



Ctrl+Alt+Delete in the name of COVID-19: When a reset leads to misrecognition[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Identity
Trust
Recognition
Reset
Sustainability
System theory

ABSTRACT

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in March 2020, it impacted all areas of society. Most conspicuous were the lockdowns that were quickly imposed in many countries along with other restrictions. These interventions into the everyday life of ordinary citizens were, perhaps not surprisingly, often met with resistance by citizens and businesses that felt their rights were being trampled on by governments. In this paper, we analyse reactions towards the far-reaching measures taken by the Danish government to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the fur industry and thereby prevent the development of new mutations of the virus: to cull all minks and temporarily ban mink production in Denmark. We argue that by studying this case, valuable lessons can be learned regarding how a business community reacts when faced with a great reset. Taking the current climate crisis into consideration, it must be expected that emission-heavy industries, like agriculture, will be faced with calls to radically change their mode of production in the near future. In this sense, we propose to view the Danish mink case as an early example of what a great reset could look like, how it is perceived by those who experience it first-hand, and how feelings of resentment and resistance can develop following a logic of (mis)recognition.

1. Introduction

Many observers agree that contemporary society is in dire need of a reset (Roth, 2021). The productivist logic of industrialism appears to have not only produced enormous benefits to mankind, but also an increasing number of negative externalities that potentially threaten life as we know it. Perhaps the most severe of these externalities is the emission of greenhouse gases which has contributed to the current climate crisis. These gases are emitted by all industries, but agriculture, forestry and other land use account for a stunning 24% of total emissions (IPCC, 2014). To counter the climate crisis by reducing emissions from agriculture will require a total reset of many farming practises. However, the climate crisis is not the only crisis which agriculture must deal with. Animal welfare, loss of biodiversity and zoonoses also pose significant challenges to the current farming regime. The fear of a zoonosis became a particularly relevant concern during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the corona virus not only suspected to have emerged from bats, but also feared to be given optimal conditions to mutate in an environment of industrial animal husbandry, something that could potentially render

the vaccines then in development less effective (SSI, 2021). In fact, in late summer 2020 a COVID-19 mutation with origins in Danish mink production was found. Within weeks, this caused the Danish government to order the culling of all 17 million minks held by the Danish fur industry and to place a temporary ban on all mink production until the end of 2022, effectively dooming industrial mink production in Denmark. This was a sudden and unprecedented reset of an entire industry, which only a few years ago was widely heralded as an important source of export earnings.

Against this backdrop, this article provides a study of how the reset in the mink industry was perceived by mink farmers and the broader agricultural community in Denmark. The study is centred in the eye of the storm and thereby provides a unique opportunity to study the immediate reaction towards a reset. We focus on how meaning (Luhmann, 1984/1995, 1997ab) is created when farmers decide on a specific form of contingent reaction. Whenever a social struggle is initiated, it must be decided which social grammar should code the struggle. In contemporary, functionally differentiated society (Luhmann, 1997), farmers could therefore have followed an economic, political or legal coded reaction

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but in stead, we argue, they entered into a struggle for recognition.

By focusing on how the reset leads to a struggle for recognition, the study is placed within a broader context. Farmers are thus not only central stakeholders in relation to the reset of the mink industry; they are also important stakeholders in many of the wicked problems many societies face. Understanding the various social processes that structure the farming community is therefore central to counter potential mistrust within the community towards the ambitions of governmental bodies seeking to engage farmers in different types of action in relation to climate change, animal welfare improvements and changes in farming practices towards, for example, greater biodiversity.

Farmers are noted for having a strong identity which frames how they see themselves and the external world (Burton et al., 2021). In the dynamic process of identity development, the feeling of being either recognised or misrecognised has a fundamental effect on how the world is perceived and which actions can be initiated (Honneth, 1992/1996). By taking this theoretical approach, we aim to contribute to the ongoing development of theories that take the real-life problems of managers into account (Czakov, 2019); in this case by analysing how a top-down governmental approach to the mink industry is experienced as a form of misrecognition with severe implications for the generalised trust formations of the farming sector.

We focus on how a deeply felt sense of misrecognition frames and structures how the mink farming community reacts to the reset. Specifically, we focus on how the feeling of having one's identity misrecognised generates mistrust and thereby creates an environment of hostility towards the external world, which likely makes future collaborations highly problematic. The mink case is interesting in this respect, as an ongoing survey on Danes' reactions to the covid pandemic only shows a decline in trust in the government when it concerns the mink case (Peterson & Roepstorff, 2021).

We argue that in a world characterised by the growing prevalence of wicked problems – problems that pose great challenges to humankind, yet cannot be given independent and objective definitions – it is detrimental to the development of viable solutions, if the initiatives taken on the political level generate generalised mistrust and a sense of misrecognition in others. Thus, the struggle for a reset is not simply a struggle for better technological solutions, it is also a struggle for recognition.

To develop this line of argument, we begin by discussing the concept of social identity and the notion the 'good farmer' as central to understanding farming communities. Following this, we outline our theoretical approach, herein accounting for the theory of recognition suggested by Axel Honneth. We then proceed with a short background section outlining the Danish context before we proceed to analyse Danish farmers' experience of misrecognition. Following this section, we first discuss how misrecognition leads to distrust, and then discuss what implications can be drawn in relation to developing solutions for wicked problems. Finally, we conclude that the theory of recognition helps scholars to better understand the complex process of initiating a reset.

2. Social identity in groups

Social identity is an important factor in motivation and involvement in so far as it functions as an arena for building generalised trust in government initiatives (Laurian, 2009). It is therefore important to understand how social identity is formed at a group level in order to analyse how farmers were affected by the reset of the mink industry.

Our understanding of groups departs from Axel Honneth's definition, according to which a group is "a social mechanism that serves the interest or needs of the individual by helping him or her achieve personal stability and growth" (Honneth, 2010/2014: 203). When a group reaches a size where face-to-face interactions are no longer possible, it takes on the form of a social movement, functioning by making alternative norms the generalised medium and by replacing concrete gestures with symbols and rituals (Honneth, 2010/2014: 206 f.). A group is thus

self-generating and distinctively marked from other groups by the process of applying symbols and fulfilling rituals in communications. From this perspective, groups are autopoietic in the sense that their reproduction takes place through group-internal processes, what Honneth identifies as the application of symbols and rituals. In Honneth's approach, these processes play a positive and productive role in constituting the individual, and groups are therefore a primary source of humanity in supporting the individual in establishing a personal identity (Honneth 2010/2014: 214). Groups may vary in size from nuclear families to nation states (Honneth, 2010/2014). In large groups, collective identity is a higher-level equivalent of personal identity or relation-to-self and can be analysed using the concept of recognition (*ibid.*, p. 139). When members of a large group experience exclusion or disrespect, they become motivated to band together and fight solidarily for the legal or social recognition of their collective identity (*ibid.*).

As identity is formed by the social relations we engage in, identity can be said to consist of a self-view that emerges in a self-reflective process that unfolds when we experience ourselves as members of a group in the form of a structured society (Stets & Burke, 2000; Lindgren & Wählin, 2001). Identity as a form of motivation is more important than specific economic interests, and the more overlaps there are between the different interests and identities of the group members, the higher is the likelihood that a mobilisation of action occurs (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003). Group identity makes members embrace the problems of the group despite what feelings they might hold towards other group members (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). When members of a group feel their identity threatened by information that challenges their commonly held beliefs, they tend to react to such risk by a culture and identity-protective resistance, which must be addressed to avoid resistance to public accepted sound risk-information (Kahan et al., 2007).

With its century long history, the Danish agricultural community can be viewed as a structured group within which individuals engage in relations that form their identity (Mordhorst, 2014). However, farmers are not only a social group; they also constitute an economic sub-system. Thus, the interplay between personal relations and business relations help form the group in which farmers experience themselves as members.

2.1. The 'good farmer' identity

The concept of the 'good farmer' is useful when discussing how a farmer's identity evolves in social interactions. Because social identity is an important motivation for creating mobilisation and action (Crane & Ruebottom, 2011), discussing 'the good farmer' is significant for our ambition to understand how farmers are likely to react to attempts to reset their practices. Whenever farmers meet and talk,

"the topic invariably turns to who is a 'good farmer' – and who is not. In the daily lives of farmers, the act of calling someone a 'good farmer' is an acknowledgement of appreciation and status within the community. It is not a title given lightly. Rather it bestows on the individual recognition of the cultural competences that make a farmer worthy of being sought out by others for assistance – knowledge, skills, or material assistance – the provision of which, in turn, forms bonds of mutual obligation within farming communities" (Burton et al., 2021: 1).

The talk of the 'good farmer' is central to farming communities around the world. To be a 'good farmer' is to be recognised as "knowing how to farm well and knowing the legitimate criteria for defining what is 'well'" (Burton et al., 2021: 131).

Based on the symbolic interactionism of Mead (1934), Burton (2004) and Burton et al. (2021) argues that farmers develop an understanding of the social symbolic significance of their behaviour through interactions with farmers and other actors (e.g., outreach consultants or service providers) in their community and develop a self-identity through this socialisation process. Although, some symbols of 'good farming' are remarkably consistent across contexts, specific ideas about the good farmer develop in different communities of practice (Burton

et al. 2021). Notions of good farming change over time due to changes in socio-economic conditions (Del Mármol et al., 2018), exposure to new technologies (Ogunyiola & Gardezi, 2022) or experiences with alternative practices (McGuire et al., 2013; Roesch-McNally et al., 2018).

After WWII, agriculture in the western world has developed according to a 'productivist' model that puts emphasis on maximisation of production by means of intensive production forms (Wilson, 2001). Under this regime, farmers are rewarded both financially and symbolically for an increase in production. Subsidy systems are put in place to promote increased production, while the productivist model has enabled farmers to claim a social position as caretakers of the nation's food supply (Burton, 2004), which, again, has allowed farmers to construct a sense of meaning in a life of toil (Allison, 1996; Burton, 2004; James, 1999). In the farming modes that follow the productivist model, a farmer is recognised as a 'good' or a 'bad' farmer by the physical appearance or attractiveness of the product and yield per acre/hectare/animal (Burton, 2004: 201). Because financial results are to a great extent dependent on factors outside the immediate control of individual farmers (market prices, subsidies, climatic conditions, etc.), yield is a way to symbolically measure the farming skills of a farmer. The appearance of crops/livestock and of the tidiness of the homestead tells a meaningful story to other farmers about whether one is a good or a bad farmer (Burton, 2004; Burton et al., 2021). In relation to a farmer's identity, the crops and livestock produced by the farmer thus have great symbolic value.

3. Theoretical approach

Studying how identity affects and is affected by the group dynamics in which the various participants are embedded, essentially implies studying a systemic process of communication (Blaschke et al., 2012; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Such communication unfolds as forms of self-referential communication systems that continuously draw a boundary between what is recognised as a valid topic within the system and what is not through a process of codification (Blaschke et al., 2012). In modern society, the codification of communications usually relates to the differentiation of society, which has the effect that politics cannot determine what is recognised as science, neither can religion determine what is recognised as politics etc. (Luhmann, 1997). In short, one overarching, singly coded communication cannot steer society (Luhmann, 1997; Harste & Laursen, 2022) without subjecting those who disagree to some form of misrecognition. However, despite the functional differentiation of modern society, such over-coding occurs regularly when, for instance, a decision process involving not only conflicting interests but also different functional codes gets dominated by a single code (Harste & Laursen, 2022). Overcoding by a single code means that the validity of other codes or perspectives are not recognised. Thus, as the German philosopher Axel Honneth has posited, the main struggle in modern society becomes the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1992/1996).

3.1. The struggle for recognition

Inspired by George Herbert Mead (1934), Axel Honneth (1992/1996) proposes to see struggles for recognition as genuinely mutual relations. Honneth maintains that it is imperative to shift the focus away from an atomistic model that puts the self-interested individual as the center of analysis, and instead emphasises how individuals are fundamentally motivated by a need for social recognition and intersubjective mutuality. Recognition, according to Honneth (1992/1996), may take place in three different spheres, each associated with a particular type of recognition and a specific type of positive self-relation.

The first sphere of recognition is *the private sphere*, where the modality of recognition is love and friendship. This type differentiates itself from the other two forms by being the very condition for engaging in intersubjective relations and seeing oneself as worthy of taking part in

intimate relationships and societal affairs. This type of recognition builds a fundamental sense of self-confidence (*ibid*, p. 129), which is pivotal for the individual's sense of legitimacy as an individual.

The second sphere is *the judicial sphere*, where recognition is given through the legal framework that gives the individual a set of rights and duties. To be handed such universal rights stimulates a feeling of self-respect, which again creates a sense of being a morally conscious person, who is capable of engaging in public dialogues (*ibid*, p. 167).

The third sphere is *the solidarity sphere*, where the individual's positive contribution to the group, the community or society as such is recognised. When individuals are part of a community where they are recognised for their specific particularity, this creates a sense of social esteem (*ibid*, p. 122); a sense of being someone who has a legitimate say in how the group, the community or society as such should be organised and run.

All three types of recognition are crucial for a fully integrated society. Love and friendship are conditions for the individual's ontological security, while universal rights and solidarity are prerequisites for a sense of being equal among equals. If these conditions are not met, the individual (or groups of individuals) risks losing their positive self-relation (self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem) (Honneth, 1992/1996: 131ff). If the individual is met with contempt or violations of its rights, the result is a loss of positive identity (Anderson & Honneth, 2005). In the solidarity sphere, people may experience such humiliations or shows of contempt that their specific abilities or skill are no longer considered a fruitful part of the community, which fundamentally hurts the individual's feeling of being important in a given community or society. Due to its focus on how inter-subjective relations shape our social practice, Honneth's recognition theory is beginning to resonate with organisational scholars who have applied his framework in relation to organisational identity (Fassauer, 2016) and business networks (Gold & Schleper, 2017).

In sum, the theory of recognition describes the necessary minimum conditions for humans to experience positive relations to themselves, and consequently, to engage in meaningful intersubjective relations of cooperation and dialogue (Anderson & Honneth, 2005). In this sense, we cannot live a meaningful life without recognition. When recognition is absent or taken away, people will either struggle for recognition (often with a destructive result), or they will establish alternative groups, where new types of recognition will be developed to create a sense of positive self-relation (Honneth, 2012). Misrecognition is, therefore, not only an attack on an identity but an attack of the very experience of having a legitimate function in society. Between the impersonal goals of large groups and the private experiences of their individual members, a form of a semantic bridge needs to exist that is strong enough to enable developing a collective identity (Honneth, 1992/1996: 163).

3.2. Trust and confidence

Collective identity is an important factor for motivation, action and involvement (Laurian, 2009; Crane & Ruebottom, 2011). The concepts 'motivation', 'action'¹ and 'involvement' are all concepts that point towards the future from a given present, as they indicate that a process of some form of expectational orientation has taken place. According to Luhmann (2000), the concepts of trust and confidence both refer to how we develop expectations towards the future. Confidence is the normal state in which we do not expect our expectations to be disappointed (Luhmann, 2000: 97). We are confident that other drivers keep within the traffic rules, that judges pass a fair sentence etc. Trust requires that we engage in the situation and accept that another outcome than what we anticipated could occur resulting from our choice (*ibid*). In this sense, trust is a solution for the specific problem of risk (Luhmann, 2000: 95).

¹ We distinguish between action as a premeditated form of activity and behaviour as an unmediated activity.

Luhmann distinguishes between two types of trust: personal and system trust (Luhmann, 1979). Where personal trust is concrete and aimed at specific individuals, system trust refers to the more abstract trust we have in social systems.

The distinction between confidence and trust depends upon our ability to distinguish between danger and risk (Luhmann, 2000: 98). This means that if dangers can be converted to risks, confidence is replaced with trust. Equally, trust can revert to confidence when situations stabilise to such an extent that decisions on the topic are no longer risk-decisions (*ibid*). Our fundamental expectations, which allow us to live an ordinary daily life without constantly having to worry about what the future will bring, are thus expressed in our confidence in much of the surrounding world. Reflecting on the relationship between confidence and trust, Luhmann (2000: 99) hypothesises that “a social evolution which achieves increasingly complex societies may in fact generate systems which require more confidence as a prerequisite of participation and more trust as a condition of the best utilization of chances and opportunities.” Confidence can thus be seen as providing the foundation from which we occasionally make a risk calculation resulting in a decision made in trusting a successful turnout. If we, for example, have confidence in the political system, we trust that the politicians we elect will do their best to deliver on their promises and not make any illegal decisions.

3.3. Confidence and misrecognition

Since both confidence and trust rely on expectations, there is always the possibility of disappointment. When our trust is disappointed, we refrain from taking risks, and when our confidence is violated we will feel alienated (Luhmann, 2000: 99). A breach of our confidence might occur if we experience being misrecognised. When the expectations that form our confidence are disappointed, it is the expectation that no alternative existed that is being violated. To Honneth (1992/1996), experiencing recognition is a basic expectation captured in the indissoluble connection between the integrity of human beings and the approval from others (p. 131). Under normal circumstances, we are thus confident that we will experience recognition from others. We do not engage in interactions with others expecting them to violate our legal rights or subject us to degrading treatment or offensive language (p. 163). We are confident that we will not experience this when we participate in societal activities on the premises that we are fully included citizens. A violation of the basic recognition expectations therefore constitutes a powerful motivation in social resistance, exactly because our confidence is disappointed (Honneth, 1992/1996: 163). The feeling of misrecognition can become a basis for collective resistance, if it can be formulated within an intersubjective interpretation that can be seen as typical for a group, and if a collective semantic can be formulated which captures the disappointments (*ibid*).

4. Analytical approach

Analytically, we apply a second order observation (Luhmann 1993; Andersen, 2003; Moeller, 2017). This implies that we are not interested in placing a verdict on the extent to which the Danish mink farmers actually have been misrecognised from an independent point of view. Instead, we intend to observe how the farmers express their own situation in the mass media and, on this background, provide a theoretically informed reflection on the consequences of this experience. We settled on this, because social groups' own statements can be used to draw conclusions about the specific type of collectively desired recognition (Honneth, 2010/2014: 146). Thus, the aim of the analysis is to offer a set of illustrative examples of how mink farmers experience a lack of recognition, and how this is expressed.

To this end, we have chosen to use local written media outlets (primarily dailies but also weekly papers) as the analytical starting point. The Danish landscape of local media is dominated by a few large players.

We have chosen to analyse the largest of these players, De Bergske Blade, which controls four local daily newspapers and nine weeklies, all situated in rural parts of Denmark and targeting readers from these areas. As the mink farmers live in these areas and are presumed to read and interact with these newspapers and weeklies, these outlets have been chosen to provide a medium through which the farmers have been able to express their experience of the culling. We started the data gathering at 4 November 2020 when Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, announced the culling of all Danish minks. In order to grasp the intensity of the situation, we decided to scan the dailies and weeklies in their totalities from this date and until the point of saturation, specifically selecting articles about mink farmers. In particular, we were interested in articles that took the farmers' point of view, such as feature articles about how particular mink farming families were affected by the decision to cull all minks. Interestingly, the point of saturation, the point where no new knowledge could be extracted from the data, was reached already on 10 November 2020. On the one hand, it is somewhat surprising to find that no more perspectives to the farmers' experiences could be found as early as 10 November, i.e. no more than a week from the decision to cull all minks. On the other hand, the mink community is a very tightknit community that consists of no more than 800 farmers, many of whom know each other intimately. In this dramatic context, where the livelihood of the community is at stake, it does make sense for the community to construe its group identity around one dominant narrative that thematises the threat to the entire industry. As already discussed, the social context simply does not allow for mink farmers to challenge this narrative, at least if they intend to remain part of the community. This goes some way to explaining why we could only find one dominant story in the data, a story that is closed off to other ways of understanding the situation.

Mass media like newspapers and weeklies do not just report on what goes on in the world, they participate in the construction of reality (Luhmann, 1996/2000). In particular, we want to acknowledge that our focus on mass media inevitably (re)produces certain biases inherent in the coverage of the mass media, as other forms of communication are not covered by our study.

It is characteristic of mass media that the information that is conveyed has to be understandable of the largest possible audience, and the choices have to be made about what news to cover. (Luhmann, 1996) identifies a number of typical selectors for what news to cover in the mass media, most of which can be found in the mink case: surprise, conflict, local relevance, norm violations, moral judgement, attribution, topicality and expressions of opinion. *Surprise* over the decision to cull all minks as the decision is a marked discontinuity with what has gone before, and because there are no previous examples of industries being forced to close so abruptly. There is a *conflict* between the mink farmers and the government personified in the Prime Minister. There are strong *quantitative* aspects, such as staggering number of minks to be culled and the number of farmers affected. There is strong *local relevance* to the communities affected, and hence to the readers of the dailies and weeklies studied. The decision to cull all mink was quickly turned into a scandal, as there was no legal basis for making the decision at the time. Hence, there is a *norm violation* that lends itself to generating a sense of outrage and the opportunity to make *moral judgements*, and thereby offers an “opportunity to demonstrate respect or disdain for people” (Luhman 1996/2000: 31). There is a clear *attribution* of blame for the decision to cull all mink to an actor, the Prime Minister or the government. There is strong *topicality*, as the issue is covered intensely in the days after the decision was made. In this situation, the *expressions of opinion* in the form of letters to the editor penned by mink farmers became news in themselves.

In terms of the actual analysis, we worked as abductively as possible: We started off by developing a number of codes from the data which were subsequently analysed through the lens of Honneth's theory and thus translated into themes. These themes are presented in the analysis.

5. Background

Agriculture and the cooperatively owned food industry have long been seen as the source of Danish affluence, with farmers cast as the carriers of a national identity associated with the fight for equality and democracy (Boje, 2020).² For many years, the Danish mink sector saw itself as part of this narrative. Historically, the Danish mink sector has been an important part of the global fur industry. Prior to 2020, Denmark accounted for more than 20 per cent of the global production of mink skins. Danish mink skins were known for their high quality, and the world's largest fur auction house, Copenhagen Fur, was located in Denmark.

However, the Danish mink production was far from being a lucrative industry prior to the onset of COVID-19. After a record year in 2013, when the value of Danish exports of mink skins peaked at DKK 12.8bn, and mink producers on average posted a profit of DKK 3.3 m, the following years offered falling prices and declining farm income, with the average farm posting a DKK 700,000 loss in 2019 (Statistics Denmark, 2020). The poor state of the Danish mink production is also illustrated by the number of operating farms declining from a high of 1261 in 2015–792 in 2019 (Statistics Denmark, 2020). Furthermore, mink producers were facing increasing opposition from citizens, animal rights advocates and politicians. In December 2018, a parliamentary motion to ban mink production in Denmark was tabled. Although, it was eventually rejected, the motion illustrates that mink production was not only economically in dire straits; the industry also struggled to maintain a broad societal recognition.

The decision to cull the entire mink population (including breeding animals) in Denmark in November 2020 was taken and effectuated during what would, in a normal year, have been the skinning season, where 80 per cent of the animals are killed (with the remaining 20 per cent of the animals kept as breeders). The decision resulted in a moral outcry from farmers, who felt that their fundamental legal rights to operate a company were violated. The cry was echoed by several politicians, who argued strongly in favour of a just and righteous compensation for the affected farmers and affiliated businesses. In a political agreement reached in January 2021, the total compensation was estimated to amount to up to DKK 18.8bn. From the outside, the compensation offered to mink farmers, therefore, looked like a welcome chance to leave an increasingly unpopular and stagnating industry with full financial compensation. However, the public reactions from the farmers showed a radically different picture.

6. Experiences of (mis)recognition

In this section, we will argue that mink farmers experienced the decision by the Danish government to cull all minks as an expression of misrecognition. Being a mink farmer is not simply a job or an occupation; it is an identity, which has now been taken away from the farmers (Burton et al., 2021). And to make matters even worse, the identity is not only related to the individual farmer; it is deeply embedded in the farmers' family structures, so that daughters or sons are also impacted by the loss of identity. For example, in a newspaper article, mink farmer Henning Christensen is described as preoccupied not only with his own business but also with the future of his employees and his family:

"He is crying silently but continuously. The 44-year-old mink farmer and board member of Copenhagen Fur, Henning Christensen tells: 'It is sad. I am left with three trainees. What are they supposed to do? I have employees who have been here for many years. What are they supposed

to do? I have a family with four children. What are they supposed to do?'" (JydskeVestkysten, 5 Nov 2020).

Hence, it is not surprising that mink farmers' initial response to the order of culling all minks is a sense of shock and a sincere feeling of sadness that the entire mink industry has been eradicated. Some farmers use metaphors such as 'ground zero' for the Danish mink industry, others see the decision as an 'atomic bomb' and some even fly the Danish flag at half-mast. Overall, the farmers find themselves in a situation where they have a deep feeling of being misrecognised, leaving them with an immense feeling of emptiness, hopelessness and despair as illustrated by the quotes in Table 1.

This sensation of utter despair and rage is powered by a feeling of withdrawal of recognition. As minks are culled, the mink farmers see themselves as devoid of recognition in both the judicial sphere and the solidarity sphere. The lack of judicial recognition primarily has to do with the experience that normal democratic procedures, such as consulting with the industry before making important decisions, making sure that normal legal protocols are followed and putting the decision into actual contracts, have been invalidated. But even more so, the mink farmers suspect that the lack of proper political procedures are driven by an explicit wish to get rid of the mink farmers. Some say the decision is 'corrupt'; others contend that they have been 'assaulted' and 'raped', while still others make the claim that the mink farmers are intentionally 'run down' because of a hidden agenda to get rid of the entire industry. Table 2 offers some illustrative examples of these types of interpretations.

The lack of judicial recognition is expressed as the creeping sensation that a political idea (to get rid of the mink farming industry) paves the way for a dismissal of the farmers' basic legal rights. This is personalised in the expressions concerning the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen. Even though the expressions are directed at a person, what they concern appears to be the Social Democratic government. But that is not the end of the story for the farmers. They also experience a withdrawal of recognition within the sphere of solidarity. At stake for the farmers is the fact that they suddenly see themselves being devoid of useful competences and hence without an ability to contribute to their local communities. As summarised in Table 3, the newspapers are ripe with descriptions of how the farmers feel unwanted and how their competences as mink farmers are no longer relevant.

Not surprisingly, the fact that the mink farmers feel that they have been robbed of recognition in the judicial and the solidarity spheres stimulates an aggressiveness and a sense of counterculture. One mink farmer places an obituary in a local newspaper, where she demonises the Social Democrats (the party forming Denmark's minority government at the time) as the culprit. Other farmers state that they have lost the faith in the 'system', while some see the government as liars. All in all, our interpretation is that the withdrawal of recognition has created a situation where farmers see themselves in opposition to the political establishment, an experience which is very explicitly expressed by a farmer by placing tractors in front of his estate so that authorities are blocked entry (Dagbladet Struer, 6 Nov 2020), or by another farmer who

Table 1
Expressions of emptiness, shock and despair.

"My world fell apart. It is not just a job; it is my entire life" (Nordjyske, 7 Nov 2020).
"There is just emptiness. Total emptiness. With a blink of an eye, the government has eradicated an entire industry" (Helsingør Dagblad, 6 Nov 2020).
"My two daughters were crying and so was my wife, while I was completely catatonic. I tried to keep up appearances, but I was crying inside" (Fyens Stiftstidende, 6 Nov 2020).
"They are taking away our livelihood and our life's work. It is inhumane to put us in that situation" (JydskeVestkysten, 6 Nov 2020).
"This is our life, and it is very tough to realise that it is over. I can't see how we move on from here. I can't see any light at the end of the tunnel right now" (Sjællandske, 5 Nov 2020).
"Everything we have suffered for now disappears," says 80-year-old Evald Hansen, who has worked with mink since he was 15 (Nordjyske, 8 Nov 2020).

² In a recent book, Per Boje (2020) challenges the predominant narrative of farmers and the cooperative movement as the source Danish affluence and argues that the narrative was actively constructed and used to legitimise the interests of individual farmers and agriculture in the political struggle for recognition in competition with shipping and industry.

Table 2
Expressions of a lack of judicial recognition.

"Here will never be mink again. It is terrible to put our stock down because of something that has happened in the northern part of Denmark. And I am angry that we haven't been consulted at all".

"My main point is that Mette [Frederiksen, the Danish prime minister, ed.] does not inform the industry about her decision and that she has not consulted with the broader political spectrum. [...] The decision should have been part of a larger democratic process" (Dagbladet Struer, 6 Nov 2020).

"No mink farmers want our animals to infect people with COVID-19. [...] But I would have liked the government to listen to us. Our organisation provided an alternative plan three weeks ago about how to contain the infection by quickly slaughtering infected animals" (Fyens Stiftstidende, 6 Nov 2020).

"It is a democratic disaster. We must have a legal procedure in Folketinget [the Danish parliament, ed.] without rush. The disaster is that we don't discuss whether or not it is okay to do anything in the holy name of corona" (Dagbladet Køge, 10 Nov 2020).

"The authorities have not been very good at communicating. We have not been told anything from the authorities, and I have really struggled to get hold of a contract or anything in writing about the conditions for putting down the animals" (Nordjyske, 7 Nov 2020).

"They have taken away our future but in an illegal way. I really don't know what to say. It is corrupt as hell" (Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern, 9 Nov 2020).

"I am so sad that people keep talking about public health while the government runs the proud mink farmers mentally down" (Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern, 5 Nov 2020).

"We feel that somebody has a hidden agenda to get rid of us" (Nordvestnyt, 5 Nov 2020).

"They are raping our industry" (Nordvestnyt, 5 Nov 2020).

"I have the sense that there is a political agenda to close us down" (JydskeVestkysten, 5 Nov 2020).

"I think they do this, because they have been pressurised by the animal welfare activists and political parties who do not want mink farming in Denmark" (Helsingør Dagblad, 5 Nov 2020).

"The economic compensations have been okay. The problematic issue is that they are now eliminating an entire industry in the name of public health. That is what I call an assault" (Helsingør Dagblad, 5 Nov 2020).

Table 3
Expressions of a lack of social recognition.

"Right now, I don't know what the future brings but I hope that someone will need us mink farmers who have always known how to work from sunrise to sunset" (Sjællandske, 7 Nov 2020).

"Jens is 37 years and a trained farmer, but he has no land to farm. He has 2.9 acres of land, but much of that is used for buildings for the minks. 'I have so many questions, and I had hoped that the government would have come up with some answers. Can we be supported in getting new competencies?'" (Sjællandske, 7 Nov 2020).

"He [Jens Wistoft, a mink farmer] has more than three decades of mink knowledge. But that is useless now. Before next Sunday all of Jens Wistoft's animals must be put down. In the same process, 34 years of knowledge is rendered useless and a big emptiness awaits" (JydskeVestkysten, 7 Nov 2020).

"Louise: 'I have nothing to fall back on. I need to find something entirely new'" (Fyens Amts Avis, 7 Nov 2020).

prefers being jailed than following the order to cull the minks (Helsingør Dagblad, 9 Nov 2020). Table 4 illustrates this sense of opposition.

The quotes in Table 4, furthermore, demonstrate how the feeling of exclusion, experienced by the farmers, introduced a sense of distrust in the authorities. As Table 2 showed, a widespread feeling in the farming community consisted in a strong suspicion that culling the mink was a decision embedded in an already made decision to shut down the industry. Taken together, this section shows examples of how

Table 4
Expressions of a sense of opposition to the government.

Obituary: 'Our lovely fluffy minks were brutally put down by the social-democratic party' (Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern, 5 Nov 2020).

"We are many who have lost confidence in the government" (Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern, 9 Nov 2020).

"I don't have great faith in the system anymore" (Nordvestnyt, 5 Nov 2020).

"The authorities have lied to us before, and they have kept on lying" (Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern, 5 Nov 2020).

misrecognition, trust and identity are heavily entangled social phenomena.

The question is then how we can understand the relationship between these phenomena and what implications this holds for the development of solutions to wicked problems.

7. When identity is under attack: from misrecognition to distrust

Misrecognition is problematic in itself, but it becomes even more so when it leads to dissappointments that affect our confidence and trust in a negative way. Before proceeding to discuss the more general implications of the reset, we, therefore, discuss the relation between the misrecognition and distrust.

The top-down decision to ban mink farming was experienced as a form of misrecognition in two of the three spheres identified by Axel Honneth. Such an experience of misrecognition leaves the community in a vulnerable state, because it challenges its very identity. If farmers are no longer recognised as someone who can farm, who can contribute and take care of themselves then who are they? Therefore, whenever a social group experiences misrecognition there is a potential danger that this will install distrust and suspicion within the group, making it difficult to treat others with civility and mutual respect (Conover, 2009).

This is problematic, because trust is an important social mechanism in contexts where collaboration around complex topics containing insecurity is required (Luhmann, 1979; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007). When the matter concerns private-public collaborations based on voluntary agreements, as is the case for many initiatives designed to combat the crises facing modern agriculture, trust is perhaps even more important (Pautz & Wamsley, 2012), as other interests than financial ones are the primary for engaging in collaboration, thereby creating an extra layer of complexity. This is clear when public administrators face complex problems, where long-term involvement of stakeholders, e.g., citizens, nonprofit organisations and the business community, is needed for effectively dealing with the issue (Yang & Callahan, 2007).

The implications of the misrecognition experienced by the mink farmers must therefore be understood within a broader picture. Mink farmers are part of the wider farming community in Denmark and involved in ongoing discussions of what constitutes a 'good farmer' with other farmers. Although, different types of farmers are likely to develop specific identities (as mink farmers, dairy farmers, pork producers, plant producers etc.), many feel that they are belonging to the same overall social group with a shared group identity as farmers. This is important, because sharing a group identity makes members more willing to embrace a given problem (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The misrecognition and distrust towards the authorities expressed by mink farmers resonate within the farming community on a broader level, as it is experienced by some as the misrecognition of farmers per se. Indications that distrust towards the government exceeds what have been expressed by various members of the farming community have been given by an ongoing research project into Danes' response to the COVID-19 (Petersen & Roepstorff, 2021). The study showed that Danes have displayed a remarkably high level of trust in the government throughout the COVID-19 crisis, with one exception: the mink case. The effect of the mink case on trust in the Danish government must be expected to be most severe within the farming community because of the shared group identity. Studies on Danish farmers' willingness to engage in schemes requiring some form of collaboration with authorities have revealed a considerable lack of trust in the same authorities (Christensen et al., 2011). When a certain level of mistrust is already in place, an experience of not only being over-ruled by the government, but also experiencing social and juridical misrecognition, can therefore foster more distrust.

This is problematic in relation to upcoming climate initiatives such as those aimed at excepting wetlands from agricultural production in

order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Previous research has shown that sustainable transition within farming is a controversial topic with many competing interests, preconceptions and emotions involved (Eilso, 2019), and that landowners' decisions on land use are based on a broader range of factors than simply economic ones (Graversgaard et al., 2021; Hayden et al., 2021). Key success factors for successful implementation of policy schemes thus include sufficient compensation levels, flexible scheme designs and information-based strategies documenting relevant benefits and sustainability issues, with advice and support from the state, regional and local participants, and farmers' organisations also required to increase participation and achieve success (Graversgaard et al., 2021). For such complex processes to succeed in the eye of farmers, who have only little bureaucratic experience, trust in the government and its representatives is vital. Distrust is thus problematic, not only in relation to specific schemes of collaboration between farmers and authorities.

The experience of misrecognition expressed by the mink farmers can thus be expected to effect the farming community more broadly because of the shared farming identity. This, we argue, potentially effects efforts to establish cooperatively organised stakeholder involvement and action by jeopardising both personal and systemic trust in the government. This indicates that even a secluded problem can have far-reaching consequences in forming stakeholder capitalism. Discussing the consequences in its broadest sense, in relation to, for example, wicked problems will indicate some of the implications of experienced misrecognition by vital stakeholders.

8. Implications for solving wicked problems

Grand challenges relating to, for example, sustainability have been described as a form of 'wicked problems' (Norton, 2005). Wicked problems occur when different stakeholders have diverting perceptions of both the problem and the solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are thus not clear and cannot be formulated in an exhaustive and definitive way, because the "information needed to *understand* the problem depends on one's idea for *solving* it" (Rittel & Webber, 1973: 161; italics in original). With wicked problems there are no definitive criteria for determining whether a proposed solution is right or wrong. Instead proposed solutions are assessed in terms of whether they are good or bad. Often a number of different actors will have a stake in the solution, and their judgement of the appropriateness of the solution can differ widely depending on their identities, world-views and interests in the problem.

When encountering wicked problems, actors find themselves dependent on each other, because their actions influence other actors' interests, and even though they acknowledge this, they still find it difficult to engage in joint action due to institutional, cognitive and network barriers (Van Buren et al., 2003). An important requirement in overcoming wicked problems is, therefore, trust between central stakeholders (Head and Alford 2015). Only when a stakeholder trusts that other stakeholders will take their interests into consideration, despite the fact that they do not correspond with each other, can the uncertainty be absorbed to such a degree that collaboration becomes possible (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010).

Even though wicked problems tend to be of a grand scale, smaller problems, like the resetting of the Danish mink industry, can display some of the same traits. Culling the mink did not only mean containing the virus within Denmark. This is clear when the decision to cull the Danish mink population is observed from other perspectives than that of the farmers. On 9 November 2020, the CEO of the Confederation of Danish Industry, representing more than 18,000 Danish businesses, thus expressed his strong hopes that by culling the mink, Denmark was able to send a signal to the rest of the world that all possible measures were being taken to contain the virus (Olsen, 2020), and thereby maintain trust in Denmark and Danish products. This message pinpoints a central challenge in relation to wicked problems: different stakeholders might

have fundamentally different interests.

As farmers are the main land users in Denmark, and since the sector accounts for a large percentage of greenhouse gas emission, farmers are important stakeholders in solving wicked problem. Much of the debate and legislative propositions dealing with climate change center on negotiating fair economic compensations to landowners and/or discussing the size and timing of future carbon taxes (e.g. Klimarådet, 2020), following a traditional understanding that considers farmers' decision-making processes from a rational economic perspective (e.g., Cary & Wilkinson, 1997). However, studies of Danish farmers' decision rationales have shown that non-economic values, such as professional pride, trump economic rationales (Pedersen et al., 2012). Although, some farmers are economically rational, others are more focused on farming practices (Busck, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2012; Primdahl et al., 2013). Most Danish farmers are not particularly concerned over climate changes; instead they favour incremental changes and believe that dialogue is an essential tool in promoting adherence to legal regulations (Anneberg et al., 2013; Woods et al., 2017). This corresponds with international studies finding that the rational actor perspective is an overly simplified approach that neglects important social-psychological factors in farmers' adoption of agri-environmental practises (Dessart et al., 2019; Lastra-Bravo et al., 2015; LeQuin et al., 2019; van Dijk et al., 2016). These factors include; (a) prejudice and scepticism towards outgroups such as politicians and local government officials; (b) experienced need to conform to local social norms (i.e., local norms of agri-environmental practises); (c) experienced loss of personal autonomy; and (d) threats to personal work identity (i.e., being an efficient farmer vs. climate activist) (McGuire et al., 2013; van Dijk et al., 2016).

An inherent problem in wicked problems is therefore that uncertainties, conflicts or value differences tend to exacerbate wicked problems (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). When those with a stake in a wicked problem furthermore adhere to a strong group identity, there is a risk that they will understand any form of information on the problem that conflicts with their interest as an attack on their identity (Kahan et al., 2007). Therefore, studying how an attack on a group identity effects how trust and confidence is attributed may offer an additional dimension in our understanding how wicked problems are constructed in different groups.

9. Limitations and future research

This study focuses on public statements made by Danish mink farmers over the course of a few days following Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's announcement of the decision to cull all mink and impose a temporary ban on all mink production in Denmark. This was a tempestuous period of heated public discourse, and thus we have been able to study the reset of the Danish mink sector at the peak of the storm. Our data is restricted to letters to the editor and interview quotes published in local newspapers. These sources express immediate reactions. On the one hand, this is a strength of our study, because feelings of misrecognition are so clearly formulated. On the other hand, the announcement and its immediate aftermath are parts of a much longer process. For instance, the process leading up to and the implementation of the decision by different authorities,³ the negotiation of economic

³ In 2021, the Danish parliament launched a thorough public inquiry into the entire process and tasked a commission with studying and accounting for the actions and involvement of all relevant authorities and government ministers in the decision to immediately cull all mink and the execution of this decision. The commission conducted public interrogations of key civil servants and ministers, including the Prime Minister. For more information, see <https://www.minkkommissionen.dk/da/kommissorium> (in Danish only).

compensation to affected farmers,⁴ how farmers coped and so on, would all be viable topics for further research.

Our focus has been on farmers and their feelings of misrecognition. Future research should study other stakeholders, including family members, local and national politicians (mink farming was concentrated in a small number of local municipalities, while the decision to cull all mink was made on a national level), labour unions, farmer associations, private citizens, authorities, veterinarians, animal welfare organisations (which have long agitated for a ban on all mink production) etc. Expanding the scope of the study would help shed light on how different groups made sense of the situation, and how their interactions shaped the decision, its implementation, and the subsequent public discourse in Denmark.

Broader issues related to public perception and discourse of measures taken by authorities to deal with and prevent the spread of COVID-19 could be studied in many other countries, where public support for government measures have been weaker than in Denmark. In Denmark, support for authorities and government have generally been high (e.g., Nielsen & Lindval, 2021), the mink case excluded (Petersen & Roepstorff, 2021). There is already a burgeoning literature on how governments' handling of COVID-19 was perceived by citizens in various countries (e.g. Altiparmakis et al., 2021).

To study the reset of the Danish mink sector, we have combined two theories that are usually not in dialogue with each other; Axel Honneth's recognition theory and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. We believe that this is an important theoretical contribution, but of course the question arises if other theoretical perspectives could have been gainfully used. One promising alternative is sensemaking. Sensemaking is often associated with the work of Karl Weick, who understood sensemaking as a process that is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of social environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Weick focuses on sensemaking in moments of breakdown, when order is disrupted, which the decision to cull all mink clearly was for the mink farmers. Although Weick's understanding of sensemaking is canonical and remains widely accepted, there is a small but significant literature that questions some of its central tenets and try to advance the sensemaking perspective (see, e.g., Introna, 2019; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In the context of our study, problematic aspects of the Weickian conception of sensemaking entail that it is retrospective and cognitive, leaving out emotions. What we studied were statements made in the heat of the moment (without little or no time for reflection or retrospection) when emotions ran high. Emotion is an underexplored dimension of sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013), which has deep cognitivist roots (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

'Identity-protective cognition' (Kahan et al., 2007) could also be used to explain why we observe such reactions to the decision to cull all mink. The concept builds on the observation that group membership is important for how people process information, as individuals tend to adopt the same beliefs as salient "in-groups" and resist changing these beliefs in the face of contrary information (Baumeister and Leary 1995; MacKie et al., 1992). Group membership provides individuals with both material and non-material benefits such as status and self-esteem (Honneth, 1992/1996: xi), thus contributing to personal well-being (Kahan et al., 2007). When exposed to information that challenges group beliefs, and therefore threatens to undermine personal well-being, individuals are prone to appraise this information in such a way as to reinforce "beliefs associated with belonging to particular groups" (Kahan et al., 2007: 470). Because the threat to mink farmers' identity occurred so swiftly, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent they engaged in this identity-protective cognition.

Future research should try to study similar cases, where sudden changes in legislation have fundamentally and suddenly altered the playing field. History is replete with cases of industrial decline, but there are few, if any, cases of industries coming to such a sudden and drastic end as the case of the Danish mink production. The case of the Danish mink is thus an 'extreme case' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) in the sense that it is so clearly delineated.

10. Concluding remarks

The decision to cull all minks in Denmark was a decision with no alternative. If the decision was to be effective, it had to encompass all minks. And once the decision was effectuated, it was irreversible. The speed of the decision left farmers with almost no time to prepare themselves for the emotional shock of losing their livelihood overnight in what may be characterised as a total reset. A reset, thus, is not simply a technical process, it is just as much a social process, which calls for new ways of thinking (Roth, 2021). A reset like this means that stabilised patterns of recognition are disturbed, and that stable identities suddenly face disruption. And when a reset is pushed through by a small elite, like a national government, it implicates the risk of some groups, who insist that their system does not need a reset, face discrimination (Roth, 2021: 6). The conflict between such interests is exactly what we observed in the case of the Danish mink industry. The feeling of misrecognition (Honneth 1992/1996) triggered in this process indicates that societal resets have profound effects on the system trust in the government. As business networks like the Danish farming community have no distinct boundaries (Håkansson & Snehota, 2006), distrust tends to spill over from those subjected to an injustice to those who identify with them. The experience of being misrecognised thereby risks triggering a broader development of distrust towards those who are identified as initiators of the reset. This, we have argued, is potentially problematic for the development of a well-functioning stakeholder capitalism as it jeopardises trust between stakeholders to the extent that mistrust can become the new normal.

On this basis, we contend that the struggle for recognition is not only a fundamental struggle at the individual level; it is also an important issue when it comes to struggles between social groups (Honneth, 2012). Viewed this way, both existing and emerging social conflicts feed on struggles for recognition. Thus, if we are to better understand the opportunities for countering some of the grand challenges we currently face, then management theory needs to orientate itself towards those network logics that frame stakeholders' perspectives on potential solutions. As many grand challenges assume the form of wicked problems, no single common agreement on problem or solution definition can be assumed (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In this respect, trust is vital in opening any communication on such difficult topics. And when trust is required, we must inevitably overcome the fact that something is always at stake, that there is always a danger that we might experience some form of loss. When inviting someone to step down such a precarious path they must be met with the forms of recognition established by Axel Honneth to avoid that trust is replaced with mistrust.

The diagnosis of the present that framed the outset of the present analysis departed from the theory of functional differentiation (Luhmann, 1997). When society cannot be said to evolve around a specific centre, any greater change cannot simply be understood following one single logic. *Prima facie*, the present case of resetting the Danish mink industry was justified with reference to the public health. But what the present analysis demonstrates is that what appears as the right decision from one perspective, can just as easily appear as wrong from another. By engaging in decision-making on topics where different perspectives on right and wrong are conflicting, decision-making potentially leads to the feeling of misrecognition and of having one's identity attacked by those who's interest are overruled. In relation to grand challenges and wicked problems that potentially call for a reset of the current practice, management theory could, therefore, benefit from paying attention to

⁴ The necessary regulation for compensating mink farmers was finalised in December 2021. It is expected that the process of individual appraisal and payment of compensation to each farmer will last at least until the end of 2024.

how intersubjective network relations form specific ways of approaching problems and solutions. With this article, we have aimed at contributing towards developing our understanding of these phenomena by bringing together a system theoretical point of departure with recognition theory.

Author statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

All data is already publicly available.

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