Introduction

Generally, studies on hunting and hunting cultures could be criticized for not having a cultural perspective. The existing research-based knowledge is to a large degree based on statistical information about hunters and game stock. The main goal has been to gather knowledge about people’s access to hunting, motives for participating in hunting, the economic outcome of hunting, and the hunter’s willingness to pay (Brotveit & Aagedal 1999). To a large degree, the analyses have had a (natural) scientific bias, and they have largely been motivated by business and management interests.

During recent years, hunting as a social phenomenon has emerged as a research issue, and based in the social sciences, there has been a growing interest for the social and cultural aspects of hunting. With this approach, the common meaning of hunting and the values and ideas of hunting are central issues. This change in focus has brought about a methodological shift, from quantitative methods to qualitative methods like interviews and participatory observation.

The Norwegian hunting tradition has for generations had its foundation grounded on a farming culture with relatively small farms. Unlike the English hunting tradition, the Norwegian hunting tradition has been a public tradition based on a harvesting principle. However, although this basis of harvesting from nature’s abundance still exists, there is an increasing tendency towards emphasizing the importance of other aspects in relation to hunting: recreation, excitement and fellowship. According to Vaagan (1996), there is also a rural-urban dimension in the elk hunter’s motivation for hunting: with rural hunters, the harvest yields are emphasized, while with urban hunters, the recreational aspect is emphasized. Nevertheless, pure trophy hunting is generally not accepted within the Norwegian hunting tradition (Brotveit & Aagedal 1999).

In many rural Norwegian wooded regions, elk hunting plays a central role in the shaping of the masculine rural identity. It is a symbol of and a ritual for important transitions in people’s lives, exemplified by expressions such as ‘too young to go hunting’, ‘elk confirmeé’, ‘hunter’, and ‘retired hunter’ (Brotveit & Aagedal 1999). Young men are gradually initiated into the male and generation community of the local society through participation in the elk hunting party. ‘Carrying a rifle’ represents the elk confirmeé’s first major initiation into the male community. Other major steps are bringing down ‘the first animal’ and ‘the first bull’. According to Birketveit (1999, 115), the hunter is not the same after bringing down his first animal – he has a different status, both inside and outside the context of hunting. In addition to the actual process of bringing down the animal, placing the shot and gutting the game, which is carefully assessed by the other hunters in the party, other aspects of the hunt are of paramount importance for the hunter’s honour. A particularly ugly wound (wounding an animal without bringing it down) or violating the party leader’s instructions may involve a loss of prestige, and in a worst case scenario, exclusion from the hunting party and even from the local community (Brotveit 1999).

Many perceive hunting as so sacred that nothing should interfere with it. Both official and personal activities must be adjusted and organized so that they do not conflict with the elk hunt (Holmleid Lohne 1996). In some male-dominated workplaces, work stops during the first days of the hunt season. Tone Magnusson’s (1996) study of rural district boys is a further demonstration of the importance of hunting in rural male identities. Her study shows that traditional masculine activities like hunting, outdoor life, tinkering with
engines, and ‘hard drinking’ have become increasingly important in the construction of male identity in rural areas when local boys cannot find work in their home town. In the arenas of the job market and public life where the local boys lose out to the local girls, traditional masculine leisure activities are the primary source for gender identity.

In a sense, hunting unifies the hunt participants. The battue is considered a social domain for the local community in which social bonds are created and strengthened across gender, generation and social status borders. The community values are strengthened through communal preparations before the hunt starts, in the long breaks during the hunt and during the banquet after the hunt. However, the battue may also be considered as excluding and marginalizing to those that are not interested in or cannot participate in the hunt. This can be equally valid for both women and men, but perhaps particularly pertinent to men that are new to the local community and whose male identity is not recognized and confirmed if they do not participate in the hunt (Myrstad 1999b). The reason why hunting has such a strong social position in the local community is connected to the fact that it is not limited to only a few weeks every autumn. The hunt preparations start in the early spring, and for dog owners, the hunt is a year-round engagement, as the dog needs training to become a good hunting dog. In other words – participation and interest in hunting is more or less a must for men who wish to live in local communities where most men participate in it.

However, there are several indications that the rural masculine identity is losing territory or changing character as a consequence of new groups of people entering into the hunting arena. Today, it is not only men in the local community that seek the traditional masculine arena in pursuit of excitement, identity and historical roots. For many urban men (and women), hunting has become a genuine engine, and ‘hard drinking’ have become increasingly important in the construction of male identity in rural areas when local boys cannot find work in their home town. In the arenas of the job market and public life where the local boys lose out to the local girls, traditional masculine leisure activities are the primary source for gender identity.

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talk about their choices, and to share their ideas and attitudes and opinions are shaped. The men were invited to shaped their personal, daily routines, and of how their men's lives, and how these episodes have become part of and lifestyle interviews was to identify everyday episodes in the years that have lived in a forested mountainous region in

The empirical basis for this article is taken from in-depth hunt and hunting culture

Methodological approach to the study of individual’s possibilities for creating their own individual spaces.

Masculinity and rurality at play in stories about hunting

The interest in gender and gendered meanings suggests that the methodological interest is directed towards the social structures and cultural discourses that people are part of, and towards the social practices and personal meanings that they create (Haavind 2000). Therefore, I focus on material that incorporates descriptions of chains of action, individual practices, and considerations and interpretations of practices. Davies (1993) introduced the concept of ‘storylines’ about chains of action where the identity of the categories develops through including and excluding discursive movements. According to Søndergaard (2000, 77), storylines are a product of a naturalized and inevitable cultural story which constitutes a frame of interpretation for one’s own and other’s actions and chains of actions. A study of the storylines of hunting culture increases the processes of inclusion and exclusion connected to the constitution of categories such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the actions, positions and interpretations that are connected to these processes. On the one hand, we may say that storylines are collective. On the other hand, we may say that they are carried and recreated through the constant development of self-narrations of the involved actors (Søndergaard 2000). In the following, I will examine how personal storylines are constructed in relation to the collectively constituted storylines about the commercialization of the hunt and of female hunters. Another focal issue is the implications the collective storylines have on the individuals’ possibilities for creating their own individual spaces.

Methodological approach to the study of hunt and hunting culture

The empirical basis for this article is taken from in-depth interviews with 10 young men in the age group of 23–28 years that have lived in a forested mountainous region in Mid-Norway for the whole of their lives. The purpose of the lifestyle interviews was to identify everyday episodes in the men’s lives, and how these episodes have become part of and shaped their personal, daily routines, and of how their attitudes and opinions are shaped. The men were invited to talk about their choices, and to share their ideas and experiences about life. One very positive aspect of using conversations as an interview method is that it provides an inter-subjective focus on the narrator as a participant in events that have been of special significance for the person. Furthermore, it gives the researcher an opportunity to identify gendered meanings without having to ask directly what gender means (Haavind 2000).

The choice of study area was based on a wish to capture the local men’s relation to the local culture and the hunting culture. Therefore, it was important to find a study area with an active hunter environment which also was regarded as attractive by other hunters. Among people with an interest in hunting and fishing, the study area is known for having many woodland birds, a solid elk stock, and great fishing lakes. Each year, 350 elk and thousands of small game are caught in this region. The municipality also heads the hunting statistics with regards to both female and male hunters. At a county level, an average of 20.8% of the male population and 1.4% of the female population are hunters, compared to a national level of 10.5% male hunters and 0.5% female hunters (Jegerregisteret 2001).

Knowledge about hunting is, in many ways, an embodied and unspoken knowledge (Brottvøit & Aagedal 1999). This knowledge is often passed on from father to son through practice, and it is reinforced and confirmed through the hunter’s participation in a hunting party. For this reason, extracting the meaning of hunting is not necessarily a simple matter, and researchers who have studied hunting culture have often used both interviews and participatory observation as a method (Brottvøit & Aagedal 1999, Sande 1999). Although this study is mainly based on interviews, I have also benefited from my previous experiences as a ‘sherpa’ during small game and big game hunts. By participating in the different phases of the hunt, I have acquired knowledge about the hunt and the hunting culture. I have taken part in training and shooting, and experienced futile hunting days consisting of waiting, long coffee breaks and hunting talk. I have experienced the adrenalin boost when a shot is fired, and I have seen how the animals have fought their final battle and how the trembling excitement of the hunter gradually gets transformed into satisfaction and tranquillity. But I have also seen the dark side of hunting, searching for game that has been shot and wounded. These experiences have been very useful, especially for understanding the embodied knowledge that is part of the hunt. In addition, the experiences have enabled me to better interpret the men’s statements concerning hunting culture.

All interview subjects put special emphasis on their interest for hunting and outdoor activities, and thus the interview material has provided a basis for regarding the young men’s hunting stories as an expression of gendered practices and values. I have particularly observed the rural men’s reflection of themselves as gender in relation to commercialization and equality for the sexes. However, these stories should not be regarded as ‘individual’ in the sense that they are established independently of social and cultural belonging. The stories reflect the men’s individual experiences, but they are also created within a local culture and a local system of norms. It could be said that the men’s hunting stories are collective, historically conditioned ideas,
and that they are important sources for cultural patterns through the views that they convey. They say something about how the individual relates to his or her social and cultural environment by demonstrating the collective discourses and practices that are available to young men and, in addition, how the rural hunters understand, apply and shape these collective conditions.

Young rural men’s stories and ideas about hunting

All my informants had gone hunting with their fathers when they were little, and all had participated in both small game and big game hunting. Most of them also had access to private hunting grounds and were affiliated with one or several hunting parties. In order to give a deeper understanding of the role of hunting in the construction of the rural masculine identity in the hunting community, I provide a longer excerpt from one of the conversations that I had with the young hunters. The selection is representative of the young men’s ideas about the role of hunting:

I can see that you’re a passionate hunter [referring to the stuffed lynx on top of Tore’s television set]. Yes, I hunt for lynx, elk and hare. Does your partner take part in the hunting, too? No. She really wants to, but it hasn’t happened yet. Perhaps she hasn’t been used to hunting in her childhood? Oh yes, she has. She has two brothers and a father that hunt. How do you feel about her joining you for the hunt? I wouldn’t mind. It would be fun [the latter sentence is uttered with slightly more enthusiasm]. Are there any women in the elk hunting party? No, there are no women in the hunting party, but I think that her being part of it would be OK. It is not completely macho . . . The competition between the hunting parties here is fierce. But it’s mostly for fun. If anyone does not catch any game, or shoots the wrong animal, they certainly will hear about it. But nothing beyond that . . . What happens if an animal is shot and wounded? Well, we tend to keep a low profile on it. Can you joke about it? Yes, I guess we can joke about it. But I do not find it worse to joke about these things than other things, because it doesn’t make it any better or worse. If an animal is shot and wounded, we start a thorough search for the animal, using a tracking dog. I have shot and wounded [Hah, hah – hem]. That was a really bad start . . . What does the competition between the hunting parties consist of? It consists of there being different theories about the best hunting method. We use an unleashed dog and we think that is the best. Others think that it is just nonsense. It’s not exactly competition – at parties we even discuss which is the most effective method. Are there many hunting discussions? Rumour says there are, and during the hunt there is clearly a lot of talking about the hunt, but it is not that bad . . . This area is infamous for being all about hunting, snowmobiles and moonshine, but there are many other things here as well . . . Do you know anyone who doesn’t hunt? Now I have to think . . . In my circle of friends I guess everybody hunts! Yes . . . Of course, the girls sometimes feel that there is too much talk about hunting, but it works both ways. They are interested in curtains, and that is not something that we boys can have any opinions about . . . Aren’t you concerned about which curtains you have in your living room? Well, of course we may have opinions about such things also, but then all the guys must take part of the discussion. Otherwise it becomes a bit stupid . . . We men most often discuss hunting, machines, and work. How do you think it feels to be a boy and not being interested in hunting? If you do not have any interest in hunting then you probably don’t have anyone to talk to – but people who do not hunt join in on trips to cabins, anyhow. And if they don’t like hunting, they still like partying! [laugh]. Do you feel that there is a certain pressure on you as a man to hunt? No, I have never felt forced to go hunting. It’s mostly related to my own personal interest. (Tore)

As is shown in the conversation with Tore, the hunt has a special position in the life of the young men. It is their main occupation and an ever-recurring topic. In this context, we can only imagine how it is for a young man to not be able to take part in this conversation because he has not participated in the hunting and because he does not find it particularly interesting to discuss different guns and trajectories. The interview also shows that girls sometimes feel that there is too much talk about hunting, and in such situations they come together to talk about ‘more feminine’ matters. However, men have to be careful not to get too involved in topics in hunting. The presence of other men, who control and sanction men who do not abide by the cultural codes of the rural masculinity.

In the following I examine how ideas about place and gender identities are constructed, recreated and transformed in the young men’s stories about hunting. The issue of stability and change in the rural masculine identity is examined in light of firstly, the stories about commercialization of hunting and secondly, the stories about ‘girls and hunting’. In a sense, the two accounts represent two hegemonic stories about hunting in the local hunting culture, and provide an understanding of gendered social practices and the individual beliefs and attitudes that the young men create and are a part of.

Commercialization of hunting

Agriculture as a livelihood has become increasingly marginalized over the past few decades, and this has forced both farmers and politicians to consider alternative sources of income for the farming population. One possible option is to commercialize the local game and fishing resources. In Storting Report no. 19 (1999), Norwegian Agriculture and Food Production, it is stated that the fish and game resources may have a huge commercial impact on the landowners and the local community. However, hunting as a potential for business development has not yet involved any extensive commercialization, and this idleness must be seen in connection with the cultural and social norms of the local societies. Among other things, institutional conditions in the local community may hinder commercialization of big game hunting because of conflicts of interests between individual and collective perspectives (Rønningen et al. 2001, Hovland 2002). There are also several good indications that this is connected to the rural masculine project:

What are your opinions on the commercialization of hunting? I am not aware of many who express grave concern about selling hunting licenses, but I think about this occasionally myself. I think ‘what the heck am I doing’. Am I about to sell out my interests? This autumn we had visiting hunters staying at our cabin for seven days. They
Bård’s story represents two main accounts. Firstly, he expresses concerns that the market will be aimed at city dwellers and foreigners and that this development will lead to the exclusion of the local hunters. Secondly, he refers to the potential benefits of commercialization, and in this context the hunting resources are regarded to be sufficient. In many rural societies, the first story seems to be the dominating one, and in a neighbouring local community, the young men have initiated a protest against some investors’ quest for external hunters that are willing to pay for hunting licences. They claim the hunting tourism raises the prices for participating in the hunt, and thus lowers the accessibility for the local people. In a time where the role of hunting seems to be of special importance to the process of self-realization among young men in rural areas (Magnussen 1996), commercializing the hunting seems paradoxical. According to the young men themselves, their interest in the hunt is an important reason for living in the rural district, and for many people the interest in hunting and outdoor activities is more important than a steady full-time job and high wages (Skogen 2001). Homland (1999) is also critical of an extensive commercialization of the hunting, as he holds that the hunt represents an important social meeting place for rural districts that are facing economic hardships. Another concern in relation to increased hunting tourism in rural areas is that this development may strengthen the impression of rural districts as playgrounds for masochism (Ronningen 2003). Instead of a society struggling for increased gender equality, one may envision a rural society where women do the cooking and cleaning, because within the modern hunting tourism and modern outdoor activities, the urban hunter often needs lodging and other services. 

Considering the future development of rural districts, there are several indications that the landownership structure will change in the coming years, and this may increase the conflict level in relation to the management of local hunting and fishing resources. The Norwegian Centre for Rural Research has predicted that the number of farming units will decrease by 50% during the coming 10–15 years (R. Almås, unpublished data, B. E. Flø, unpublished data). This development will probably lead to a new landownership structure in rural areas, in which unclaimed land will be bought by large-scale farmers in the district or by a new service class which will settle in rural areas. In many countries in South Europe there is a counter-urbanization of the rural areas which involves new power structures in rural communities (Boyle & Halfacree 1998, Ilbery 1998). Even though there is no extensive and permanent urban-rural movement in Norway today, there is still an increasing trend that the well-educated and well-off middle classes wish to settle in the rural districts (Berg 2001). Generally, the new group of settlers neither have any experience of living in rural areas, nor do they want to work the land. Their movement is to a large degree motivated by the idea of the ‘pastoral idyll’. They move to fulfill their dream of the good life in the countryside, with more time to themselves and their families – fresh, clean air and closeness to nature (Berg 2001).

Like other stories about the men of the forests (Johansson 1994, Brandth & Haugen 2000, Kaldal 2000), stories about the hunter involve gendered notions of rurality and masculinity. The following quote expresses the uniqueness of the rural hunter in representing a unique lifestyle. My question to the interview subject concerned who exactly the guest hunter was:

In addition to the big shots, both locals and from out of town, there are the urban boy’s clubs. The classical boy’s club has a fairly substantial income, and in a way it is ‘fashionable’ to spend money on hunting. Then they are boys again [expressed in a certain sarcastic tone]. The boy’s club in the age 25–35 are fairly all right, because they often want lodging as well. And in general they are not very experienced hunters, which means that they do not overtax the wild game. Yes, they are an OK bunch because we make a fair amount of money from them . . . Coming here to hunt is kind of cool for them. This is obvious from their clothing. Most of them wear high-class and extremely expensive clothes . . . . And I don’t buy those types of clothes; they are much too expensive, and I hunt an awful lot. But people who only hunt once every year spend a lot of money doing it. . . . But we are happy to have them here. (Bård)

In this quote, a distinction is made between ‘the vain and incompetent hunter from the city’ and ‘the proud and patient rural hunter’. The two accounts can be labelled ‘the rural hunter’s story about the urban hunter’ and ‘the rural hunter’s story about the rural hunter’. It is obvious that part of Bård’s project is distancing himself from the urban hunter. The urban hunter stands for ‘the other’ – represented by ‘the big shots’ and ‘the urban boy’s club’. They are referred to as big shots with little knowledge about hunting; they are from the city and apparently everything has been just handed to them. They use expensive Gore-Tex clothing and have expensive cars. In addition, they spend a lot of money to go hunting and be ‘real men’ one week every autumn. The other story is the rural hunter’s story about himself. This is the story about the patient and proud, hard-working man who does not spend much money on hunting accessories and who goes hunting every weekend. Stories about the hard-working man are known from accounts of forest workers (Halberg 1993, Johansson 1994, Kaldal 2000) and the ideals of hard work and moderation of the farming culture (Thorsen 1993). For the rural hunter, the hunt is not only about friendship and excitement; it is equally about the masculine pride connected to the many long, cold and toilsome days in the forest and in the mountains. It is about appreciating ‘the real thing’ and not being caught in the modern ideal of material values. Comparing the two stories, we see that the rural men strengthen the local identity and the collective ‘we’ feeling through the stories of the ‘Gore-Tex hunter’ and ‘the proud toiler’. They emerge from accounts of ‘us/we’ and ‘the
others’, where ‘the others’ refers to the urban upper-class hunters or the urban boy’s club. In this context, the local men tend to ridicule the urban men’s sudden interest in hunting, and their inclination to dress up for outdoor activities. As a result of a fear of extensive commercialization it is emphasized that the urban hunter does not possess the necessary knowledge about and respect for the wild game:

They come to the countryside and show off their expensive liquor and fancy gear, and they show little respect for the wild game. They’ll shoot all the grouse chicks in one brood if they get the chance. (Knut)

According to the rural men, a certain macho culture (in the negative sense) prevails among urban hunters. While local hunters are more concerned about securing next year’s hunt, the number of grouse caught is more important for the ‘paying hunter’. Rampant and uncontrolled behaviour is associated with urban masculinity. In other words, the story of the local hunters is based on a disassociation with ‘the urban gender’, and in a sense the urban hunter emerging from the story adds a positive value to the rural masculine identity. Seen in this light, the notion of an ‘unrefined’ rural masculinity is turned upside-down; the local men are regarded as reliable and stable and civilized, while the urban hunters are presented as being materialistic and inconsiderate. In a sense, the internalization of the modest and proud hunter in the rural culture opens up for a positive self-assessment, in contrast to the prevailing view of a rural society on the decline and the rural man as a loser in society. In other words, developing the utilization and use of hunting resources leads to an expansion of rural masculinity.

Women hunting

In 1989, female hunters became an issue on the agenda of the Norwegian Association of Hunters and Anglers (NJFF), and although this did not immediately result in an increased number of female hunters, there are several good indications that women’s interest in hunting is on the increase. Statistics from the Jegerregisteret (Norwegian Register of Hunters) (2001) show that the proportion of women among first time hunters has increased from 16% to 23% over the last five years. One of the reasons why there still are relatively few female hunters (just below 5%) is that women’s entry to the hunt has been limited because girls have neither been encouraged nor trained to hunt (Myrstad 1999a). Women’s access to hunting has also been limited indirectly by the old allodial system, by which daughters were not entitled to land hunting rights (Bye 2000).

A recent tendency is that women are introduced to hunting because they are dating a hunter, and the men express a certain pride over the fact that ‘their women’ take part in typical male activities. In the study area, many women hunt and drive snowmobiles, and some have also adopted other typically masculine habits like using snuff. However, in spite of women’s efforts and adjustments to the rural masculinity there is still a significant difference with regards to participating in the hunt:

After joining me for the elk hunt, my live-in partner took the hunting licence test. I shot a 20-point bull that day, and she was more excited than I was [Ha, Ha]. She was down by the elk taking photos before I could even remove my backpack. Is she a member of the elk hunting party? She hasn’t joined in on the elk hunt since then, and she has never taken down an animal. She has joined me for bird hunting a couple of times, but you know, there are several other girls that hunt and she prefers to go with them. She says I run too fast and that she can’t keep up with me. . . . And then it becomes a different thing, you know. It only causes stress! So you mainly go hunting with your mates? Yes, we’re usually a bunch of guys hunting together. It is great when the girls join in, and we do show consideration, but when the guys go for longer hunting trips the girls don’t want to come. They aren’t all that happy being in a cabin with a bunch of other men for several days. I guess they feel that there is too much talk about hunting, and when we’re in the cabin we have to have karstk in the evenings. (Olav)

Olav suggests that he is a skilled hunter. A bull with 20-point antlers is not lightweight. In a ‘modest’ tone he also speaks about his girlfriend’s enthusiasm and pride the first time she participated in the elk hunt. Olav’s girlfriend does not join the hunt very often, and according to Olav this is because of the long days and the high pace. It is worth noting that the hunt is described as hard physical labour, where physical endurance and good condition is important. Furthermore, he establishes strong connections between masculinity and rurality in that the hunt involves a strong male comradeship, as the men come together and drink karstk in the evenings. The male hunt is presented as a symbol of freedom because men can hunt at their own pace without having to show any special considerations for the women; they can talk freely about hunting and get drunk without worrying about others or what they think. When Olav says that men show a special concern for women participating in the hunt, he makes an implicit statement that these ‘joint hunting trips’ are of a different character than when only ‘guys’ go, and that the joint trips in some ways place restrictions on the men.

Adding to the fact that the rural men’s stories involve a certain distancing from ‘the urban gender’, we can also identify a certain protection of the masculine sphere. Going hunting with their mates is an arena for nurturing ‘the masculine freedom’, and they protect ‘the masculine hunting space’ by telling stories about physically challenging trips, one-tracked conversations, and alcohol. These accounts imply that there is perhaps also the fear of losing the space where ‘a man can be a man’ in the company of other men. This point is further underlined in Ståle’s taciturn account of women and hunting:

How did you become interested in hunting? I guess I got that interest from my dad. I’ve gone hunting with my dad since I was little. How about your sisters? No, they’ve never been hunting, and I’ve never heard them express any interest in hunting, either. But there seems to be an increasing interest in hunting among girls. How do you feel about girls being interested in hunting? Well, I think it is fine that the girls want to join, but it is OK to keep some things to oneself, also. When we go grouse hunting it’s more like a holiday trip with our friends. Are there any women in the elk hunting party? There used to be. Two women were members of the party for two years, and then they disappeared. I don’t know why they quit . . . (Ståle)

It is clear from the interview that Ståle regards the female elk hunter as a fairly volatile member of the hunting party, and this suggests that it may be difficult for female elk hunters to become included in the hunting party. In many ways, they represent a deviation from what is considered natural, and
they challenge the meaning and coupling of rurality and masculinity. When women enter into men’s territory, men have to find strategies that create a distance from femininity. Within agriculture this is seen in the fact that technology and use of machines has remained men’s responsibility (Brandth 1995). In relation to hunting, young men seem to be very happy when their girlfriends express interest in hunting as long as their interest does not compete with or threaten the male community.

A fundamental idea within recent feminist geography studies is the notion of ‘gendered places’ (see Rose 1993, Massey 1994, McDowell 1999). In this context, gendered places are seen as an expression of men and women establishing their own spaces and spheres where they can nurture their interests and create their gender identity. The notion of hunting as a gendered practice becomes clearer if we make a distinction between different forms of hunting. First, there is the collective hunt in which several hunters collaborate to take down an animal, and where all new hunters go through an evaluation before they are accepted by the other members of the hunting party. Second, there is the individual hunt which does not presuppose that several hunters must participate in order to take down an animal. The elk hunt is a collective hunt, while small game hunting (e.g. for grouse and deer) is an example of an individual hunt. When men give enthusiastic reports about women and hunting, it is always with reference to individual hunts. Presumably it is easier to go hunting with one’s girlfriend during the individual hunt than during the collective hunt, precisely because one avoids the scrutinizing looks from the other members of the hunting community. During the grouse hunt or the deer hunt, couples can hunt together without having to face the stares of other people, and according to the masculine norm, hunting is for real men with hair on their chests. In other words, by adopting a spatial strategy, the young local men exclude women from certain contexts, and thus they avoid the potential threat that female hunters represent to men’s notions of masculinity.

In many ways, the elk hunt holds a special position, as it is not necessarily a hunt for close friends. During the elk hunt, neighbours meet to take down a certain number of allocated animals within a restricted hunting area. Because the size of the estate of Norwegian farms is fairly small, several farmers must go together to make a jaktvald. Against this background, the hunt is obviously not only about a community or team spirit; it also involves elements of power and hierarchical order (Brottveit & Aagedal 1999). The hunting parties often include three generations of men, and therefore it is also conceivable that it is fairly difficult to be a big game hunter as a woman. It is an arena where hidebound opinions prevail, for example, that the forest is not a place for women. It is feasible that the reason why female hunters rarely remain in the hunting party is related to the fact that as big game hunters, women are ridiculed and treated as invisible (Bye 2000). In hunting photos we often see that women are deprived of all exterior marks of the hunter, for example by their weapons being hidden. In addition, feature material of a more amusing character is often made of women’s hunting performances. In the hunting magazine Jakt & Fiske (1998, my emphasis) it says: ‘A one hundred kilogram red deer stag fell to Ragnhild Wangen Trosse in Hardanger’. To the extent that female big game hunters achieve recognition and respect among men, this seems to rely on whether they behave like a man socially. Female hunters have to follow the masculine discourse, in which hunting skills are measured by the number of animals killed, in addition to the size of the animal and the antlers. Also, they must comply with the masculine values of freedom and show that they are second to none in relation to drinking the traditional schnapps or the ice-cold beer after the hunting (Bye 2000).

To sum up, the major difference between the individual and the collective hunt is that whereas the individual hunt is founded on close relationships, the collective hunt is more an issue of practical solutions. Adding to this that the individual hunt also appears as a safer hunt, it is no surprise that the gender changes are more prominent within this hunt.

Constituting rurality

Over the past years, there has been an increase in the number of new hunters, and as a consequence of this, the rural man has experienced increased competition from outside the local community – he no longer has sovereignty over his hunting territory. The growing hunting interest has resulted in an increased pressure on hunting resources. In connection with this, the local hunter is afraid of losing his position and the freedom and space to act. He fears that the pressure on the resources may become too overwhelming and hinder his own hunting possibilities. In this article I have focused on how young men in the rural districts present themselves as men when the idea of ‘the rural masculinity’ is challenged. The primary aim has been to understand the men’s statements and practices in relation to the cultural code.

The biggest challenge is found in relation to men who seek rural areas in a quest for their historical roots and their gender identity in modern day society (Sande 1999); however, the rural masculinity is also challenged by the local women who want to participate in the hunt. Urban men are characterized as ‘the other’ in the sense that they represent the foreign substance in the rural environment. They are described as ‘extravagant’ and ‘self-centred’, and they are categorized as macho because they do not show any respect for the wild game and nature management. Moreover, the general opinion is that this group does not possess the necessary local knowledge to become good hunters. When the rural man is represented as the counterpart of the urban man, the rural masculinity is constituted and upgraded: the rural men become the epitome of the strapping and balanced man. They also represent realness and authenticity, because hunting for them is not only a hobby, but also a way of life.

In relation to the female hunter, the rural masculinity is redefined and opened up. Men invite women to actively take part in their activities by introducing the women to the values and pleasures of hunting. By doing this, they unlock an area which for generations has been considered exclusively male. However, although they unveil part of the masculine secret, they are also careful to keep their gendered spaces. Women are welcome to participate, but they must do so within the terms and conditions set by the men. Men organize and
manage everything by separating hunting trips for couples and hunting trips for just boys. The couples’ trips take place within the individual hunt, and either one goes with one’s partner or along with other couples. The ‘just boys’ trips take place both within the individual and the collective hunt, but these trips are presented as more physically challenging, involving biased conversations and (hard) drinking.

The stories about the urban hunter and the female hunter contradict one another, as one serves to further reinforce the traditional rural masculinity, while the other opens it up for redefinition. This may be regarded as a consequence of urban masculinity being considered as a larger threat to rural masculinity than rural femininity, and thus it also challenges the rural masculinity more. The need to assert one’s position is stronger in relation to urbanity than femininity, and the activity of hunting is more an issue of constituting rurality than of constituting masculinity. Or, put differently, hunting is a stronger expression of rural identity.

The stories about the local hunter represent a cultural code for the gendered rural district man. The social practices of the rural district man must therefore be seen in relation to the cultural context he operates within. Moreover, the cultural gender code is not repeated in a monotonous manner (Butler 1990, 1993), and in this context, the men are able make the gender distinctions less rigid, placing more emphasis on rurality than masculinity. This is a rare tendency which is not found in many other areas. In work life, the opposite tendency is seen: when women enter into arenas with masculine connotations, masculinity is reinforced. For example, within agriculture and forestry, the tendency is that masculinity is becoming increasingly technological and professionalized (Brandth 1995, Brandth & Haugen 2000). It is highly likely that the reason why urbanity becomes more significant than masculinity is connected to the fact that rurality (the hunting arena) is put under pressure by external forces, as men without the rural identity enter into the hunting arena.

What novel insights into men and masculinity can we expect to achieve when women enter into the hunting arena? In a historical perspective, we see that men adopt new ways of expressing differences by implementing new technology and to a larger extent becoming involved with selling hunting licences. This scenario represents one possible development; however, another possible development is towards a more feminine way of expressing differences by implementing new technology in a historical perspective, we see that men adopt new ways of expressing differences by implementing new technology and to a larger extent becoming involved with selling hunting licences. This scenario represents one possible development; however, another possible development is towards a more feminine way of expressing differences by implementing new technology and to a larger extent becoming involved with selling hunting licences. This scenario represents one possible development;

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