. Dangerous large animals are better protected than humans! In Finland killing such animals is strictly criminalized, while for instance in France it is seen as just civil disobedience." Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /61*

In the last narrative, the community member feels that by an act of illegal killing he is exacting revenge, as wolves cause the loss of hunting dogs. The narrative also

contains elements of the 'denial of the necessity of the law' in the comment on unfair conservation regimes. These rationales were quite common, with a focus on inequitable policies and distrust between the authorities and the local people.

*"The common feeling is that trust in large carnivore management is long gone. So people take power into their own hands and agree with the illegal killings."* Woman, "said nothing" 31/16

*"Common sense has defeated all those EU bureaucrats".* Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /48

*"The local community's silent agreement on how to handle things, since officially no exemptions are allowed."* Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /8

Hunters ( $n = 51$ ) in particular mentioned rationales that included elements of 'appeal to higher loyalties', although women ( $n = 13$ ) did so as well. This means that community members may support illegal killing on the grounds that deviating from shared group attitudes may pose a risk to relationships; at its worst, the entire life of the community would collapse. In the last two narratives, community members justify their support for the illegal action with 'denial of the injury', along with the 'appeal to higher loyalties'.

*"Because there was silent agreement among the villagers. And the person went along with the agreement. If he had told the authorities about the illegal killing, he would have failed his own community."* Woman, "said nothing" 31/5

*"Because the person involved felt that the hunting violator was doing them all a favour for the sake of community peace, something that everyone else was afraid to do. That's why he didn't want any harm to come to his acquaintance – nor did he want any harm himself. Besides, he was also thinking of the safety of the locals and of the farm animals."* Woman, "said nothing" 31/8

*"Those wolves breed like rabbits, but good friends are damn hard to find."* Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /7

The 'claim of normality' occurred a few times in the data. The core group rationalized their support for illegal killings by saying that anyone might do it, or had already had done it. Quite surprisingly, the 'metaphor of the ledger' occurred only once. The following narrative refers briefly to hunters' positive qualities, including skill at sustainable management and culling, and claims that these qualities should matter. The narrative also makes use of the 'appeal to higher loyalties' and 'condemnation of the condemners'.

*"Well, a dog doesn't bite another dog, it's the law of the wild that matters. Hunters manage and harvest game and predators in a sustainable manner. If you don't take "large carnivore contact persons" seriously, you know, 'what is the real population estimate and what isn't', it evidently induces illegal killings."* Hunter, "said nothing" 88 /77

To conclude this section on community members' rationales in the "said nothing" stories, there is one narrative containing elements of the 'claim of entitlement'. The community member feels that they are entitled to kill wolves to reduce their population. This rationale is connected to those of 'denial of injury', 'appeal to higher loyalties' and 'denial of the necessity of the law', and shows at the same time how ambiguous these comments actually are.

*"He didn't want to snitch on his mate, well, in fact he didn't see any crime in the actions at all. In fact, he may have felt huge satisfaction from the fact that now there was one wolf less. Now that I think about it, maybe he was irritated that there weren't two wolves at the same time."* Hunter, "said nothing" 88/43

#### *Community members' argumentation in "said something" stories*

Keeping in mind that the respondents were randomly assigned one of the two versions of the background story, and thus could not decide which one to use in constructing their own narratives, it is interesting to examine the narratives based on the "said something" stories. If the respondent's attitude differed from those introduced in the story, he or she faced a challenge in building their own narrative from the facts provided. For example, if the respondent was actually in favour of the illegal killing of wolves but received a background story where the community member intended to turn the friend in to the police, the narrative showed an effort to introduce the writer's own attitude regardless of the events in the story they were given. For example, hunters were keen to argue that the illegal killing was somehow inadvertent; they justified telling the authorities by arguing that the hunting violator would not be sentenced anyway because of the nature of the act, or that anyone would act the same way if they had to defend their own life or that of their dog.

*"The person who reported the illegal killing considered that if you protect your own property it can't be seen as a crime after all."* Hunter, "said something" 81/9

*"Illegal killing is a crime, sure, but there might be extenuating circumstances related to the incident."* Hunter, "said something" 81/71

The above narratives contain elements of using 'denial of responsibility' as a rationale in support of hunting violators. Interestingly, the most common neutralization technique used in the "said something" stories was found to be 'condemnation of the condemners'. Hunters ( $n = 25$ ) said that a community member who reported the illegal killing was described as a 'watermelon', a person with green and red (leftwing) values, whose view of life differs markedly from that of the local people. Such attitudinal differences were implied indirectly, as in the following narratives.

*"The person who reported the happening made a mistake according to the common notion of justice".* Hunter, "said something" 81/26

*"He reported it to the police because the act was illegal and because the snitch was a rat."* Hunter, "said something" 81/42

*"You shouldn't share your business with all those greenies."* Hunter, "said something" 81/1

In the women's narratives ( $n = 6$ ), the rationale for condemning the condemners was expressed as follows:

*"He was just jealous of the violator because he didn't get to bag the predator himself".* Woman, "said something" 31/21

*"The person who informed the police knew that the act was illegal, but he evidently didn't have personal experience of wolves".* Woman, "said something" 31/23

The next two examples illustrate a hunter's expression of his opinion regarding the current legislation defining aggravated hunting offences, and a woman's comment pointing out that rural people are concerned about the current large-carnivore situation and inaction on the part of the authorities. The narratives contain rationales based on 'denial of the necessity of the law'.

*"It was a hunting crime (which is questionable)"* Hunter, "said something" 81/38

*"The person who found out about the illegal killing let the authorities know because all this information should be shared in public to allow the legal killing of predators."* Woman, "said something" 31/22

### **Discourses behind the illegal killing of large carnivores**

Interpretation of the perceptions of the core group about the neutralization of the actions of the illegal hunters demanded analysing the narratives given in response to question A, that is, 'what had led up to the situation?' The narratives gathered were found to contain several rationales combined with each other. The presence of the large carnivores in a residential area is not favoured, stock and hunting dog damages are seen as intolerable, local people are concerned about human safety and feel that their well-being is ignored. Local people feel like bystanders who should agree whatever policies or measures the government offers because its political and legal legitimacy is ostensibly in place, and the distrust toward the game management authorities has reached severe levels. Locals feel that they are forced to act as no socio-culturally legitimate conservation occurs.

*"The large animal that was killed had harassed the local villagers by coming close to the houses. It had killed a hunting dog and sheep in the village. The locals had requested exemptions based on the damage, but not a single one had been granted. The villagers had silently agreed that the predator would be killed if for example a hunter came across it. Now that moment had come."* Woman, "said nothing" 31/5



*“It seems to be a common opinion among the authorities in this country that large animals don't cause any harm. Conservationists have the impression that predators aren't capable of hurting anyone. Especially in eastern Finland, the wolf population is far too large. Domestic animals and children are under threat. The authorities won't take the problem seriously.”* Woman, “said nothing” 31/16

*“The hunting violator felt annoyed by the lack of power when it comes to large animals. The children are afraid to go outside in the evening, not to mention that they can't ride their bikes to see their friends three kilometres away. There had been damage from wolves on the neighbour's sheep-farm, and the youngest child in the family, a six-year-old who had previously enjoyed visiting the sheep and lambs is now sad and has nightmares about packs of wolves surrounding the home and attacking human beings. Exemptions to get rid of the wolves that circle around the village are hard to get and are very rigid. If you do get an exemption, you can't satisfy the conditions. You try to chase the wolf to the specified area to start hunting, and meanwhile the same wolf has harassed the cattle and killed a deer in a nearby field. There is a lot of fear and a sense of helplessness because the father couldn't do anything. You need all that bureaucracy and paperwork to make a change or influence anything”* Woman, “said something” 31/25

## Discussion

Anonymous non-active role playing was found to be a feasible method of data collection concerning the neutralization techniques used by the core group of hunting violators. Role-playing provides discourses which include references to actual illegal actions. People usually write about their own perceptions and things they have some knowledge of [61]. People have linguistic powers, which they can use to take a stand in a conflict situation [62]; we interpret this to mean that the rationalizations we found in the stories may also signal the capacity and intention to support illegal killings and hunting violators. This support is manifested in the form of silent endorsement and approval of the act. An act of local social defiance toward the conservation regime is thus committed not solely by individual hunting violators, but in a sense by everyone in the community who knows of illegal actions and justifies them. The use of two background stories and the frequency distribution of the rationales used by the groups support the interpretation that community power is heavily exercised over conservation regimes and over issues of illegality, especially in the case of wolves at the time of the first Finnish wolf management plan.

In previous studies of neutralization techniques, the technique most commonly used has been ‘denial of responsibility’: hunting violators claimed their illegal hunting was accidental because they did not know that the law prohibited hunting [44], or offenders ignored the law and went fishing without a license [42]. In our study, an appeal to circumstances where hunting violators and community members felt forced to act illegally was found to be quite frequent, and the use of the ‘denial of the necessity of the law’ justification relates to these rationales. The acts of local hunting violators are seen as contingent on national and EU-level conservation policies: in the absence of

formal management, informal management takes place out of necessity. These findings are very close to a 'defence based on necessity' but in this study we found that when society at large has 'forced' hunting violators to take the law into their own hands the rationale is categorized as 'denial of responsibility'. This conclusion receives support from previous observations, where both the local game authorities and the Finnish national hunters' organization have stated that the growing wolf numbers will lead to an increase in illegal killings [23].

'Denial of injury' occurred several times, in justifying both the support given by community members and the acts of their fellow-citizens, i.e. hunting violators. Overall, wolf populations were argued to be higher than official estimates, and local people claimed to have more accurate knowledge as to population sizes and ranges. Despite the existence of rumours of secret, intentional government action to re-introduce wolves in Finland, such stigmatizing of individual wolves as illegitimate, alien components of nature to justify their killing was not found in this study [23, 63, 64]. Rationales based on 'denial of injury' have been found in previous studies, for example among fishing violators, who believed that recreational fishing has little or no biological impact compared to commercial fishing operations [40].

'Denial of the victim' turned out to be the most used neutralization technique in the narratives produced by the core group of hunting violators in interpreting the motives behind the illegal acts. Retaliatory killing was found to be a noteworthy rationale: hunting violators claim entitlement, for instance, in the case of loss of livestock or of a hunting dog. The illegally killed individual is declared a malefactor, deserving to be punished. Interestingly, although there is continuous public debate as to the genetic purity of free-ranging wolves, and the wolf is stigmatized as a 'porridge-eating dog' [23; see for similar results 56], we found no signs of such stigmatization in the narratives.

Rationales based on 'denial of injury' and 'denial of the victim' reflect the issue of biosecurity, which has problematized the socio-natural accommodations that have developed and been actively constructed by both humans and animals for centuries [32]. Large carnivores have the ability to cause staggering losses to livestock and other domestic animals; shepherds, ranchers, farmers and hunters have thus had to accommodate their livelihood practices and leisure activities to the presence of large carnivores in their territories [9, 15, 31, 32, 63, 65]. Spatial control has led to the adoption of new mechanisms, such as building physical barriers, introducing guard-dogs, or adopting hunting methods where dogs are not used [5, 32]. It is worth noting that local people living in large carnivore territories are not dominated by feared species alone, but also by management authorities and conservation groups. EU conservation policies have been criticized for preventing traditional ways of rural life and hindering the welfare of rural livelihoods [5, 16, 66]. The re-colonization of wolves in Europe is an excellent example of the conflicts that arise when conservation efforts confront naturally embedded social and economic interests and practices among locals [31, 32, 67].

While the 'defence based on necessity' is closely related to those of 'denial of the necessity of the law' and 'denial of responsibility', we concluded that it refers more directly to some form of survival; in fact, the 'defence based on necessity' as such was absent from the narratives. This technique has been identified as one of the most commonly used in justifying deer-poaching for example in Missouri [68] and in the

western United States [44]. It may be that in the case of usable game, where the main motive for poaching is economic gain, it is more socially acceptable among hunters and the public to claim that one needs the meat to survive [44]. The illegal killing of large carnivores is a socio-politically determined action supported by other community members, rather than driven by economic reasons. This means that there is no need to apologize for illegal killing by other community members – to justify their actions based on the necessity of survival. This may also be the main reason for the absence of the rationale based on the ‘metaphor of the ledger’.

Under the pressure of the environmental ethos of recent decades, rural people living in large carnivore territories have confronted a feeling of alienation from society at large [37]. On some level, there is an antagonism between conservation policies and traditional agrarian values. The use of the ‘appeal to higher loyalties’ reflects the demands of smaller social groups over those of society at large, and shows how rural space is constructed on traditional agricultural values rather than on biocentric values, which pose a threat to the uniformity of the community. However, the results show that in the case of large carnivores, it is not just a rural concern; women and hunters living in suburban and urban areas also justified the illegal killings. In Finland almost all hunters have a connection to the countryside, because they have to be members of a local hunting club to be able to hunt. It is possible that suburban/urban hunters want to separate themselves from their non-hunting fellow-(sub)urbanites, who at least according to the media are apparently against all forms of large carnivore population control. It may also be that both suburban/urban hunters and women wanted to express their support for the people living in large carnivore areas (see also 13 for similar results). Snitches may be seen as seeking questionable fame, as bearing a grudge over an old incident and now seeking revenge, or simply as individuals whose view of life differs from that of the locals, as seen in the use of ‘condemnation of the condemners’ as a rationale.

Large carnivore conservation is based on the power of natural science, as conservation regimes rely on ecological-technical expertise. Conservation regulation and policy are dominated by the *favourable conservation status* enjoyed by the species in the European Union’s conservation policy and by the national Red List for species conservation [69]. Instruments that measure solely the success of ecological sustainability may fail to take notice of other important issues in the success of conservation efforts. We conclude that at some level there are signs of cultural resistance against newly adopted conservation regimes set by the European Union. Not only rural people belonging to the core groups of hunting violators, but also urban/suburban respondents felt that the public sphere has been colonized by an EU environmentalist agenda that excludes alternative rationalities [56].

## Conclusions

While fully recognizing that rural people may hold differing views as to large carnivore conservation, and varying attitudes towards large carnivore species in general, this study of the neutralization techniques used to justify the illegal killing of large carnivores provides an insight into the discourses used to defend the rural identity and way of life, and to express rural protests toward conservation policies. Rural protest manifested by the core groups of hunting violators contests views as to how the conservation of large carnivores, more

specifically wolves, should be conducted, and is connected to non-compliance and resistance to a conservation regime that affects people's well-being. Empirical socio-cultural legitimacy deficits are manifested in arguments that conservation/management based on strict protection of wolves has a detrimental effect on people's livelihood, leisure interests, and culture, thus violating their right to a safe living environment. Distrust of the authorities and of wildlife scientists is deep-seated among the groups examined, and further hinders compliance with management measures. Although the illegal killing of large carnivores invites the criminalization of hunters and their stigmatization by the rest of society, those belonging to the core group of hunting violators rationalize and justify such illegal actions and the support given to them. Neutralization of stigma and shame by community members on behalf of hunting violators may be interpreted as a matter of rural defiance against the authorities [70]. It is debatable whether these community members are committed to deviant values [71, 72], but when the crime is justified as legitimate these people in some sense share the same norms and values as hunting violators. The results imply that the core group of hunting violators arises out from the rural context, and there are signs of a larger cultural protest against "illegitimate" top-down conservation regimes applied at the EU level among the groups examined. Our findings suggest that not only hunting violators but also the core group of hunting violators has non-communicative resistance power, which they have exercised prior to the implementation of the new wolf management plan manifested in the drastic decrease in the wolf population mentioned in the Introduction.

The conservation of conflict-prone species is primarily a socio-cultural challenge, rather than a purely biological one [73]. To achieve socio-culturally sustainable species management, it is vital to recognize both the *power* of hunting violators and their core group (their ability to influence the well-being of the species) and the *urgency* (the importance to them of the pace and quality of management policy decisions; see [74] for the concepts of power and urgency) in terms of the success of conservation regimes. Understanding what motivates the core group of hunting violators to back up illegal acts is important in formulating effective deterrents to illegal killing and increasing compliance with conservation regimes [75, 76]. To reduce the crime rate and to avoid the detrimental ecological, economic, social and even political consequences of illegal killing, voluntary compliance through informal social sanctions and the perceived legitimacy of the rules enforcing the law according to moral standards might be worth exploiting [77–79]. High levels of compliance may result from informal sanctions based upon collective moral judgments and the perceived legitimacy of rules, as in the cases of Newfoundland and Norway with small fisheries [77, 80] and of the population restoration of moose and brown bear in Finland [81]. Toward that end, there is a need to enhance practices that will transform the core groups' perception of the hunting violator from benefactor to criminal: in other words, to support processes that will make hunting violators irrelevant to community welfare.

For example, research is needed addressing the question of how to turn so-called problem species into valued game, thereby turning illegal killing into a potential threat to legal hunting activities see also [82, 9, 18, 83]. In the Nordic countries, the first attempts have been made to turn wolves into a valued quarry via traditional hunting [7], and in Finland an experiment was initiated in 2015 in the use of regulated hunting in wolf conservation as a result of the implementation of the revised wolf management plan [3]. The first results following the two-year trial seem promising; concurrently with the harvesting of sixty wolves, there has been an estimated increase of 40–60

individuals in the total wolf population [84], while at the same time traditional wolf-hunting practices, such as hunting with hounds, have been revived. Overall, such an approach, recognizing the “primordial stakeholders” (see [85]) in legitimizing the conservation efforts of problematic species and leaning on traditional hunting with derogations based on population management, is also supported by EU conservation policies [86]. These conservation efforts lean toward responsive and deliberative governance of natural resources management and conservation, with the aim of empowering local citizens in natural resources management and policy by bringing to the fore their sense of nature and how it is to be used [87]. This view also addresses the importance of building trust between authorities/wildlife scientists and local populations, including hunters [82, 88, 89], and acknowledges the importance of local knowledge along with ecological-technological expertise [37, 56].

The wolf seems to be the main species involved in the conflict, and future research should emphasize its species-specific characteristics and their contribution to high levels of fear [87, 90]. The re-colonization of large carnivores has brought the traditional sense of a safe life to the foreground of political and social arenas [5, 9, 32]. There is a need for a better understanding of biosecurity issues within human societies, and of the psychological processes involved in environmental conflicts.

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