

Expanding arenas for learning hunting ethics, their grammars and dilemmas: An examination of young hunters' enculturation into modern hunting

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Abstract

Although hunting is declining in western countries, the number of people taking the hunting exam in Sweden are stable, and new demographic groups are becoming hunters. Through interviews done in Sweden with both new and experienced hunters, as well as focus groups with young hunters at agricultural colleges, we investigate how they navigate praxis and ethical frameworks taught in hunting. Using theories on moral learning, as well as Walzer's thick and thin moral argument, we contrast the views of these young hunters with the ethical principles outlined in the educational literature for the hunting exam. We then present how young hunters reasoned around issues regarding hunting ethics, animal welfare and the place of hunting in modern society, both inside and outside the classroom. The young hunters we spoke to acted as moderators of modern trends in hunting, often bringing 'destabilising' influences like social media and female hunters. Young hunters are enculturated into traditional hunting structures and, in the process, caught in a dialectic between modern influences and traditional hunting culture. Our findings highlight

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challenges such as ‘false consensus’ and ‘ethical trade-offs’ in the learning of hunting ethics, which emerge potentially due to a lack of space for deliberation on hunting ethics.

KEYWORDS

ethics, modernity, moral learning, technology

INTRODUCTION

The killing of animals in hunting evokes ethical debate (Cartmill, 1996). Following the cultural critique of hunting with the rise of animal rights, veganism and animal welfare initiatives, the hunting community increasingly advertises its sustainability and the contributions to society that hunters perform as stewards of wildlife (Holsman, 2000; von Essen & Tickle, 2020). Perhaps as a result of this sustainability image, hunting in a western context attracts individuals with lost ties to the countryside wanting to ‘reconnect with nature’ (Dizard, 1999; Leopold, 1992; Ortega y Gasset, 1972; Posewitz, 2002; Tickle, 2019). At the same time, societal processes such as urbanisation and increased social and physical mobility are cause for concern among hunters, as they change both the composition of the hunting community and how hunting is viewed (Dinnie et al. 2015; Øian & Skogen, 2016; Tickle & von Essen, 2020). Societal change is therefore resulting in pressures on hunting, challenging its ethical legitimacy.

Currently, hunters balance the place of hunting in modern society depending on their motivations as a leisure or a labour, indicating a type of ‘identity crisis’ for modern hunting that materialises both individually and structurally (von Essen & Tickle, 2020). To add further complexity to these society-wide value shifts, modern trends such as technological development interact with societal processes such as urbanisation (Caro et al., 2017; von Essen, 2018) to produce new contexts for a person to become a hunter.

As new hunters with varied backgrounds are recruited into hunting, they bring both personal moral viewpoints as well as new methods of learning that have become popular with the rise of the Internet and social media. We are interested in understanding how new, and specifically young hunters, are enculturated into traditional hunting structures and how they navigate the dialectic between modern influences and traditional hunting culture.

In this article, we, therefore, investigate how new, and specifically young, hunters negotiate the ethics of hunting, including the differences between the ethics expressed and performed by established hunters, the non-hunting majority and their own backgrounds. We focus on Sweden as a case, as hunting is well-integrated into the culture and history of this country that is simultaneously highly modern and experiencing the aforementioned societal changes (in values, technology, demographics) that can be seen across many western societies.

In Sweden, hunting is a traditional practice derived from agricultural management with significant folk roots as it contributed to households’ food supply. Hunting is carried out on foot, sometimes with specialised dogs, alone or with a hunting team. Although hunters sometimes may hunt alone, they often belong to a team they hunt with as well. Game species range from large herbivores such as moose (*Alces alces*) to birds such as ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*), and also under certain conditions, the hunting of carnivores (e.g., grey wolf *Canis lupus*) is allowed.

By contrasting what is taught in official hunting literature and curricula with findings from focus group discussions and interviews, we show that hunters in Sweden vary in their own moral stances as well as in their interpretations of ethical hunting principles that are taught to them. Using theoretical concepts of moral learning, particularly Walzer's (1994) writings about thick and thin morality, we unpack how young hunters negotiate their personal moral standpoints in relation to the ethical principles taught to them in the face of influences from both modern developments and enduring patriarchal structures. We see that young hunters bring their own morals into established ethical structures of hunting, and therefore they may change hunting ethics at the same time as they are assimilated into it. Nevertheless, ethical issues such as 'false consensus' and 'trade-offs' arise when young hunters are lacking arenas to deliberate and reflect on their moral standpoints and experiences in hunting.

LEARNING TO HUNT (ETHICALLY)

A typical maxim heard concerning good hunting practice is '*you learn your whole life*'. Undeniably, childhood exposure to hunting as well as ancestral traditions passed on through generations is significant. However, the traditional and patriarchal 'father-to-son' inheritance of hunting practices (starting from young childhood and continuing throughout maturation) and passed-on situated knowledge appears to be decreasing in Sweden (Gunnarsdotter, 2005; von Essen, 2018; von Essen & Tickle, 2020). As older patriarchal family values change and more people from varied backgrounds are introduced to hunting, such as women, foreigners or those without a hunting heritage (Eriksson et al., 2018; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020), enculturation into hunting takes place increasingly through formalised and more scholastic means such as literature, classes, examinations and training. In addition, technological developments such as the accessibility of audiovisual information on the Internet also open up for the different ways of informal learning unfettered by geographical constraints. Nevertheless, a hunter's identity and values are often attributed to their 'roots' by means of landscape attachment (Øian & Skogen, 2016; Skogen, 2003) as well as upbringing. Hence, it is difficult to condense all that is considered 'hunting ethics' into the structure of a single learning curriculum with successful learning assessed through a formal exam. It has therefore been shown, by Swedish hunters' own admission, that 'what is lectured at the course doesn't matter as much' (von Essen & Allen, 2017, p. 22). Such statements may appear elitist, where only those growing up 'with hunting in their blood' (Dinnie et al., 2015; Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011a) are able to become 'true hunters', whereas people with an urban upbringing and lifestyle are 'othered' (Dizard, 1999). Perhaps it is the unpredictability of these 'new' types of hunters that has, in many western countries, led to unease among older generations and other demographic groups that are attached to their own hunting traditions (Caro et al., 2017; Tickle, 2019).

Nonetheless, even those who have not grown up with the teachings of hunting in their life do not enter a hunting course in a moral vacuum. Morals are learned through processes of cognitive development through life (Cushman et al., 2017; Gibbs, 1977; Miller, 1985; Railton, 2017), and therefore people enter hunting with variable moral 'baggage' and values (Caro et al., 2017). Next, we briefly consider some of the mechanisms by which moral development occurs.

MORAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The development of morals and values begins in the earliest childhood. We can thus assume that the learning of hunting-related values and norms also starts in very early childhood—for example, if a child sees an adult bring home a hunting quarry smiling proudly and later enjoying a meal made of the meat, they will probably adopt similar associations (Cushman et al., 2017). Many hunters recall positive memories of hunting in their childhood (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011b). However, there are also people *without* a hunting background who still wish to incorporate hunting into their life. They will have found other ways to form value-based experiences and inferences that have led them to seek hunting as a rewarding activity (Cushman et al., 2017). Consequently, people who express an interest in hunting share certain values or ‘reward functions’ that they see in the activity, whether they grew up in a hunting household or not.

Yet as new hunters are socialised into the hunting community, they bring with them their own values and moral viewpoints. Hence, there lies some relevance, for the purpose of this study, in more traditional psychological studies of moral development. For example, Kohlberg’s stages of moral learning illustrate moral development throughout a person’s lifetime (Carr, 1996; Colby et al., 1983). Particularly interesting for moral reasoning is the differentiation between conventional and post-conventional morality and the purely speculative idealistic stage of ‘ethical principle orientation’ (Baxter & Rarick, 1987; Carr, 1996; Gibbs, 1977). Kohlberg (1986) posits that at the conventional stage, authority, rules and their enforcement through implied punishment are the basis for judging ‘wrong’, while at the post-conventional stage, moral reasoning is based in contractualism and respect of one’s peers and self-respect. Whilst some conclude that much of moral learning is developed through assimilation organically through life, morality—as well as the process of moral reasoning—can and, maybe *should*, be taught in the capacity of any other scholarly subject as long as it does not fall for the ‘bogy of indoctrination’ (Carr, 1996, p. 368).

This leads to the argument that whilst people have their own moral faculties, in the context of hunting, hunters-in-training should not only be relied upon for their own judgement but must also be *taught* about hunting ethics. These ethics pertain to everything from ensuring wildlife welfare to attending to interpersonal norms of propriety in hunting teams. We view hunting ethics, therefore, as something between personal judgment (Marvin, 2010, p. 152) and a broader culture. Nevertheless, if hunting is taught only in terms of deontological prompts (‘you shall’ and ‘you shall not’) without offering reflection around the basis for these norms, broader dilemmas of being a hunter in modern society are not approached or, even worse, are dealt with dogmatically. Hence, we stipulate that learning is culturally situated and therefore, for the purposes of this study, apply Walzer’s (1994) concepts of *thick and thin morality*.

Walzer (1994) describes thick, maximalist morals as culturally embedded in particularistic contexts that may be social, historical and religious. These thick conceptions of morality are formed over a long time of complex interactions that apply to certain parts of a cultural group. By contrast, thin conceptions of morality are simpler, yet universally accepted values that avoid cultural complexity and can be understood, in their minimalist terms, also by cultural outsiders. Therefore, whilst morals and ethics are often culturally situated, certain cases of affective reactions and logical reasoning will hold across different contexts (Cushman et al., 2017; Emmerich, 2015; Miller, 1985). Thin morality is more fundamental and universal, meaning that thin moral principles are valued and understood across cultural contexts. A typical example of a thin moral principle would be ‘that the killing of people is normally wrong’, which is universally unquestioned, held throughout history and different societies (McMahan, 2002, p. 189). Nevertheless, thick and thin morality

are intertwined, with thin moral values leaving room for thick cultural values to be added (Walzer, 1994). Outsiders of a community may agree to a thin moral principle, but within a community, that principle is made thicker by cultural context and situated understanding.

Hunting is a deeply cultural activity with a strong (and thick) ethical structure established across many platforms with concretised ethical principles (Causey, 1989; Danell et al., 2016; Gunn; Loftin, 1984; Fischer et al. 2013). Whilst taking a course in hunting may, in part, be a question of pedagogics, the learning of hunting and its ethical structures is very much a cultural undertaking (Causey, 1989; Tomasello et al., 1993).

METHODOLOGY

We configured this study as a qualitative and phenomenological inquiry into the formal and informal learning spaces of young hunters. Young hunters, under the age of 35, are of relevance as they are raised alongside modern developments and form a well-defined demographic that works as a good indicator for modern changes that can affect the hunting community. The young hunters included in our study all had different levels of hunting experience despite being in the process of taking or recently passing the hunting exam. Some had never hunted before, while others had many years of experience and might be training to become professional hunters.

Data collection

Data collection was qualitative and took place in iterative stages that allowed for a more informed approach to the study area of hunting, starting with a pilot study that comprised workshops led by us with hunting organisations, attending the hunting exhibitions ‘Swedish Game Fair’ at Tullgarn and the ‘Elmia Game Fair’, as well as several private meetings with The Swedish Hunters Association and the National Hunters Association (the largest and second-largest hunting organisation in Sweden, respectively). From these events, we developed a sense of the current discussions around ethics and early on talked to hunters of different age groups about the learning of hunting ethics.

From there, the lead author immersed herself systematically into the various arenas in which hunting norms are constituted. First, the author undertook an auto-ethnography of the hunting exam course in Sweden during autumn 2019, keeping a diary and field notes for each event. This was through attending lessons, passing the theoretical exam, chatting with coursemates and the current process of taking the various shooting tests. Second, in coherence with auto-ethnographic research, field observations were done on three hunting occasions, unconnected to the course, featuring young hunters. The hunts consisted of one full day drive-hunt with dogs organised at an estate and two evening roe deer hunts with a local hunting organisation. Other participant observations included visiting the homes of hunters in connection with these events and being shown around the hunting schools at which we conducted interviews.

These efforts of immersion into hunting culture set the stage for the main data collection, the focus groups and interviews on which this research is based. In total, seven focus group discussions were held, and 14 people were interviewed individually for this study, covering the length of the country (a majority from mid and southern regions, but this may reflect population density/distribution accurately) to gather diverse views on hunting ethics.

The focus groups consisted of four to six students each, at two vocational agricultural colleges from the ages 16 to 18, specialising in rural or nature-oriented careers. All of these students had an experience of hunting through the college and some from home and were involved in a hunting-oriented course with both practical and theoretical teachings. They were younger than the average hunter and predominantly male (which reflects the current Swedish hunting community). Overall, four out of more than 30 participants in focus groups were female. The focus groups were facilitated by the lead author. Discussions were semi-structured, and interaction between the participants was encouraged. Although there were dominant voices in many of the groups, all participants at some point actively contributed to the discussions.

All focus groups except for one lasted just under one hour, which is in line with the recommended timeframe for the demographic group and size (Daley, 2013). Informed consent was obtained in advance as well as at the start of a session, all of which were attended in person physically on site at the two colleges. A teacher was present at the first session. Although this did not appear to have had an obvious censoring effect amongst the participants, there is still a chance of teachers inhibiting the expression of certain sentiments (Daley, 2013). This was therefore not repeated in the other group discussions. Peer-influence is of course also a factor (Akers & Jennings, 2009; Daley, 2013; Moloney et al., 2003), and this was considered by the researchers in their observations by paying attention to over-dominating personalities and, where appropriate, calling on quiet participants (Daley, 2013).

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one hour to just over two hours. Four of the semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and the rest remotely via telephone or video call programs, due to the coronavirus pandemic. Participants were found through hunting organisations and the snowballing method (Gabriel, 2020). We conducted 11 interviews with experienced hunters who have roles as teachers, mentors or hunting course and exam organisers, and three young female hunters who had recently passed or were in the process of taking the hunting exam. This sample, while not representative, provided a diverse collection of voices that all had reflected to some extent about the learning of hunting ethics.

Data analysis

During the processing of the data from the interview and focus group transcripts, codes were inductively developed from the data but were also framed in relation to the challenges mentioned facing hunters in the Introduction section: anxieties about the impact of modernisation on hunting as a culture and on learning processes. Through the iterative process of moving between data and literature, it became apparent that an effective method of illustrating how young hunters approached established ethical structures in hunting was to use the main hunting course literature (Lindroth, 2019) as a point of departure. The newest coursebook for the hunting exam exerted a structuring function for the interview guide in terms of framing topics but also served as a tool that provided students with the vocabulary to discuss ethics with the researchers and, finally, functioned as a reference point for criticism.

Specifically, the chapter titled 'Jaktetikens grunder' (Foundations of Hunting Ethics) in the coursebook contains many of the recent concerns and trends within hunting under specific sub-headings. These will be used to organise the presentation of the findings in the Hunting Ethics—From Page to Practice section.

RESULTS

Background: Swedish hunting education

In Sweden, since 1985, it is legally stipulated that people must pass a theoretical, practical and safety exam in order to hunt (Danell et al., 2016). At present, teaching for the hunting exam is done in a standardised pedagogical system that includes course literature and a multiple-choice exam. Once the theoretical exam is passed, a practical exam about shooting and weapon safety is carried out on approved shooting ranges. Studying for the theoretical exam can be done individually from home, using course literature (often from either one of the main hunting organisations) and study apps, attending several classes over a period of some months or taking a ‘quick course’ (Gadolin, 2015). ‘Quick courses’ usually entail the students researching the literature themselves and then attending a two to three-day course over the weekend to review the literature and take all of the exams, both theoretical and practical. The quick courses have become particularly controversial, as they are thought to not adequately teach and enculturate new hunters. Quick courses are seen to undermine understanding of fundamental principles such as weapon safety (Gadolin, 2015) and set a wrong precedent from which one should approach hunting—not as a side activity unceremoniously squeezed into a busy modern schedule but as a commitment in both time and effort.

The hunting community remains active in trying to recruit new hunters into their globally declining ranks, and Sweden is no different, with active (permit leasing) hunters having declined by about 30,000 hunters from 1993 (a record high period) to 2021 (Eriksson et al., 2018; Naturvårdsverket, 2021). Although there has been a slight uptick in people taking the hunting license in the last couple of years, reports still show a general decline with some slight buffering by growing numbers of foreign and female applicants (Eriksson et al., 2018; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020). Women are increasingly taking the hunting exam, although recent statistics show that in Sweden, out of 2,822 women who took the hunting exam, only 1,076 continued to lease hunting permits to hunt practically (Eriksson et al., 2018; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020; Marklund, 2019). This trend is seen throughout Sweden, where a stable number of people take the hunting exam, but a much lower number are leasing hunting permits. Some of them may hesitate to hunt as their main motivation might lie in ‘...a great interest in animals and nature, so rather this motive seems to be connected to an ethical consideration to *not* take an animal’s life’ (Hansson-Forman et al., 2020, p. 5, our italics). Nevertheless, new groups of hunters are emerging with heterogeneous backgrounds and perspectives (Larson et al., 2014).

Due to changing demographics and backgrounds of new hunters, combined with changes in hunting practices, interest within the established Swedish hunting community in education and specifically hunting ethics has increased as exemplified by ‘etikatsningen’ [the big ethics initiative] by the Swedish Hunting Association (Svenska Jägareförbundet, 2021). This has become especially topical as growing pressure on hunters to control the ‘calamitous’ increase in boars (*Sus scrofa*) is disrupting hunting conduct as hunters use new or different methods (e.g., hunting at night) and technologies (e.g., infrared vision), potentially at the expense of certain ethical principles (von Essen, 2019). Consequently, ethics have become a central concern for many Swedish hunting organisations, hunters and hunting lobbyists, both as they deal with internal challenges and as they communicate hunting to a non-hunting society. Here, we use official hunting course literature to contrast the taught ethical framework of hunting with the moral views and reason-

ings of our study participants. In the next section, we directly cite ethics-related subheadings from the coursebook, relating these to the main issues discussed by our study participants.

Hunting ethics—from page to practice

‘Gain and utilise knowledge about wildlife’

The course literature emphasises that increased knowledge about wildlife creates a better hunter but, most importantly, leads to a naturally acquired respect for all wildlife (Lindroth, 2019, p. 39).

In our conversations, those who were fairly new to hunting expressed that the hunting course opened them up to a new world of knowledge about wildlife behaviour and ecology. However, they analysed, critiqued and used knowledge with different outcomes. Personal values, morals and understanding were expressively used to judge sources of information. This was especially clear when young hunters in focus groups discussed their use of the Internet for sources on hunting. They applied their ideas of respect towards wildlife when judging the propriety of information material, as well as quality of information:

If I were to sit in the evening and watch a film whilst eating chips, then I would not exactly choose ‘20 best slo-mo hunting kill-shots’. I would choose someone who goes around and talks, and where I gain knowledge, that I want to watch, where I see he respects wildlife, that he is a hunter with knowledge so I can learn. (Focus Group 4)

Another participant voiced that she had viewed a teacher as a role model and kept contact with them after the course had ended, based on their shared values and perspectives on hunting and wildlife:

At the same time, he is very aware that one needs to manage [wildlife] correctly and well. Even when we spoke and asked him ‘Where is biodiversity included?’; and he was happy that we raised the question because it is often missed, at the Swedish Hunting Association as well. So he has been a bit of a role model actually. (Participant 15)

Several participants thus explicitly mentioned judging learning material and teachers as role models based on their own knowledge and values rather than accepting all the ‘teachings’ that they were exposed to during their hunting course. This was also exemplified by the following statement:

You can learn as much as you want from the Internet, but then you have to choose for yourself what you need and what you think sounds good. (Focus Group 3)

Students shared knowledge and went on peer-recommendation regarding which information and Youtube-type videos to watch online, weighing up opinions and taking it ‘with a pinch of salt’.

It is then that you have to look at what others are saying about it, you listen to some and hear their opinions. If all say it is good then it is good. If two say it is good and three that it is really bad, you have to listen to what others say. (Focus Group 5)

Another group expressed that the younger generation learned faster and more than previous generations due to their online access and habits. When questioned on whether they had adopted or tried any new methods they had seen online, participants in different groups said they had watched American hunting videos using lures to attract foxes and thus ordered and tried them out themselves successfully.

However, in the end, most, if not all, participants concurred that practical experience ‘in the forest’ was essential and could not be replaced by scholarly knowledge. This was expressly supported by some teachers who during interviews maintained that ‘you cannot teach ethics’ and that the hunting exam was a test to pass, while the actual education and ethics guidance were provided in hunting teams by more experienced peers.

...Of course, you sit and talk about it [hunting] during the hunting exam, that you will stalk quietly and the wind here and there, but it is not the same thing at all if you are going to do it for real, practically, that is what I think. (Focus Group 4)

Respect for wildlife, tied by Lindroth (2019) to having knowledge of the hunted species, was prominently mentioned in all of the focus groups; our study participants, however, did not relate respect to knowledge themselves. The term ‘respect’ was often used when discussing ethical conduct but only elaborated on by participants when they were specifically asked what they meant by showing respect for wildlife. Here, answers varied but several connected ‘respect’ to behaviour such as language and treatment of the animal after death (tasteful displays of the body or not wasting resources such as meat or fur).

Respect for wildlife, in death same as in life. (Focus Group 4)

Ethical views were evidently dynamic: Some students changed their ethical views or rather engaged in ‘ethical-trade-offs’ as they were exposed to new knowledge and being encultured into new hunting paradigms:

In my opinion, because it was not the hunting that I started with at all, but I can imagine that many think this way, they think it is wrong that we breed these ducks here for the slaughterhouse, the duck facility out here, and then we buy some and put them outside. Then these old men come here and pay for it, and then we shoot them. I thought that was wrong. That we breed animals to kill them. I am raised that we kill animals that we did not have to place out. (Focus Group 2)

In this case, other members of the same focus group agreed that the duck rear-and-release was a ‘difficult hunt to defend’. A counterargument, brought up by one of the participants, was that no other hunting form provided opportunities for as many stewardship initiatives as duck and pheasant hunting since the animals were bred and then released into an ecosystem specifically cultivated for their survival by the hunters. Following this ethical argumentation, these stewardship initiatives thus came to replace previous principles about not hunting animals bred only for hunting purposes.

‘Use modern technology correctly’

There was a time when a successful hunter was equivalent to a skilled hunter. Those two were near-identical. That is not necessarily true today and the difference compared to before is technology. (Lindroth, 2019, p. 41).

In the coursebook, this heading received a longer elaboration on the *misuse* of technology as well as negotiating technology in an effort to maintain principles such as ‘fair chase’ and ‘respect for wildlife’. Whilst the Internet and mobile phones are definitely affecting how young hunters learn about hunting and act in the field, as seen in the previous section, in the focus groups, technology was often discussed in the form of new developments or paraphernalia recently introduced to hunting. Technologies mentioned in particular were adjustable lighting, thermal and night vision scopes, which were legalised at the national level as recently as 2019 for hunting wild boar (Regeringskansliet, 2019).

It feels like, that, it feels like a videogame. It does not feel like a hunt when you look into it because it is pitch-black and then you check the scope and see a group of pigs. It simplifies reducing damage to fields and to come closer to the pigs and avoid using the lamp. But there are some mixed thoughts if it should be legal or not. (Focus Group 3)

Likening the view through night scopes to a videogame recurred also in other focus groups, which may indicate that this had been discussed amongst the participants prior to the focus group or that the night scope inspired the same apparently detached feeling of playing a video game. Participants expressed an ethical trade-off where the night scope appeared to have improved hunting wild boar and thus the control of crop damage, but there existed doubt as to whether ethical principles of hunting were upheld.

Other instances of technology use such as smartphone apps and global positioning system technology (GPS) evoked similar discussion. With regard to other technologies, participants often reflected that technology use should not impair the principles of ‘fair chase’ or giving wildlife a chance to escape. Young hunters were aware of their ways of negotiating these ethical challenges, especially when comparing themselves to ‘older hunters’, stating that they were more alert when using technology and knew when to put it away.

‘Shoot wisely and well’ and ‘Do not be careless with tracking injured game’

The coursebook highlights the importance of planning your shot and tracking not only large high-game species but the small game as well: ‘When you in silence wonder whether you yourself are a good hunter then there are few measurements that are better than how much energy you spend towards tracking injured small game and how often you succeed with it. Here true hunting ability and hunting ethics go hand in hand’ (Lindroth, 2019, p. 45).

Here, we combine these two headings as they both focus on the importance of taking responsibility for your shot. Injuring the game was a grave issue for participants. Pulling the trigger was

described as a highly charged moment, both with adrenaline but also with feelings whether the outcome was hit, miss or injure:

Injuring an animal is the worst there is. There is nothing worse, that feeling is not fun at all. (Focus Group 3)

Quite a few of the young hunters with some hunting experience had injured game at some point. Yet taking a 'safe shot' was one of those ethical principles no one would really challenge unless for the reason of felling already injured animals. Newly licensed hunters would approach shooting differently; during the field study, one newly examined female hunter whispered to the researcher that she had no intention to shoot during the hunt and was there for the experience. In this case, even the idea of shooting wildlife was contested, yet the person in question was still interested in hunting. During another hunt, it became apparent that people interpreted differently what was considered a 'safe shot'. A young hunter recalled an experience where she joined another hunter, and they had agreed that one should only shoot when confident and rather let an animal pass than risk injury. However, despite their prior agreement, during the hunt, the participant observed that the other hunter displayed bad judgement when shooting at a hare and, in her view, did actually take a risky shot.

Whilst our study participants had experiences of firing off bad shots at animals, they expressed great remorse when they admitted it. At the same time, they also saw it as part of the learning process—at some point, you will probably miscalculate and fire a bad shot. Teachers and team leaders would approach such events differently, on occasion deciding to end the hunt and sending the erring hunter away to train on a shooting range before being allowed back. The hunting teachers we interviewed also described how they would try to explain and analyse what had gone wrong. Neither teachers nor young students reported 'yelling' at or 'shaming' students who made mistakes. However, in practice, injuring game or missing a shot remained a case of some shame for the perpetrator since a hunt might have to be stopped and tracking commences, so whilst injuring game was often expressed as an emotionally painful event, its moral evaluation as 'wrong' was also enforced through peer influence and rule of law. At the same time, peer pressure could also lead to more rash shooting:

There is a bit of a macho attitude sometimes that you should shoot wild boar in any way possible, the first thing you do, and they are pretty hard to get a good shot at. (Participant 15)

Some participants had started hunting by shooting wild boar, and others were getting access to land through crop-protection hunts by killing wild boar and 'gaining a good reputation' locally. For some of our participants, the recent abundance of boar thus shaped the introduction into hunting in a way that differed from earlier generations, who started hunting by killing small game. Wild boar offers a different ethical context than in the past, as they require a Class 1 weapon, are considered 'high game' and can be easier to injure. One teacher lamented the treatment of wild boar by hunters and even professionals, classifying it as the biggest ethical issue Swedish hunting was facing today. With the abundance of wild boar and disrespectful behaviour towards them, he was concerned that bad hunting conduct was unwittingly taught to new hunters.

‘Be a good hunting colleague’ and ‘Safety’

Safety is highlighted as a fundamental concern that is discussed throughout the whole book. Unsafe practices are more than a ‘breach of etiquette’ (Lindroth, 2019, p. 48). Practising safety is also a sign of a trusted member of the team. Respect for hunting colleagues is discussed in the form of being generous about shooting opportunities and not being possessive about the game (Lindroth, 2019).

Safety was often mentioned as the foremost priority of many participants. Linked to discipline, good safety conduct was the hallmark of a good hunting colleague—and recklessness a significant warning sign. However, ethics was often discussed through bad examples (a phenomenon leading to ‘hunting cannibalism’, which is elaborated in the discussion). Critical comparisons happened on the individual as well as on national or cultural levels and appeared to be the base for why Swedish hunting was considered highly ethical by several participants:

Sweden is not like the US where they use semi-automatic weapons and just fire 30 shots on a group of pigs without aiming properly but just to hit them and ‘they need to go down’. But that could really happen in Sweden. (Focus Group 3)

Controversial film clips online provided material for some participants to illustrate unethical conduct. Nonetheless, critique of colleagues certainly happened also through anecdotes recounting instances of gender discrimination, unfamiliarity with hunting, age discrimination and intimidating or macho type behaviour:

The older people have less respect for women, [they say:] ‘What? But women don’t hunt!’ But younger people respect it [women hunting]. (Focus Group 3)

Female hunters were the ones who raised the issue about discrimination although macho behaviour was talked about by both males and females, often in reference as posturing and cavalier behaviour towards wildlife, sometimes displayed through the use of derogatory language applied to wildlife such as ‘devil-fox’ or ‘damned pigs’. Female participants expressed optimism with regard to an increase in female hunters. They attributed this increase to values and status around the growing interest in ethically sourced meat and self-sufficiency (a main reason for some of them), ‘an interest in nature’ and also to an introduction to hunting by friends and partners if they did not have a hunting family. Some female participants without a hunting background attributed much of their involvement with hunting to female colleagues who provided encouragement and support for learning.

Generational differences also came into question, as illustrated by the citation above, where generalisations can be cautiously drawn to say that gender discrimination was done by older males and posturing by younger males. However, considering that most hunters are male, this is no revelation. Younger hunters often grow up with more modern habits but expressed difficulty in disagreeing with older hunters. Some felt it was often futile to convince older hunters of the younger ones’ opinions and knowledge, citing their own youth and inexperience as a basis. Instead, there was an expressed desire by several participants, with and without a hunting background, to prove themselves, including their knowledge and ethics, worthy to older, experienced hunters.

DISCUSSION

In the midst of these cultural changes and societal pressures, young hunters navigated the moralities of hunting as they studied and trained to become legitimised or even professional hunters. While individual moral values are developed throughout life and in cultural situatedness when negotiating ethical frameworks, our analysis identified cases where there appeared to be a ‘false consensus’ and ‘trade-offs’ of ethical principles. These two types of cases illustrate underlying conflicts that exist between individual hunters as well as between individual ethics and formalised teachings, something that ethics deliberation between young and more experienced hunters could highlight and perhaps even solve. Below we elaborate on these.

False consensus

Participants often cited the same or similar ethical principles, but their approaches to, and support for, these principles varied. A way to interpret this is as a type of false consensus through superficial convergence, where similarly cited ethical principles are verbally rationalised or physically enacted in different ways—a ‘thin’ ethical principle (Walzer, 1994). An example from our data (‘Shoot Wisely and Well’ and ‘Do not be Careless with Tracking Injured Game’ section) illustrates the difference between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ principles: Two hunters agreed that harming an animal by not judging a shooting instant properly was unethical. However, their judgements of what constituted a well-judged shot diverged. Thick morality shapes behaviour all the way to the snap moment where individual decision-making and personal experience take charge (Dale, 2015). While people might tend to agree on a thin principle such as ‘respect for wildlife’, they might diverge in their thick interpretation of these, which are developed and embedded in cultural contexts.

Therefore, whereas environmental ethics have extolled the pragmatic and conflict-mitigating potentials of shallow or so-called convergent consensus that originates from different moral reasonings (see Norton, 1991), this hunting context demonstrates that such seeming consensus can also lead in the opposite direction. Instead of all roads leading to Rome, hunters use Rome (in the form of taken-for-granted deontologically framed proscriptions and prescriptions) as a point of departure and end up in various corners with quite different practical implications. The role of education and learning in navigating these roads, furthermore, is clearly underexamined in the intersection of environmental ethics and moral learning research.

Ethical trade-offs

Ethical trade-offs are often used as a type of ethical exercise (Kohlberg, 1986; Menzel & Wiek, 2009.). Here, we might see trade-offs where participants illustrated ethical stances or principles in hunting that were weighed against each other or a repositioning of moral values in order to accommodate new practices. The trading of ethical principles happens in different contexts, sometimes between competing for desirable considerations (Menzel & Wiek, 2009). Some trade-offs may be more acceptable than others depending on perspective. A common case of trade-off between principles in hunting is the negotiation of ‘fair chase’ versus ‘quick kill’, where efficient technology is assessed against an animal’s ability to escape the hunter, giving the animal a chance to escape

but also a sport for the hunter (Su & Cheon, 2017). In our study, an example of such a trade-off concerned the use of night vision scopes (infrared or thermal) on their rifles. Participants likened night vision to video games, and they described a type of disassociation from the reality of killing the animals, which appear as bright shapes in the scope. Hunting is often described as a game or sport (Morris, 2014; von Essen et al., 2020), and the filtering of wildlife with video-game type visuals alerts a 'step too far' as technology facilitates visual disassociation between the hunter and their quarry, one where hunters risk becoming simple 'shooters' since technology replaces skills (Brown & Cooper, 2006; Lindroth, 2019). However, the young hunters we spoke to were aware that, despite the disassociation and lack of fair chase brought on by the night vision scopes, they used them for the reason that they were recently legalised to curb the rapidly growing wild boar populations—which they felt compelled to manage. They were trading in one principle for another, in this case 'stewardship' in the form of population management trumping 'fair chase'.

Another case of ethical trade-off lay in the discussion around duck breeding ('Gain and Utilise Knowledge about Wildlife' section). Through socialisation into a group of duck hunters and exposure to duck breeding practices, rather than rejection, duck hunting became adopted as an acceptable part of the hunting repertoire, where the freedom of ducks was replaced with the extensive stewardship activities (including habitat management) needed for breeding and hunting them. Here, descriptive norms (i.e., observed, actual behaviour) seemed to have shaped the young hunter's own behaviour—and their ethical evaluation of duck hunting (Gino et al., 2009; Goldstein et al., 2008). In this case, the moral good of stewardship, needed to be able to hunt ducks, superseded the principle of only hunting ducks that hatched in the wild.

Discussing ethics—Towards co-constructing knowledge in hunting education

Our unpacking of false consensus and ethical trade-offs has shown how hunters may reach ethical decisions. The concepts of thick and thin morality add a somewhat hierarchical pattern to our analysis of ethical decision-making. Thin morality can be seen as universal across hunting groups and even outside of hunting communities. Distinct thin and imperative principles showcased in the results are that game populations must not be endangered, sound practices that do not risk harm to colleagues or wounding animals and the meat must be used—a moral idea shared by both hunters and non-hunters (Ljung et al., 2012). Breaking one of these thin principles would face disapproval and de-legitimise any hunting activity for a majority of people, hunters and non-hunters alike. Nevertheless, during a culturally complex situation such as a hunt, the enactment of these thin principles reveals the thick context surrounding them, a multitude of thick understandings and necessities that also guide behaviour. In the Results section, and hunting debates outside of this research, we see different thick moral interpretations of thin principles such as sound practice, avoiding the risk of harm to the animal, and what it means to manage wildlife populations without endangering them. Seeming agreement at the 'thin' level might, as a false consensus, conceal divergence in thick interpretations within hunting about what adhering to a thin principle requires. Fischer et al. (2013) found that certain motivations for hunting, such as excitement and fun, were only seen as ethically permissible if obligations at a higher moral level, such as stewardship, were met. This hierarchy model shows that also seemingly thin principles are being navigated in their context and, notably, in relation to each other. In this interpretation, moral evaluations, for example, of different motivations for hunting, are not necessarily competing or cancelling each other out, but the favourable evaluation of one principle might render the

unfavourable evaluation of another one acceptable (Fischer et al., 2013), a point illustrated also in relation to balancing leisure and labour in hunting (von Essen & Tickle 2020).

On another note, our findings suggest that young hunters lacked an arena to discuss the details of hunting ethics and to process the ethical implications of what they learned about hunting online. Here, a gap was created in the teaching of hunting ethics, filled instead with personal moral reasoning by the individual student. By exploring cases of false consensus and ethical trade-offs, we have illustrated that young hunters are facing challenges navigating ethical dilemmas and pressures. We also witnessed cases of what some hunters, including course literature, refer to as 'hunting cannibalism' where hunting groups criticising each other might lead to undermining hunting entirely as an ethically legitimate activity. Nevertheless, thin fundamental principles appeared to be respected across our participants and are shared by many other, hunting as well as non-hunting, communities. Currently, in formalised hunting education, ethics and ethical conduct within the hunting community are discussed using mainly prescriptive practical examples and comparisons. Understandably, it often proved challenging for participants to verbalise their moral values and thoughts clearly. This might be because some thoughts are taboo, participants lack enough confidence or opportunity to share them, or because hunting is steeped in thick cultural understandings of ethics that are hard to disentangle and put into words (Tomasello et al., 1993; Walzer, 1994).

As far as cultural change in any one subculture, such as hunting, is concerned, modernisation is not a linear process. Research into young hunters with traditional patriarchal and working-class hunting backgrounds in Norway show that many young hunters admire their fathers and ancestors and often *reject* modern trends (Borgen & Skogen, 2013) probably as a case of peer influence and community (Cushman et al., 2017; Gino et al., 2009; Goldstein et al., 2008; von Essen & Hansen, 2018). Other cases show that part of the moral learning of young hunters may be informed by selectively looking back on the past, perhaps cherry-picking from old traditions (as von Essen & Allen, 2018, show of Swedish hunters). At the same time, several of our focus group participants voiced that young hunters might be more accepting of new developments within hunting, such as women joining hunting teams, compared to some senior hunters. Although, we want to highlight that issues of discrimination or disagreement in hunting are not just a generational issue and can stem from many factors such as cultural differences or social group dynamics.

Importantly, there was a positive response and unanticipated enthusiasm for engaging in ethics discussions from especially newer and younger hunting students. The participants were able to morally argue at a post-conventional level (Kohlberg, 1986) when given the chance to discuss ethics on a broader and more philosophical scale, something our participants said was not often done in the classroom. There is value in pointing out the necessity of ethics discourse, not in the context of 'why things are right or wrong' but instead aim conversations at discussing 'how is it to be a hunter today?' The latter question opens up beyond the frame of standard teaching and socialisation practices and accommodates issues of modern development in a flexible manner beyond deontological ethical demands. More reflexive ethics discussions in classrooms and groups could exercise the moral muscle (Carr, 1996) and allow hunters to explore ethical reasonings.

Online and digital materials form a predictably large part of knowledge gathering today and often outside of the teaching curriculum of hunting. Teachers are still known to fall behind when it comes to integrating digital technology and games into their classes (Ashinoff, 2014; Prensky, 2003) and the traditional institution of hunting is no exception. Students consume hunting teachings from online forums other than those accredited by the Swedish Hunting Agencies. They will watch out of interest in their own times and even pick up new learning techniques from online materials. An interesting finding was that young hunters saw that their own morals, ethics and

personal values had a principal role to play in navigating and assessing online content. Here, decision-making in itself is a learning process (Bell, 2010) where we see participants make judgments based on their own knowledge, moral principles and peers. Since regulating the consumption of online materials is unfeasible, it is important to account for it as an increasingly important part of a person's repertoire in hunting education. It functions as both a tool and a repository of knowledge and, possibly, also as an arena or 'third space' in which ethics discourse can be held.

In the end, the origins of internal moral thought and action are still being discussed and have been 'since the inception of their fields' (Cushman et al., 2017, p. 8). Nevertheless, discussion about ethics could raise understanding between hunters as well as hunting groups, remedying any cases of 'hunting cannibalism' through misunderstandings as well as help hunters weed out practices they disagree with. Most importantly, ethics discussions with new and young students would facilitate a forum where they can deal with the dualities of being a member of modern society entering into the traditional institution of hunting.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [L.T.].

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