

# Social Representations of the Wolf: A core of common understanding



Helene Figari

# Research questions:

- What are lay people's conceptions of the wolf? What *representations* of the wolf do exist?
- Do people who express positive or negative views about the presence of wolves also think differently about wolves?

# Why social representations of the wolf?

## *Previous studies:*

- Polarized attitudes as a starting point.
  - Seeks to *explain* reasons for the conflict.
- Socio-economical background
  - Life values and orientations
  - Different interpretations of wild animals

# Theory and concept of social representations

## Serge Moscovici:

- Common ideas and interpretations of the social and physical environment
- Lay knowledge, common sense, collective intersubjectivity
- Levels of representations: From consensual and implicit ideas to antagonistic point of views.

## *Social representations as a tool instead of attitudes:*

- *what* people think about the wolf, rather than *why* some declare themselves to be “pro” wolf and other to be wolf adversaries
- Reveals shared aspect of social thought as well conceptual antagonisms

# Focus groups

## Who?

- Focus groups selected from two communities in the eastern part of Norway
- Segmented groups representing each side of the conflict: farmers, hunters, conservationists
- Mixed groups – not selected according to position in the LC debate: dog sled racers, hikers, neighbour groups

## How?

- Descriptions of the wolf – it's nature and behavior
- How to reach a level of consensus? Watching and listening to interaction

# Shared representations of the wolf

- Despite the controversies, wolf adversaries and wolf supporters share basic conceptions of the phenomenon "wolf".
- Independent of their positioning in the conflict, the informants perceive the wolf as:
  - Superior
  - Social
  - Wild
  - Pure

# Representations in conflict

Disagreement is to a large extent due to antagonistic representations of the physical environment, as well as the people and animals that inhabit them:

- People: Threatening or Threatened?
- Animal life: Rich or Scarce? Robust or Vulnerable?
- Landscape: Wilderness or Productive areas?

*“Once, we were tracking two wolves, following their footprints. And then, apparently, one of them had stopped, standing still on his post. We could see that he had been standing there for quite long – waiting – while the other one had went on and then chased a deer right up to where the first one was standing still, waiting. Then [the first wolf] had brought down that deer, from which they had eaten every little bit, except the horns and the scull. That’s all that was left. I think... I was so impressed when I saw how they had been working. Just to see that this was really someone who knew how things should be done [...].”*

(Neighbour group I)



*Interviewer 1: If you should describe the wolf, how would you characterize that animal?*

*A: Social.*

*B: Intelligent.*

*Interviewer 2: How... can you expand on that?*

*B: Intelligent? Well, at least it has a social intelligence. It's a gregarious animal, after all, and it's capable of making... well, strategies while hunting.*

*(Conservationist group)*

*“That’s the most dangerous wolf of all, if there’s a dog mixed with it! It will have the properties of a wild animal, but it lacks its natural shyness of people. That’s definitely the most dangerous sort.”*

(Hunter group I)

*“To experience something so authentic, in this society of ours – to me, that’s incredible... it’s of vital necessity! Everything is becoming so artificial. Things keeps disappearing and disappearing. So to be able to go into and be in touch with something so... it must have been like that for an eternity! You can sit down and feel (...) the silence, the calm; but to me, it’s also an experience that reaches far beyond that. It’s something that simply makes you feel at home on earth... as opposed to what I can feel elsewhere.”*

(Neighbour group II)

*“(...) What scares me about the large carnivores is that the land will not be used. Then it'll just become overgrown, and we'll have the forest right up to [us]. That's exactly what we don't want. We want it to be an open landscape, (...) in use.”*

(Farmer group II)