

Through the eyes of a taxidermist

What aspects scientific-, classic- and artistic taxidermists value in relation to their profession.



Fig. 8.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, taxidermy has increased in popularity and simultaneously evolved as a practice and profession, becoming more diverse with both its members and the type of work that is performed. This has resulted in the craft of taxidermy gaining a variety of new disciplines (referring to forms of style). The major disciplines include scientific, classic, and artistic taxidermy. With this diversification, taxidermists may hold varying values regarding their work and how it pertains to society, and these values may be influenced by the type of taxidermy they practice. The aim of this research was to investigate what aspects of their professions are valued by taxidermists of different disciplines. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten taxidermists (all from the Netherlands). In these interviews, the taxidermists discussed their work experiences and the values they hold regarding taxidermy and its place in their lives and society. The results revealed that despite their different disciplines, there are some common values the respondents have. For instance, all taxidermists expressed their love of nature and animals (and learning about them). Several taxidermists also expressed that practicing taxidermy brings positive influences on mental health and helps them confront challenging concepts such as death and mortality. However, there were other aspects of the taxidermy field that drew varied perspectives across respondents. For instance, using taxidermy as a medium for artistic expression was primarily valued by artistic taxidermists, while others did not find the same artistic value. Similarly, the economic aspects (i.e., income) of taxidermy were primarily important to those who relied on taxidermy as a livelihood. The social values of taxidermy, however, were of most importance across all respondents. Respondents expressed how much they value the individuality of each animal and how they value the living animal, refuting outsider stereotypes (i.e., media) that portray taxidermists as blood thirsty and death obsessed. Furthermore, respondents expressed that taxidermy can be a strong medium to deliver a message to the public, regardless of the purpose (i.e., artistic creativity, political theme, societal). Finally, all taxidermists expressed how respect for the animal (and nature as a whole) is paramount, although some openly questioned whether taxidermy can be completely respectful. Taken together, this thesis highlighted the diversity that exists in the field of taxidermy. The values taxidermists hold is influenced by the kind of taxidermy they practice

and the experiences they have had. As the taxidermy field continues to grow and evolve, with both its members and its practices, the values taxidermists hold may become more varied. However, as was observed with this group of taxidermists, some common core values – such as love and respect for nature – will always bring these individuals together.

Keywords: Taxidermy, Taxidermist, Values, Animals, Societal views

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1. Introduction

Since 2016, I have been volunteering as a taxidermist for the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam. Together with a group of fellow volunteers, I prepare study skins for the scientific collection of the museum. This entails skinning the deceased animal, washing the skin, stuffing it with kapok and wire, sewing the skin back together and letting the specimen dry. The result is a study skin that is meant to be conserved for decades to come. The purpose of this practice is to collect and preserve animal species for their scientific value, such that they can be examined and studied for years across different fields of natural sciences. This practice is notably different than the practice of classic taxidermy that is true to nature – where the aim is to manipulate the dead animal's posture to give it a life-like appearance. These life-like mounts are often used for commercial selling or museum exhibitions. Another unique use for taxidermy is to use it as a medium for making art. Here, the animals are used as material for specific artworks. Artists may use certain parts of the animal or the entire body, finding various ways to display their creative expressions.

Throughout the years, working closely with dead animals has led me to consider existential themes. Observing the animals in a direct, intimate manner uniquely reveals its structural and functional anatomy. Every animal is unique, yet there exists a commonality within and between species. The interactions I have with these animals spur internal thoughts about the wonder and genius of nature. This sparked a philosophical thought process – to explore the relationship we, humans, have with non-human animals in today's western society. According to an article on taxidermy-art published in the Dutch Financial Times (Lindeboom, June 5th, 2021), this relationship between human and animal is a disturbed one. Therefore, I wonder how other taxidermists, depending on- and irrespective of their taxidermy discipline, think about these theme's and how their perceptions and values of other taxidermy-related themes developed.

Previous research on taxidermy mainly covers three topics. First, overall use and history of taxidermy (Poliquin, 2008; Madden, 2011; Poliquin, 2013; Kaber & Hawkeswood, 2021) which also entails taxidermy and death (Sanders & Hohenstein, 2015; Monroe, 2018). Second, the technique of taxidermy (Allington-Jones, 2020) and third, the use of taxidermy in the arts (Prottas, 2012; Bateman, 2013; Aloï, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Heather, 2016; Aloï, 2019; Niittynen, 2020). Three points can be remarked about these studies. First, most of them are North-American studies, which can be due to the fact taxidermy as well as hunting has a strong history in the United States and Canada. Second, research on the values a taxidermy

object carries is either focused on taxidermy that is true to nature (Poliquin, 2008) or on artistic taxidermy (Aloi, 2015; Niittynen, 2020), but not on both. Third, most (if not all) of these studies are conducted by non-taxidermists and focus on the final product (the mounted animal or artwork) and not on the perception of the maker: the taxidermist. Exceptions are books by Madden (2011) and Andrei (2020) which use biographies about 20th century taxidermists, as well as journalistic interviews with taxidermy artists in *Antennae* (2021) and a study by Eliason (2012), which describes motivations of individuals to become a taxidermist. However, thorough research on thought processes of taxidermists is scarce. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding of the motivations behind the practice of taxidermy and the way it is used for different purposes since the values and perceptions of the taxidermists are virtually excluded. It is these values and perceptions that are of interest in this study.

Taxidermy can evoke a range of responses in people who are unfamiliar with it. For instance, many people can feel uncomfortable when they imagine handling a dead animal. Indeed, the practice of taxidermy can be associated as dirty, evoke unnerving feelings and is even perceived as unethical. The taxidermist is, after all, faced with death, rot, internal organs and (occasionally) bad smells. Despite these negative stigmas, the number of taxidermists appears to have risen significantly in the 21st century. Notably, there are increasing numbers of people joining taxidermy classes and competitions (Leckert, 2019). Most of these newcomers are reported to be women (Voon, 2014; Blitz, 2015; Semic, 2016; Connell, 2017) – some of which use taxidermy to create art – and use solely ethically sourced animals, which means that the animals had not been killed for the purpose of taxidermy (Jeffries, 2012; Voon, 2014; Secorun Palet, 2014; Semic, 2016; Leckert, 2018; Philips, 2019). Individuals often describe that the practice of their arts and crafts of choice facilitate deep thoughts, such as the reflecting on fundamental questions regarding life and mortality (Serlin, 2007). The material used for taxidermy is unique and notably different than an art supply like paint, clay, or an instrument; in that it involves working with a deceased animal. Therefore, the practice of taxidermy inherently brings the individual face-to-face with topics like mortality, and it is plausible to assume they allow for similar deep thoughts and considerations. Thus, there is a logical reason and need to explore these matters and how they are viewed by taxidermists: (1) Academically, there is a lack of research on values and perceptions of taxidermists, as well as research that covers both classic taxidermists and taxidermy artists; (2) socially, the rise of popularity in taxidermy is a cultural phenomenon which raises ethical and political questions

and debates, which are not studied and left to journalistic opinions. Thus, the main interest for this study is how taxidermy has expanded to different disciplines and how those disciplines carry different values. The major disciplines which are defined and addressed in this study are scientific, classic, and artistic taxidermy. Today, taxidermy generates diverse meanings. I want to know which values taxidermists derive from practicing taxidermy and if the way that they do that influences those values. Therefore, the goal of this research is to find out whether these different disciplines contain different values. It explores the role of taxidermy today, what it means and how these (new) disciplines can add to this meaning making. This research investigates the experiences of individuals when practicing taxidermy as well as the values and perceptions of taxidermists with different styles of work. The research question is: *What are the values and perceptions of scientific-, classic- and artistic taxidermists, considering topics related to their profession?* To answer this question, qualitative interviews are held with 10 Dutch taxidermists with various backgrounds, expertise and level of experience.

This research consists of a literary review which starts with a brief background of the history of taxidermy and current developments. It then moves on to the first three sub-questions. The first discovers what a taxidermist is and which different type of taxidermy disciplines there are. The second sub-question explores the values and narratives that are intertwined with taxidermy such as the role of the animal in human culture, the animal's death and animal ethics. These values are categorized with the use of the value-systems created by Elhuizen et al. (2020). It ends with the third sub-question, a discussion on how these values and narratives might match the beforementioned disciplines. The second chapter provides an overview of the methodology to explain that interviews are executed with taxidermists as a method for this qualitative study, as well as the operationalization and how I account for the fact that a taxidermist (me) is studying other taxidermists. Chapter three, the results chapter, is divided into the fourth and fifth sub-questions. The fourth question presents the values and perspectives that were derived from the interviews, such as respect for the animal, the ethics of artistic taxidermy and the narratives a taxidermied animal can carry (such as beauty, love for nature or a political/social message). The answer to the fifth sub-question presents how these values and perspectives relate to the disciplines of taxidermy of the respondents. The study concludes with a discussion of the main findings and a consideration of their implications.

2. Literary review

To detect and recognize the shifts of values and disciplines, this chapter starts with a summary of taxidermy throughout history, as well as the developments of taxidermy in the past decades. It then proceeds to the first three sub questions with information derived from literature. The first explains what a taxidermist is. (1.1). It then gives an overview of different disciplines in taxidermy (1.2). The second is an exploration of the values often linked to taxidermy that can be found in the existing literature. These are categorized by the use of values derived from the research rapport *De waarde van cultuur* (The value of culture) by Elkhuisen et al. (2020). The last section combines the first two by forming a discussion on how the beforementioned disciplines can be matched to the values and narratives described in section two (2.4).

2.1 A brief history of taxidermy and its recent developments in society

In order to further understand the shift in disciplines and values in taxidermy, a summary of the history of taxidermy is needed. Poliquin (2012) considers the 16th century as the start of preserving dead animals outside of the purpose of eating them (dried meat) and spiritual intentions (e.g. burying mummified animals as part of religious burial in ancient Egypt). However, this is refuted by Schulze-Hagen et al. (2003, p. 474) who's research found evidence which indicates the collecting of birds and the methods of preserving existed prior to 1600. Their argument is based on analysing documents between the time span of 1200-1600 and states that the techniques used in the 16th century already existed. Poliquin (2012) describes the primary aim of collecting dead animals in the 16th and 17th century to be that of *wonder*. In this period, when Europeans started to travel further out to sea to find different lands (and with that the beginning of colonization), they collected as much as they could to get an overview of these "new worlds". The collected animals started to provoke creative thought among collectors. Knowing the poor techniques of preserving the animals, Poliquin argues that this was not taxidermy (yet). With the rise of empirical science in the 18th century came the need for collecting and preserving as many specimens as possible. Preserved animals started to be classified their shared characteristics and grouped into animal species and families (taxonomy).

Simultaneously, rich Victorians in the 18th century started to collect preserved animals, mostly birds, for the mere sense of *beauty*, with hummingbirds on top of the wish-list for their diverse and bright colours. These preserved birds became part of the Victorian interior not just as decoration but as *art*, produced by nature. The Victorian era was the golden age for

taxidermy. Having taxidermy in the house was a sign of class and riches. Wealthy ladies would wear (parts of) birds as corsages on their hats and clothing and mantels in houses were decorated with dioramas (Poliquin, 2012).



Fig. 1. *Sisters with hats: one of them with taxidermy (whole bird), as was quite typical for this period* (Shorpy Historical Photo Archive, 1895).

In the 19th and 20th century, the animal preservation methods improved and taxidermy as we know it today got its form. Collecting animals for the scientific purposes continued mainly through natural history museums and universities with scientific collections). This aim of collecting is still strong today, however, with hunting for science no longer being an option, scientists depend on animals that die through natural causes or human interference (e.g., traffic accidents, flying into windows). The second aim of preserving dead animals – to keep them in interiors as a form of art – seemed to have faded between the end of the Victorian era (1900) until around the beginning of the 21st century. Taxidermy for the aim of preserving so called “trophy hunting” (mounting animals killed by a hunter to keep as a trophy) was popular among hunters all over the world. However, this was (and is) barely socially and politically accepted outside of the hunter community, and therefore, did not have a very high popularity between the Second World War and the beginning of the 21st century (Poliquin, 2012). Thus, while the practice of taxidermy has been around for hundreds of years, after the 1940’s it was traditionally considered as a niche field with a smaller set of participants (Patchett, 2010; Poliquin, 2012).

Over the last decade, taxidermy has seen a noticeable rise in news and media coverage. This more frequent coverage, as well as its content, indicates that taxidermy is growing in popularity and is being pursued by people with various backgrounds and interests. More people are joining the practice of taxidermy by taking it up as hobby and/or a profession (Clevesy, 2012; Hoen, 2012; Bishop, 2013; Secorun Palet, 2014; goHUNT, 2014; Scherper, 2014; Blitz, 2015; Mcdonald, 2015; Goodwin, 2017; McCarthy, 2020; Strunck, 2020). This rise in taxidermists may be partially explained by the increase of women taking up an interest in taxidermy. Within the last decade, various taxidermy teachers have noted that women represent 70% to 90% of their clientele (Voon, 2014; Blitz, 2015; Semic, 2016; Connell, 2017). Increased involvement and interest from women are being further demonstrated in the marketplace and taxidermy competitions (Blitz, 2015; McDonalds, 2015; Leckert, 2018). This suspected increase of women being interested in taxidermy can also be reflected by social media, as one taxidermy seller remarked: “Last I checked, 79 percent of our Instagram followers are women” (Leckert, 2018).

Another factor, that may not only account for increased female involvement, but overall taxidermy interest, is that it is becoming more widely understood that animal specimens do not need to be obtained through hunting. While hunting has long provided a major source for taxidermy (McDonald, 2015, Connell, 2017), they are also gathered from so-called *ethical sources*. Coverage in media articles suggests that the public is becoming more aware of ethically sourced animals – which have not been intentionally killed by humans for the sake of taxidermy but died of natural causes or other reasons. Examples of these causes of death include traffic collisions, other blunt traumas (i.e., flying into a window), and planned sacrifice (mostly bred mice and rats) for the purpose of feeding pets or zoo animals. (Jeffries, 2012; Voon, 2014; Secorun Palet, 2014; Semic, 2016; Leckert, 2018; Philips, 2019). As a result, they are generally viewed as ethically sourced. Consequently, using them in taxidermy does not conflict with environmentally conscious lifestyles or other sustainable ideologies. For instance, many new taxidermy-enthusiasts report having plant-based diets (Semic, 2016), a combination that may be perceived as contradictory before considering how the animals are obtained. The increased awareness and prevalence of ethically sourced animals are shifting the perception of taxidermy such that it is increasingly recognized as a field that aligns with sustainability and other eco-friendly topics. This could contribute to its rise in popularity. The final theme that is derived from the media articles is the beforementioned artistic use of taxidermy. The goal of taxidermy, apart from collecting for scientific reasons, is no longer

only the preservation of the most life-like, naturally adequate animal. The media write how the “new generation” of taxidermists often view themselves as artists (Scherper, 2014; Blitz, 2015; McDonald, 2015; Semic, 2016; BMTN, 2018; Leckert, 2018; McCarthy, 2020).

To conclude, the large amount of newcomers is noticed by academics and journalists, and could be explained by a multitude of reasons, such as the rise of ethically sourced animals and the artistic implications of taxidermy. In the following section, I will define and describe different types of these taxidermy practices.

2.2 What is a taxidermist and which disciplines of taxidermy are there?

2.2.1 What is a taxidermist?

A taxidermist is a person who prepares a dead animal for preservation. This is achieved in a variety of ways, such as placing the animal in a jar of alcohol which will prevent it from decay for centuries. The term taxidermy, however, specifically refers to the arrangement of skin (Etymonline, 2021). This process always begins with a first cutting into the animal’s skin. The skinning can then begin from this incision point, by peeling the skin off from the body (akin to a human taking off clothing). After the skin has been removed it is washed and cleaned. Thereafter, it is up to the taxidermist how to proceed towards the end result.

2.2.2 Which disciplines of taxidermy are there?

Considering both traditional taxidermy as well as the recent developments within taxidermy culture, three main disciplines of taxidermy are described:

2.2.2.1 *Classic taxidermy*

There are taxidermists who prefer to realize the most natural looking animal, which means that the skin of the animal will be mounted on a fake skeleton (made of sticks and wire, etc.) to give the animal a life-like appearance. These taxidermists will be addressed as *classic taxidermists*. They can sell commercially (selling taxidermy to private costumers, museums or institutions such as hotels or restaurants), work as a hobbyist or volunteer for a natural history museum and so forth.



Fig. 2. Example of classic taxidermy. *Steenmarter 4* (Walen, 2021).

2.2.2.2. *Scientific taxidermy*

Second, there are taxidermists who create study skins for natural history collections (like myself), often for the benefit of scientific research and knowledge (Duncan, 2018). A study skin is made by stuffing the skin with kapok (or any other dry stuffing material that the taxidermist prefers) and then sewing the skin back together. Study skins are not fixated on giving the animal a life-like appearance. No glass eyes are placed in the animal and the animal is oriented in a simple posture (i.e., laying flat on its abdomen or back), primarily so that it can be neatly fit into a storage drawer. This is convenient for research purposes as researchers can make the most of their storage space and arrange the prepared animals in a systematic, organized manner. For study skins, the primary objective is to ensure the animal will remain in good condition (intact skin, fur, feathers) for a long period of time. With the collection of specimens stored and readily available, researchers can compare and contrast large samples of animals within and between taxa (Duncan, 2018).



Fig. 3. Study skins. *Acht baardmannen* (Kompanje, 2020)

2.2.2.3. Artistic taxidermy

A third category of taxidermists are artists that use the craft of taxidermy for their artistic creations and designs. This group cannot be generalized, since each artist has their unique work and vision. However, there are some common styles within the artistic use of taxidermy:

2.2.2.3.1 Rogue taxidermy

Rogue taxidermists challenge the realism of classical taxidermy by creating sculptures by using (parts of) dead animals (Niittynen, 2018). These taxidermists consider themselves a group of artists that aims to be the opposite of classic taxidermy, which the rogue taxidermists view as colonial and masculine, as described by Niittynen (2018). Rogue taxidermy is also sometimes referred to as a pop-surrealist art movement and most of these taxidermists are women. With their work, the rogue-taxidermists create self-reflexive work and criticize *speciesism* (human assumption of superiority which leads to animal exploitation) as well as *anthropocentrism* (the notion of humans being the centre of all things and beings). Rogue taxidermists claim to be informed by animal rights and aim to use only ethically sourced animals for their work (no animals were killed for the purpose of taxidermy). (Niittynen, 2018).



Fig. 4. Rogue taxidermy (Brewer, 2020).

2.2.2.3.2 Botched taxidermy

Botched taxidermy is an artform that is described by Baker (2008) as an artwork that might represent an animal or a human, without necessarily being a presentation of either. Botched taxidermy can thus represent anything with the usage of dead-animal parts a material, without necessarily representing that animal as an individual or as its species. The artworks by the famous artist Damien Hirst of animals in formaldehyde are considered as botched taxidermy by Baker (2008) because the animals are not intended to represent themselves. The artworks do not give answers (e.g., what does a sheep look like?), but instead raise questions. The dead animal is used in a creative way, without the purpose to represent its species.



Fig. 5. *Damien Hirst - Away from the Flock* (Saatchi, 1994).

2.2.2.3.3. Anthropomorphic taxidermy

Last, there is anthropomorphic taxidermy, best known because of the late taxidermist Walter Potter (Creaney, 2010; Morris & Ebenstein, 2014). Anthropomorphic taxidermy is making dead non-human animal seem human like, for example by posing the animal in a human posture or dressing the animal (Henning, 2007). This style is often distinct from other artistic taxidermy, since it is commonly viewed as kitsch. However, Creaney (2010) states that anthropomorphic taxidermy can denounce how humans view non-human animals and how they are portrayed in western modern culture, testing the boundary between how people view life and dead and between reality and fantasy.



Fig. 6. *Walter Potter: Rabbit's village school (late 19th century)*. (Bolventor, Potter's Museum, 2003).

Although these three styles (rogue-, botched- and anthropomorphic taxidermy) are acknowledged, the role of the artistic expression with the use of taxidermy can vary outside of them, since there is no limit to artforms. To conclude, not only are there more taxidermists in general, but these taxidermists are bringing new disciplines or ways to use taxidermy. Next to the classic (traditional) taxidermy and the scientific taxidermy, there is the rise of artistic taxidermy. This suggests that the value of taxidermy is expanding, and there is a need for these various forms of taxidermy (beyond classical practices) to provide worth for scientific, artistic, and philosophical purposes.

2.3. Which values can be found in literature and how can they be categorized?

Taxidermy can generate a range of different values by the public as well as the taxidermists. To categorize these values that are derived from the literature, I have used the research rapport *De waarde van cultuur* (Elhuizen et al., 2020). For this rapport, the researchers created five main value-categories that culture can carry, based on previous research. The categories of this rapport are chosen to apply to this study since they are broad and easily applicable across various forms of culture. While the beforementioned rapport is focussed on culture as a whole, here I will apply the categories on taxidermy as a form of culture. The five categories are: (1) *Cognitive* and educational values. These values represent what individuals and groups of people can learn from taxidermy and how taxidermy impact memory, perceptions, emotions etc. (2) *Mental and physical health*. (3) *Economic* value (i.e.,

money value as well as tourism or jobs). (4) Value of *experience*, both intrinsic (i.e., a taxidermist loves how beautiful animals are) and extrinsic (a taxidermist meets new people through their job). (5) *Social* values such as social cohesion, creating tolerance and emancipation.

2.3.1 Cognitive values.

Cognitive values can range from scientific and educational values (what can the taxidermist and/or public learn from taxidermy or a (dead) animal) to inner thought processes, emotions and philosophical thought. However, those last concept can also be linked to *experience value* (Elkhuizen et al., 2020). Therefore, the choice has been made to mainly focus on the scientific and educational values concerning the cognitive category. The following values have been derived from the literature:

2.3.1.1. *Scientific and educational values.*

Taxidermy can teach taxidermists, the public as well as researchers a great deal about the animal kingdom. A study by Frank (2020) focuses on the role of taxidermy in considering the return of wolves in Switzerland, which involved Frank interviewing a group of taxidermists. These taxidermists were representing the wolf through their work, in order to educate the public as well as contribute to the research on the returning wolves. The scientific purpose of collecting animals is mostly done by preparing *study skins*. This niche of taxidermy is not focused on making the animal look life-like, nor does it have an artistic purpose (although the specimens are often aesthetically pleasing). The purpose of making study skins is to collect a variety of species in order to create a natural history collection that can be used for further research (Duncan, 2018; Szabo, 2019; Kabir & Hawkeswood, 2021). On a personal note, besides the importance of preserving animals for science on a bigger level, I value the process of making a study skin just as much. I care about what the actual skinning teaches me at that moment. My museum colleagues and I typically find the most interest and passion discussing the animal and its natural body, rather than the finalized study skin. The preparing of the study skin teaches us about non-human animals as well as our own bodies. However, the collection of finalized study skins is meant for scientific and educational purposes on a grander scheme. To learn more about the animal species, the study skins are needed for their measurements, colours, DNA and so forth. Being properly preserved, the study skins, as well as the life-like mounts, can educate generations to come. This educational value is of value for both the taxidermists, as well as the public or researcher.

2.3.2. Mental and Physical health.

Can taxidermy have (mental) health benefits? Although this is hard to measure and no former research has been done considering this question, two benefits from taxidermy have been derived from the literature:

2.3.2.1. *Creating a healthy relationship with the concept of death.*

The use of animal skin in contemporary art is often with the purpose of discussing the role of the *living* animal within human culture, for example, how humans treat animals. However, Hansen (2014) argues that conversation about the living animal cannot be separated from the topic of death and dying. According to Hansen, the use of animal skin as a medium by contemporary artists sparks conversation and thought within the public, around the topic of mortality, both natural and cultural. Therefore, taxidermy can hold the narrative of life *versus* death. Taxidermy can cause conversation on death, which can be educating for the public, including children (Sanders & Hohenstein, 2015). With taxidermy being inseparable with death, the topics of living, dying and all topics related are encouraged by the material that is used: the dead animal. Sanders and Hohenstein (2015) argue taxidermy can be the source of these conversations, which is found to be healthy and educational for people of all ages. This argument is supported by Monroe (2018) who's essay explores the relationship with death that people in current western society have, in relation to taxidermy. Monroe concludes by advocating a more open conversation on death, to which (the practice of) taxidermy can be of support. To conclude, a taxidermied animals can serve as a (often beautiful or fun) tool to start a conversation on death by the public, but what role does it play with the practice of taxidermy?

There is no study on this, however, the taxidermy practice can be compared with other crafts. For example, a study by Serlin (2007) describes how art therapy can address or call to the existential stress individuals endure. Creating something out of materials can remind people of compelling and complex topics, such as their own mortality. To work with taxidermy is to work with death, bringing the individual face-to-face with the topic of mortality. In her book *Mortician Dairies* (2010), the mortician Knight Nadle promotes engaging in a dialogue on death with yourself or with your loved ones. She explains that this conversation does not have to be sad or scary, on the contrary, it can be uplifting. She describes how discussing death can make people appreciate the time they have. Another theme that comes back in her book is how she explains that working with death brings her closer to life than anything else. When we link this back to practicing taxidermy, it is easy to see how the taxidermist is exposed to the mortality animals, including humans. If we take the

words of Knight Nadle in consideration, this realisation of mortality can make people appreciate their own lives even more. However, the book *Animal death* (Johnston & Probyn-Rapsey, 2020) opens with a more sceptic sentence: “Animal death is a complex, uncomfortable, depressing, motivating and sensitive topic.” The book is a bundle of various stories on animal death, but primarily focuses on the actual period in which the animal dies, something many taxidermists are not faced with. For example, hunters or veterinarians that practice taxidermy are (or could be) faced with how their animal died, because they killed or euthanized the animals themselves. They faced the animal *peri-mortem* (near the time of death) and/or *ante-mortem* (during the time of dying). Many other taxidermists, however, only experienced the animal *post-mortem* (after dying) (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural history, 2009). As explained earlier, many (new) taxidermists prefer ethically sourced animals, which are in most cases dead before the taxidermists receives the animal. To conclude, the finalized taxidermied animal can serve as a tool for the public to start a conversation on death, which might address their fear of mortality and thus improve a healthy relationship with the concept of death. In the case of taxidermists, using dead animals as material can have the same results.

2.3.2.2. *Crafting improves your (mental) health.*

Books such as *Craftsmen* (Sennet, 2009), *The Creativity Cure: How to Build Happiness with Your Own Two Hands* (Barron & Barron, 2013) and *The case of working with your hands* (Crawford, 2010) emphasize the importance of creating something physical. Crawford writes about how he finished his PhD but did not enjoy his post-graduate life behind a laptop. According to him, getting your hands dirty and learning a craft could not only teach individuals a set of skills, but could leave them feeling happy and fulfilled. A renewed interest in a variety of craftsmanship since the 21st century has been noticed by academics (such as Frayling, 2012 and Klamer, 2012) and journalists (Bourdain, 2019; Schouwenberg, 2019; Binisol, 2021). This interest is often linked to studies that claim practicing arts and crafts provides therapeutic benefits (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). An important note is that art therapists also encourage people *without* trauma, disabilities or diseases to enjoy the benefits of creating arts and crafts (Regev & Cohen-Yatziv, 2018). However, the interest in ‘doing something with your hands’ is not just mentioned in these recent studies. In 1844, Karl Marx wrote about *alienation* (Marx & Engels, 2009). He described how a factoryworker could have a disturbed relation with the product he was making, because every day, he would work a particular aspect of the final product (e.g., the worker’s job was to put a nail in a chair on an assembly line). According to Marx, creating an object by yourself, and seeing the finalized product

being realised, has a positive influence on your happiness. Also, in 1990, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published his bestseller *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. The author describes how, when we are working on something fully concentrated, we can enter the flow-state in which we are most effective, creative and sometimes even the happiest. This can be linked to the study of Johnson Maynard, an author of a recently republished taxidermy manual (2020), who said taxidermists learn the great skill of patience and care, by enduring many difficulties while facing the extremes (referring to the exposure of death). In short, practicing the craft of taxidermy might be good for the taxidermist's mental health.

2.3.3. Values of experiences.

As described in section 2.3.3, experience values can overlap with cognitive values. Therefore, the choice has been made to focus on intrinsic and extrinsic experiences, mainly considering emotions (feeling). The following two feelings/experiences have been derived from the literature:

2.3.3.1. *Feeling close(r) to nature.*

While working with animals as material, individuals are close to nature and can learn more about it (Kalshoven, 2020). From the taxidermist's perspective, one can observe a variety of animals while holding it in one's hands, feeling and seeing all the details of the animal's body. For the public's (or viewer's) perspective, a finalized taxidermied animal also provides the opportunity of getting close to nature. The animal is cleaned and static (i.e., will not run or fly away), giving the viewer the opportunity to observe all kinds of animals from a close distance that is normally not possible in the wild (or zoo). In some cases, the viewer can touch the taxidermied animal, to feel its feathers, fur or skin or to notice the sharp teeth or claws. Both taxidermists and the public are educated by the animal and therefore feel closer to nature in both a literal- (being physically close to the animal) and figurative sense (being educated by viewing taxidermied animal, the viewer learns and might thus feel closer to nature in general) (Basu & Zandi, 2015). This relates to the intrinsic experience of feeling individually closer to nature, for both public and taxidermists.

The study *Reconstructing Dead Nonhuman Animals: Motivations for Becoming a Taxidermist* (Eliason, 2012) is an attempt to grasp why individuals want(ed) to become professional taxidermists. Forty-four individuals from Montana (USA) participated on a survey that collected their demographic data (such as age and race) and asked them questions about why they became taxidermists. Most of the respondents were hunters. The results

revealed that the love for nature was the most frequent reason respondents gave for why they practice taxidermy. Eliason ends the study by explaining the results did not (fully) answer the question what taxidermists find fulfilling about the practice. The documentary *Stuffed* (Derham, 2019) follows a group of various taxidermists. “I get to study nature. That is the most satisfying thing in the world” is a quote derived from one of the taxidermists filmed for the documentary. “I was blown away by the beauty of the material” says one of them. “It’s about the intimacy between the wonders of art and the secrets of science”, says another. These are some of the many quotes from the film that provides insight into what draws people to taxidermy and it depicts a range of emotions and perception individuals have about practicing taxidermy. The study by Eliason (2012) explores motivations to become a taxidermist from mainly hunters and the documentary *Stuffed* (2019) give various answers to the question why individuals want to become taxidermists, so both of them do not lead to clarity or explanation. However, it becomes clear that ‘getting close to nature’ is of value for the taxidermists.

2.3.3.2. *Experiencing artistic value.*

In the past, taxidermy has not been considered as art, even if presented as such, due to the absence of a discourse in art history around the production and display of taxidermy (Prottas, 2012). Within the past decade, however, this discourse has been written and still is ‘under construction’, with Giovanni Aloï as a main contributor. For his journal *Antennae* (2021), which so far has 52 issues, Aloï invites experts, artists and other thinkers to publish their story on nature in visual culture, including many contributions of taxidermy artists. The journal so far has held an ongoing debate on ethics around the use of dead animals in (contemporary) art, each issue inviting another thinker or artist with a different view on the topic. In addition, Aloï has published a number of his own research on taxidermy and taxidermy art, such as studies on botched taxidermy (2015a), animal studies and art (2015b) and *Speculative taxidermy* (2018). These contribute substantially to the discourse around taxidermy as art, which puts taxidermy on the ‘map of art history’ which was missing before as determined by Prottas (2012). These different studies by Aloï discuss the artistic value of taxidermy. However, Aloï solely focuses on taxidermy used as or for art, made by artists. What does this mean for the artistic value of classic taxidermy, used outside of the artworld (such as an art-gallery)? A quote from a taxidermist derived from the study by Frank (2020) touches upon this subject:

What I would fight against, what I would not support and what I would never do is to use such a scene as cheap showmanship and, thus, to actually also misuse these

animals. I would not approve of that. [...] it would be a simple thing to display these wolves, this scene, more dramatically. But that is exactly what wasn't wanted. (p11)

The subjective and individual perspective of the taxidermist is captured in this interview. The taxidermist did not want to create a dramatic scene, which in his/her eyes comes off as cheap. A work by a taxidermist in a natural history museum is often anonymous, not showing the name of the maker on the object label, unlike an artwork in an art museum which is accompanied by the name of the maker on the label. This suggests that taxidermy artists (can) derive different values than anonymous, classic taxidermists. The work of the artist has to be recognizable, and its signature is of importance: the artists value their name being linked with their work by the museum public. This is often not the case for classical taxidermists, however, the classic taxidermist is strongly present by the style of the work, by the choices they made. Each taxidermist has their own perception and value, and each mount will reflect those perceptions and values. Therefore, the artistic value of taxidermy for classic taxidermy might not be present in the most literal, direct sense (the taxidermied animal is meant as art), however, a personal artistic signature is present. This touches upon both intrinsic as well as extrinsic values. The individual might value creating something artistically, which is an intrinsic value. At the same time, the taxidermy artist might also value the recognition (or any reaction) of the public, which is an extrinsic value.

2.3.4. Economic value.

It is difficult to value taxidermy economically. The path of taxidermy on the art market has been, and still is, a bumpy ride. From its golden age in the Victorian era, to being condemned to the attic of our society in the 20th century, to getting back up its feet again in the past 2 decades (Poliquin, 2012). The current popularity of taxidermy can be illustrated with the success of some taxidermy artists and sellers. Taxidermists Sinke and Van Tongeren started their company around two decades ago. It is one of the most successful fine taxidermy businesses in the world, also known for their contributions to the work of Damien Hirst. Because of their expertise, usage of antique bases and domes and turning each fine taxidermy work into a piece of art, buying from this company can cost from 2500 for a small exotic bird up to 48.500 euros for a mandrill (Darwin, Sinke & Van Tongeren, 2021). *De Museumwinkel*, also located in The Netherlands, has become a popular store to buy taxidermy. However, they offer animals with prices (much) lower than Sinke & Van Tongeren, due to the simpler postures of the animals and their cheaper bases and domes. Purchasing a mounted lion from this company will cost around 35.000 euros (De Museumwinkel, 2021).

The auction house Christie's had an auction in 2015 with the works of artist Maurizio Cattelan, who is known for his use of taxidermy in his artworks. The work that sold for the highest price at the auction was his Ostrich, with a realized price of almost 1.770.000 euros (Christie's, 2015). The selling, buying or collecting (antique) taxidermy objects and artworks is not simple business. To ensure the protection of (the rights of) the animals, there are many laws one has to consider, some of them different to regions and very complicated (Shinholser, 2018; Journal of Antiques, 2020). However, it seems these laws have not prevented taxidermy from having an established spot in the art market.

Although the abovementioned companies are successful, the economic value of taxidermy varies just as the economic value of art. It all depends on the buyer, the seller and the context. But economic value is not just about how much money a taxidermied animal is worth. For example, the natural history museum in Leiden, Naturalis, had 275.000 visitors in four months in 2019 (Naturalis, 2019). Visitors often make accessory purchases, such as foods and drinks, parking costs, museum tours, and items from the gift shop. These purchases are investments in the museum and the visitors that come to see the stuffed animals ensure the jobs that the natural history museums maintain.

To conclude, the economic value of taxidermy differs and is sensitive to context. However, it is clear that there is economic value in a variety of forms generated by taxidermy.

2.3.5. Social value.

Social values can vary from networking to creating social justice (Elkhuizen et al., 2020). The social value of taxidermy can therefore be implied in different ways. First, there might be a possibility that by being a taxidermist, one can meet like minded people such as other taxidermist and thus create a network. Second, taxidermist might use taxidermy with the purpose of emancipating living animals. For example, making an artwork out of a dead piglet to raise awareness on the situation of piglets in slaughterhouses. These are some examples of social values of taxidermy and being a taxidermist, however, the following three themes have been derived from the literature:

2.3.5.1. *How human culture values animals.*

Kalshoven (2020) describes how trying to make a dead animal look life-like again through taxidermy has the risk of de-individualizing the animal that once lived. The argument of Kalshoven suggests that the individual animal is valuable, since the concept of *risk of losing* is used. The importance of the valuation of the individual animal, or the animal with unique personality, is further emphasized by Krebber & Roscher (2018). These writers analyse biographies on (famous) individual animals and add an important argument: if the

individuality of the animal becomes apparent to the public, people will feel more empathy for that animal. This might lead to more concern about animal well-being. The idea that personality in animals exists is not commonly discussed, with the exception of pets such as dogs or wild animals such as apes, although personality can be measured across a wide variety of animal species, such as squid (Gosling, 2008) and insects (Mikhalevich & Powell, 2020). This results in a lack of representation of animal rights and research on animal ethics on a variety of species. For example: a dog has more rights in western Europe than a cricket (a cricket has no recorded rights) although individuality in both species can be measured. To conclude, the individuality of the animal is of value in taxidermy, however, when taking the words by Kalshoven (2020) into consideration, taxidermy might de-individualize the animal.

Poliquin (2013) also describes an analysis of the cultural role and story of taxidermy in our society and she considers what the taxidermy object is. Is it indeed an object, is it an animal, or something in between? In her most recent publication on this topic, Kalshoven (2020) describes how by using the deceased animal as material it is very easily objectified. Furthermore, Johnson (2016) argues in her essay how portraying the animal as art, and thus an object, reassures the public. By objectifying the animal, the viewer is (unintentionally or intentionally) told by the narrative of the artwork that the animal is an object and therefore different than humans. It separates the animal (art/object) from the viewer (human/non-object) and so, Johnson argues, takes the human worry away – that of being an animal. Therefore, taxidermy can also carry the narrative of separating humans from non-human animals. On the one hand, taxidermy values the individual animal and on the other hand, taxidermy has the potential of objectifying animals. This emphasises the complicated relationship humans have with non-humans animals. This also becomes clear in the books by Madden (2011) and Poliquin (2013), which are commonly referred to if one is looking to learn about modern-day taxidermy. Both are written by non-taxidermists, who claim to be obsessed with either the practice or the finalized product. Madden:

I'm not a typical person to fall in love with taxidermy, if such a person exists, and yet that is exactly what happened. I've fallen in a kind of obsessive, curious love with this thing, and as a result I began to feel if not closer to animals then at least as though animals have begun at last to feel closer to me. (Madden, p-2)

The role of taxidermy in the relationships humans have with animals varies. As discussed earlier, taxidermy can bring humans to feel closer to nature and animals. From another perspective, working with dead animals as material for art or having a dead life-like taxidermied animal in a personal interior, can refer to a sort of ownership (humans own animals). However, Niittynen (2018) wants to emphasise the critical narrative (rogue) taxidermy can carry, in order to remind readers that human beings are an animal species. Niittynen argues humans should acknowledge our shared (undeniable) characteristics with others animal species, such as mortality and vulnerability. In short: taxidermy can remind the viewer of their animal-self. On the other hand, Johnson (2016) argues in her essay that taxidermy in the arts can often be “misplaced animal advocacy”. These topics are also explored by the beforementioned anthropologist Kalshoven who, in her 2018 study, investigates the relationships between the living human working with the deceased non-human animal. Creating a life-like mounted animal by using taxidermy and the recent renewed interest in this practice, says a great deal about the current relation between humans and non-human animals. Kalshoven explains how there is a trend in social science that argues for a more interspecies approach in research, meaning that people can learn a lot about humans if scientists compare and contrast (the behaviour of) animals with (that of) humans.

2.3.5.2. To deliver a message to the public.

In the beforementioned study by Frank (2020), taxidermists were interviewed. As the taxidermists tell Frank their ‘wolf stories’ it becomes clear how strongly these taxidermists observe the living animal and how the process of posture is created. For example, one taxidermist was quoted:

So, I had a look at some videos showing how the wolf hunts. Actually, it is a perfidious hunter. Is not like a cat, who simply creeps up, grabs and kills, as fast as possible. The wolf just bites it [the prey] in the bottom and then it waits until it gets weak and then it bites into its leg at the front and ... it [the wolf] is not the one who kills the victim as fast as possible. But it tries to ... actually it [the wolf] begins eating it [the prey] while it’s still alive, until it is dead. And that is the mean thing about the wolf which I don’t really like [he smiles quietly]. And that’s why ... I didn’t want to ... I couldn’t show that in taxidermy (Frank, 2020, p. 9)

The taxidermist here has observed wolves to learn about them, with the desire to show their most natural behaviour in the final taxidermy product. The feeling and dilemma the taxidermist enters, as he explains, is that he does not want to show the public the ‘mean’ side of the wolf. He then says how he *could* not show that in taxidermy (Frank, 2020). This reveals two things: (1) the taxidermist observes living animals thoroughly to represent its natural posture in taxidermy, meaning the living animal is of value for the process of taxidermy and (2) taxidermists (can) value showing the ‘good side’ of the animal. This might be since taxidermists hope the public will like the animal, in order for them to care about the species displayed.

The artist Singer describes how she uses ethically sourced animals for her contemporary artworks. She uses taxidermy in her work to deliver a message to the public about the current state of animals and how badly humans can treat them. She finds a paradox in this message she wants to achieve, compared to how roughly she must handle the deceased animal to get it into the desired position (Marvin & McHugh, 2014). In his study on taxidermy art, Aloi (2015a) describes two stories of taxidermy. One, the classic ‘old fashioned’ taxidermy that is often viewed as a negative by-product of the 19th century (referring to colonialism and mass-killing of the animals) and two, the current hype around taxidermy such as displaying taxidermy in “hip” interiors. Aloi’s research, however, focuses on the more frequent use of taxidermy in the arts. He describes the animal bodies used in art as a medium to “haunt” the viewer by reminding the public of different themes such as the role of non-human animals in human western society that is accompanied by reoccurring problems. From Aloi’s research three different narratives of the taxidermy product are defined; 1. The reminder of colonial times; 2. The hip artifact and; 3. The artwork that awakens the debate on the relationship humans hold with non-human animals. Artists can use animals in their artwork to deliver a political or social message.

However, artistic taxidermy is not the only form of taxidermy that can be used to deliver messages to the public. By exhibiting life-like mounted animals that are either extinct or endangered to be extinct, natural history museums try to raise awareness of the current mass extinction of species (often referred to as the Sixth Mass Extinction Event) (O’Key, 2020). Through showing the remains of these species, natural history museums try to evoke sadness within the public, feeling the loss of a specific animal. Grief can play a role in raising awareness on these endangered or extinct species. Furthermore, exhibiting these mounted animals have the potential to criticise the role of humans within this mass extinction. In this

way, taxidermy can carry the narrative of mourning and loss. However, O'Key also questions the reliability of the effects of these exhibitions and questions if these natural history museums should rely on the feeling of mourning from their audience in order to raise awareness.

2.3.5.3. *Brining gothics together.*

Taxidermy can be associated with gothic styles (Mondal, 2017). This goes two ways. Firstly, the media in popular cultural has portrayed taxidermy as linked to horror themes. The research by Mondal (2017) takes the film *Psycho* (1960) as an example, where the main character in the movie, the killer, practices taxidermy as a hobby. The man explains how he doesn't know anything about animals, he only likes them dead and stuffed. Mondal explains how taxidermy is deliberately used to add to the gothic style of the story. This narrative is also used in the family-film *Paddington* (2014) where an evil taxidermist is out to kill the little bear called Paddington (the main character of the film). The movie portrays this taxidermist as a twisted antagonist, killing animals to fulfil her obsession of improving her stuffed animal collection. *Psycho* and *Paddington* are just some of the many examples of how taxidermy is used in media to give, for example a film or book, a horror or spooky feeling. By making a character a taxidermist, the writer can emphasise the character's obsession with killing and death. The taxidermist in this perspective enjoys having the power over dead animals, which likely contributed to a negative view on taxidermists by the main public. Secondly, which is likely to be a result of the first point, taxidermy has a position in gothic styles and trends and is therefore often liked by people who identify as gothic. To put taxidermied animals into their interior is a way of exposing their love for all things gothic and horror. Because of this, taxidermy can carry the narrative of 'spooky' and morbid themes (Mondal, 2017).

To summarize, the social value of taxidermy on one hand is taxidermists trying to emancipate animals through taxidermy and raise awareness, partly by exposing the personality of the animal. On the other hand, taxidermy has the ability to objectify animals, which reassures the public that humans are different than non-human animals. To add to that, taxidermy can be associated with gothic themes and can strengthen a horror film or serves as a token of identification for people who identify as gothic. Since the social value of taxidermy varies as such, it is a challenge to measure its value.

To conclude, a variety of values and narratives are derived from the literature and these are distributed into ten categories listed above. According to Bateman (2013), however, the list of values and narratives that taxidermy objects can carry are endless and without boundary. Whether the object is referred to as natural (classic) taxidermy or as art, Bateman

argues that each mounted animal has its own story to tell: “They talk to us and function outside of the boundaries of classification: they function outside of the limits of subject and object, art and nature” (p 72). The argument Bateman makes is an interesting comparison to what is described earlier in this chapter, namely the individuality of the animal. Each living animal has its own personality and individuality, and so does each taxidermy animal. It carries the story of the animal that once lived, the perspectives and values of the taxidermist/artist, the context in which it is presented and the public by which it is viewed.

2.4. How do the disciplines described in sub question 1 match with the values described in sub question 2?

In this section, the disciplines described in the first sub question will be matched with the values described in the second sub question. The aim is to understand what features of practicing taxidermy are highly (or lowly) valued across the different disciplines and why. In this manner, these matches based on the literature can be compared to the results to determine whether these values indeed differ per discipline according to the analysis of the interviews of this study. Because most of the values that are described match multiple disciplines, the matches between the two will be categorized with the values as a starting point to maintain a clear overview.

A challenge of categorizing in this way is described by Elkhuizen et al. (2020): some of the categorized values overlap, such as the cognitive effects and the (intrinsic) experience values. Both of these categories of values refer to emotions and what is happening in the inner world (or mind) of an individual, such as what they are contemplating, reflecting or feeling. Therefore, substantiated by the claim of Elkhuizen et al., I emphasise that none of the categories are strictly framed. They are a tool to put values into perspective, give clarity and simultaneously grant the possibility for overlaps between values and effects. The matches between values and disciplines discussed below are therefore fluid, but are categorized as logical as possible.

2.4.1 Cognitive values matched to taxidermy disciplines.

The scientific and educational values of taxidermy are first and foremost present in scientific taxidermy. Study skins are made with the purpose of their scientific value. However, classic taxidermy also holds scientific and educational value. Classic taxidermy placed in natural history museum are showed to the public often with the purpose of education. The beforementioned study by Frank (2020) describes an example of this, where wolves are taxidermied in their most life like position for the purpose of educating the

museum public about the natural life of wolves. Therefore, classic- and scientific taxidermists most likely value cognitive effects (as described in section 2.3.1) for their work, such as scientific- and educational benefits. Scientific values might be less present with artistic taxidermists since the artworks often do not represent the animals anymore. If animals from different species are sown together like in rogue taxidermy, the different body parts can no longer be used for scientific measurement and analyses. In addition, these artworks are labelled as “art” for example as an art-museum object. They are not part of a scientific collection, preserved in order to fit the strict guidelines that these collections have (such as data of the animal that has to be labelled: where and when the animal was found, cause of death, measurements, determination etc.).

2.4.2 (Mental) health values matched to taxidermy disciplines.

Section 2.3.2.1 described how taxidermy can initiate conversations surrounding the topic of death, potentially benefiting individuals by fostering a healthy relationship with the reality of mortality. Both taxidermists working with dead animals and the public being exposed to the finalized product can benefit from this. This may be of value for all taxidermy disciplines, since all taxidermists work with deceased animals as material which can alter their relationship with the concept of mortality.

Section 2.3.2.2 continues with the mental health benefits of working with your hands, or crafting. Again, taxidermists of all disciplines can value these benefits. Regardless of whether the purpose is to create, the craft of taxidermy is present with all types of individuals who want to preserve animals. Creating something can be very beneficial for individuals, providing a sense of achievement, confidence, and improve overall happiness (as described in section 2.3.2.2).

Furthermore, a factor which is not discussed in section 2.3.2 is that scientific taxidermy can be of value for the physical health of humans. Modern DNA analysis on natural history collections can advance historical and evolutionary knowledge, including that of homo sapiens. Scientists can then apply this knowledge in a variety of fields for human health, such as providing the foundation to advance medical technologies and treatments. Indeed, study skins are considered to provide value beyond their relevance to the specimen’s species and have the possibility to contribute to human health (Pavid, 2021).

2.4.3 Values of experience matched to taxidermy disciplines.

Feeling closer to nature, as described in section 2.3.1, can again be valued by taxidermists of all disciplines. Working with deceased animals and learning about them,

taxidermists can feel closer to the natural world. However, classic- and scientific taxidermists have the desire to ‘keep the animal as it is’, without creating something new. Taxidermy artists, such as rogue artists, do create something new, for example fantasy animal species. This may require a different valuation of getting close to nature. Whereas classic taxidermists might value nature as it is, it is possible artists value their personal relation with nature. Through their artistic expression, they explore that relation.

The artistic value described in section 2.3.3.2 is, logically, presumed to be most important for taxidermy artists, since their goal is to create art. However, this doesn’t mean the artistic value is expected to be completely absent from the other disciplines. Although the final products created by classic- and scientific taxidermists isn’t considered as art, the process of mounting an animal could grant the taxidermist some creative expression. From my personal experience, I do not intend to make art when I make study skins. However, the process of arranging the skin can make me feel like I am sculpting. This is an example of the many ways individuals might value artistic expression, regardless of their discipline.

2.4.4 Economic value matched to taxidermy disciplines.

The economic value is mostly present in classic taxidermy. Commercial taxidermists who sell life-like taxidermy rely on their customers for their livelihood. Economic value is nearly absent from scientific taxidermy (although natural history collections can be bought and sold, however, this has mostly economic benefits for the museum than for the taxidermist). The economic value of taxidermy for artistic taxidermy is more complicated. Whereas most artists are and remain poor (Abbing, 2008), some taxidermy artists have broken through, such as the beforementioned Hirst and Cattelan.

2.4.5 Social value matched to taxidermy disciplines.

The social values described in section 2.3.4 are expected to be most present within the work of taxidermy artists: addressing the individuality of the animal, questioning its role in society and delivering a message to the public through the medium of taxidermy. An example of delivering a message to the public is the work by Studio Vlindertje (fig. 7.). A taxidermied weaner piglet, preserved with the purpose to tell its personal story. The piglet was collected dead from a slaughterhouse by the artists, who added the red rope to emphasize the scars of the pigs made by the butcher. In addition, the pig has human glass eyes instead of pig glass eyes. According to the artists, these eyes invite the public to look closer (Smit, 2021).



Fig. 7. *Memories of life, Saga sus domestica carnis* (Smit, 2017).

Although taxidermy artists are expected to value social effects of their work most, classic taxidermy in natural history museums can also deliver a message to the public, as described before in section 2.3.5.2 The classic taxidermist wants to show the best side of the wolf (instead of the mean side) in order for the public to like the wolf.

To conclude, based on the literature the values and disciplines described in sub questions one and two can be matched to one another, however, these remain fluid and might overlap or change per individual.

Method

The aim of this research is to identify, describe and interpret the values and perspectives of a group of Dutch taxidermists on themes that are intertwined with their practices (such as death, animal-ethics, artistic value and the relationship between humans and nature) considering scientific, classic, and artistic taxidermy. Specifically, the research question of this thesis is: *What are the values and perceptions of scientific-, classic- and artistic taxidermists, considering topics related to their profession?* Little research has been conducted from the perspective of the taxidermists. Relying on the existing literature, I have identified and defined values, and categorized them. These categorized values were then matched to the taxidermy disciplines. Interviews with taxidermists were conducted to explore whether this categorisation of values, based on different taxidermy disciplines, is accurate.

3.1 Choice of method

This is a qualitative research design, which enables the ability to perform semi structured, in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2016). The reason for choosing this qualitative research is because I was interested in identifying and describing the values and perspectives of taxidermists by interviewing them. These interviews are highly flexible and thus offer the opportunity to enter certain topics when seen necessary during the interview. Static interviews used in quantitative interviews (such as surveys) do not provide this opportunity. Therefore, qualitative research is the most suitable for the aim of the study and provides a deeper understanding (the ‘why’) of the motivations of the respondents. This methodology facilitated the ability to identify and describe the values of taxidermists.

The method of interviewing used in this study was inspired by *The narrative interview* described by Alheit (1982). The narrative interview is an ethnographic method. The commonly known rules for interviewing used in social science research are discounted for this method, such as asking the same questions in every interview for the study. The narrative interview allows for the story of the respondent to unfold. This storytelling by the respondent will, if correctly analysed, reveal what the respondent values and how. By allowing the respondent to tell the full story, the researcher is given the opportunity to find out what is (not) important for this individual respondent concerning the research-topic (Alheit, 1982). The method of this study is inspired by the narrative interview method but does not put it completely into practice. This means that I did allow and encourage the respondents to tell stories during the interviews (as inspired by Alheit’s method), however, I ensured the main themes from the literature were discussed in each individual interview.

Thematic analysis is applied to the data obtained from these interviews using the software coding programme Atlas.ti. This type of analysis uses coding, meaning that quotes, words, or entire sections of the interview transcriptions are coded. These codes were then compared and categorized into themes based on their similarities and differences. The theory described in the second chapter of this study is then used to interpret the themes. Further detail on the method of analysis is described in section 3.4 of this chapter.

3.2. Sampling

Two types of sampling methods were used. Purposive sampling assured that all respondents were taxidermists. Around fifteen taxidermists with this requirement were contacted through email and interviews were planned with whomever agreed (convenience sampling) to the interview request. This resulted in ten respondents. Table 1 shows an overview of the respondents, including what type of taxidermy they practice. A more detailed description of the respondent can be found in appendix one.

Table 1. Overview of respondents.

Name	Type of taxidermy
1. Paul	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)
2. Judith	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)
3. Vlindertje	Artistic taxidermy
4. Chris	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)
5. Erwin	Scientific taxidermy (classic taxidermy and study skins)
6. Amber	Artistic taxidermy
7. Daniëlle	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)
8. David	Commercial taxidermy (classic and artistic taxidermy)
9. Hanny	Artistic & scientific taxidermy (including study skins)
10. Esther	Scientific taxidermy (classic taxidermy and study skins)

The respondents Paul and Judith work together and the interview took place with both of them at the same time. Their answers will be used individually in the results chapter.

In advance of the interview, each participant received and signed a consent form which protects their privacy and grants permission to conduct an audio recording of the interview. Each interview was 45 to 60 minutes long and was held in the period April 12th and May 3rd. In accordance with national social-distancing recommendations and rules due to the Covid-19 pandemic, six of the interviews took place on an online platform (Skype or Zoom).

The other three interviews took place face to face, in the workplace of the respondent. These respondents preferred physically meeting while maintaining 1.5 meter distance. Interviewing virtually can bring obstacles such as internet connectivity issues. However, that only happened once in practice and was solved quickly.

3.3. Concept formation & Operationalization

3.3.1 Concepts

Some concepts used in this study might be defined or used differently in other studies or contexts. In order to clarify what these concepts entail for this study, the definitions are formed below. The main concepts are:

1. Classic taxidermy: Life-like taxidermy, animals mounted in their natural shape or form. A classic taxidermist is someone who makes this type of taxidermy.
2. Taxidermy art: The definition of art varies greatly and is discussed by many scholars. However, *aesthetics* (beauty as well as ugliness) and *expression* are two concepts that are often included in those definitions (Bast et al., 2014). Therefore, a taxidermied animal is considered as art when there is a combination of those two concepts. Primarily, a taxidermied animal is considered art when the taxidermy artist deliberately attempts to express their personal artistry using dead animals, with the aim of an aesthetic experience for the public. A taxidermy artist is someone who creates art with the craft of taxidermy as the medium. Note: Classic taxidermy could also be seen as art, depending on the scenario/context and if it is presented as such (for example, the exhibition *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome*, Nevada museum of art, 2004).
3. Scientific taxidermy: practicing taxidermy with scientific purposes, which most of the time entails creating study skins.
4. Values and perspectives: For this study, I used the value categories from Elkhuisen et al. (2020) (see section 2.3), which describes the concept of value as something that can mean everything and nothing and all in between. The word *value* has been so often used in history in so many different contexts, that it became a paradox in which the word *value* almost lost its value (Elkhuisen et al., 2020). Therefore, I opted for simplicity and used the following definition (although it's more of a guideline) for this research: how individuals think or feel about a certain topic, what their opinion is, how they appreciate something, how important they consider it, and if and how they relate to the topic.

The following definitions are based on the study by Elkhuizen et al. (2020):

5. Cognitive value: the scientific or educational benefits and/or purposes of (practicing) taxidermy.
6. Mental and physical health values: refers to the health benefits than can or could be derived from (practicing) taxidermy.
7. Values of experience: emotions and feelings, both intrinsic (“I feel I can express myself through taxidermy”) or extrinsic (“Practicing taxidermy makes me feel close to my father who is also a taxidermist”).
8. Economic value: varies and is sensitive to context. It can refer to the amount of money a taxidermied animal is worth, or to workshops taxidermists can teach to earn money. However, many other topics might refer to economic value of taxidermy, as discussed in section 2.3.4.
9. Social value: refers to social cohesion and the connection between individuals and/or groups. For example, the relationships between taxidermists. Additionally, it refers to the possible social benefits for animals because of taxidermy. For example: taxidermy art can address mistreatment of animals by humans which can lead to emancipation of animals by the public.

An interview guide was created on the basis of these concepts. This guide was reflexive, meaning that after each interview the guide was reviewed and revised. This was a process of continuously identifying possible issues that the guide holds which are discovered during interviewing. The purpose of maintaining a reflexive guide is that it has allowed me to, for example, ask my questions in a more effective way than I did in the last interview. If a question was not received or understood smoothly in an interview, I could word it differently in the next. Each interview started with an introduction of the research, making sure each respondent understood the aim of the study. The interview guide can be found in Appendix two.

3.3.2 Operationalisation

The operationalisation of these topics (how these topics will be measured/detected in the transcripts) is based on the literature. Therefore, topics from the literature are expected and applied in the operationalisation. However, the qualitative method of this research also allows for unexpected topics to be detected, which have not been described in former research.

Table 2. Operationalization

Concept	How is it measured
Cognitive values	The respondent discusses what they have learned from taxidermy or discusses how they practice taxidermy for scientific purposes.
(Mental) health values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The respondent discusses how practicing taxidermy and/or creating something physically makes them feel healthier, better, happier or calmer, etc. The opposite can also be measured, for example when the respondent talks about how practicing taxidermy can be hard on their body. 2. The respondent discusses how practicing taxidermy has changed their relationship with the concept of death, or how they made peace with the concept of mortality through practicing taxidermy.
Values of experiences	The respondent discusses how they experience feeling close(r) to nature due to practicing taxidermy and/or how they feel they can express themselves (artistically) using taxidermy as a medium. Values of experiences can be further detected when a respondent discusses how practicing taxidermy makes them feel and/or which emotions the craft brings them.
Economic value	The respondent discusses any topic related to taxidermy and money, earning, selling, buying or any other economic theme.
Social values	Respondents discuss the relationship humans have with non-human animals, or how they use taxidermy to deliver a message to the public, or how they use taxidermy as an artefact that relates to how they identify as gothic. Social values will also be detected when respondents talk about the social relationships between taxidermists, or any other social topic related to practicing taxidermy.

3.4. Methods of analysis

The interviews have been recorded on audio and transcribed. After transcribing, the interviews were coded by using Atlas.ti, which resulting in 52 codes. The process of open coding is to name quotes of importance. When a respondent said something that linked to one of the concepts and it was considered of value for the research, it was coded. Additionally, unexpected statements that were not linked to the concepts, but were identified as important, were also coded. For thematic analysis, the codes have been compared and contrasted to each other. Through studying this and linking codes to each other, the codes where linked to one or multiple of the value categories as described by Elhuizen et al. (2020). These groups also became the themes described in the results. The interviews were all in Dutch. The quotes used in the results section to illustrate these results were translated from Dutch to English.

3.5. Validity and reliability

The method of this research, the results and findings were described step by step to achieve transparency in the methodology and procedure. By in-depth interviewing a small(er) group of taxidermists, the values and perceptions were put in context and gives deeper insights. This resulted in qualitative data that cannot generalize a population (taxidermists) but does provide the change to better understand a sample of that group.

There were minimal ethical limitations in this study. Interviews were only conducted after informed consent was given and personal privacy was (and will continue to be) protected. All participants were free to ask for insight about the study to and were kept free of deception.

3.6. My position as a taxidermist in this study.

In his research, Weeks (1996) argues that the best way to analyse an activity (in this case study) was by using what he called *unique adequacy requirement of methods*. This means that a researcher practices the actual activity (of the group) that they are studying, to have first-hand experience and greater comprehension of the topic. This is opposed to learning about the activity through secondary or external sources, thus learning how to discuss and interpret the topic. For his study, Weeks (1996) observed an orchestra. He described the difference between *trying to understand* the music in order to follow what is going on in the group, versus *feeling* this automatically as an experienced musician. This method provides the researcher irreplaceable knowledge about the topic, and further reduces the time commitments needed to thoroughly investigate the topic. I used Weeks (1996) theory to substantiate my argument: as a practicing taxidermist, I am uniquely suited to study taxidermists. I have

unique insight and experience in the topic and this benefits my methodology and conclusions. My experience means that I did not have to perform extensive study into understanding the practice of taxidermy. Furthermore, I was already comfortable with discussing taxidermy-specific concepts such as death, animal materials, animal preparation and preservation, etc. Since I am familiar with much of the background knowledge and fundamentals of taxidermy, I had the opportunity to focus my time on the purpose of this research, which is understanding the values and perceptions of taxidermists.

4. Results

The results are divided into the five value categories which were described in chapter two. These categories are: (1) cognitive values, which focus on scientific and educational values, (2) (mental) health values, (3) values of experience (such as feeling closer to nature and the artistic expression), (4) economic value and (5) social values (such as the message taxidermy can deliver to the public). The main aim was to discover what taxidermists value and if those values differ across disciplines. To address this aim, ten taxidermists from three disciplines have been interviewed: classic-, scientific- and artistic taxidermists. This chapter presents the results of those interviews.

The first section of the results chapter describes if the values derived from the literature in chapter two were found in the interviews with the taxidermists. Furthermore, it describes unexpected results, such as values and/or perspectives regarding themes that were not found in the literature. The second section of the results chapter then describes if and how the values from the results can be matched to certain disciplines, as described in section 2.4. For instance, if taxidermy artists indeed value the artistic expression more than scientific- and classic taxidermists, or if all three disciplines value artistic expression similarly.

4.1. Can the values, derived from the literature in chapter 2, be found with the interviewed taxidermists and/or are there other values?

4.1.1. Cognitive values

Section 2.3.1 described how taxidermy can have scientific and educational purposes. Indeed, several respondents expressed how they value the scientific benefits or purpose of practicing taxidermy. Firstly, Erwin described how the building of scientific collections is his purpose of practicing taxidermy. He says how he values the usefulness of collecting scientifically. By collecting one hundred birds from one species, he can observe the variation across individual birds and how they have adapted to different environments. These birds can provide scientific value. For instance, DNA can be sampled from individual specimens and registered in large data sets. Furthermore, the noted differences across animals can provide physical evidence supporting adaptation and evolutionary-based theories. The birds can be further analysed for various purposes such as comparing and contrasting their anatomy with different tools and measurements (i.e., x-rays) or determining their eating habits by inspecting their digestive tracts. Erwin explains how it excites him when there is little known about a

bird. It fuels his interest and he wants to know more. He says, “I have a scientific curiosity that I want to satisfy”.

The scientific value of practicing taxidermy is mostly expressed by respondents discussing their love and interest for anatomy. This was something all ten respondents shared, how they learned about the physical body from observing the dead animal. Judith describes how that is what she finds most beautiful about the craft of taxidermy. She explains how, when she looks at the animal up close, she can see how cleverly the organism is put together. That is what Judith finds to be most fascinating about the profession. Chris has similar views, stating how much he still enjoys the natural “constructing” of a bird, even after all his years of experience (+/- 60 years). According to Amber, taxidermy grants her the opportunity to learn about anatomy in three-dimensions, whereas most people only get to study anatomy from a picture. This is substantiated by David, who says he obtained all his anatomical knowledge from taxidermy. Esther says it’s like a surprise every time again “When you look inside its stomach, and you think, wow, what did you eat?! I just like that so much”. She further continues how taxidermy made her very aware about how muscles are positioned inside the body. Through practicing taxidermy, she can now look at an animal or even a human, and have an intuition of what it looks like from the inside.

Hanny is also very fascinated by anatomy. She explains how someone can start practicing taxidermy with the purpose of making art with the skin, but can suddenly find themselves surprised by how wonderful all of the organs are that they find within the body. Hanny further explains how taxidermy even inspired her to follow an education in scientific illustration. She wanted to know how people and animals are built. She is fascinated when she cuts an animal open and she sees all the colours and shapes of that anatomy. Studying this helped her recognize and dissociate different organs and understand how they work. She can now recognize “blueprints” (her choice of word when describing how an organism is anatomically built) which are very similar throughout different species. Hanny says that by learning about anatomy and these blueprints, she is becoming a better taxidermist. She continues by saying how there is no limit or finality to this learning process. She ends by saying:

I just saw how connected we all are. How everything is connected, actually. It was such a pure feeling. I wouldn’t call it a spiritual feeling. But you do feel, hey, everything is connected. That’s how I got closer to learning about my own blueprint,

and in that way, I felt closer to nature. – Hanny

When comparing these results with the literature (section 2.3.1), three things can be concluded. First, the scientific value of collecting study skins, as derived from the literature, was emphasized by two respondents. Erwin and Hanny were the only ones that expressed how they value “the greater good” of practicing taxidermy for science, which means collecting study skins for the purpose of scientific research. Second, as opposed to this “greater good”, all respondents (including Erwin and Hanny) talked about how they value their own individual scientific interest and learning process while practicing taxidermy. This matches my own personal experience described in section 2.3.1, where I explained how my colleagues and I discuss the animal during the practice of taxidermy more than we discuss its final stage as a study skin. The dissecting of the animal, observing it, learning about its anatomy as a taxidermist in that moment, is valued more by the respondents than the “greater scientific good” (the use of taxidermy for science). The personal experience and educational impact of practicing taxidermy on the taxidermist as an individual is thus more valued than the scientific use of the final taxidermied animal. The two respondents Erwin and Hanny, however, valued both (individual learning process and greater scientific good) as equally important.

4.1.2. (Mental) health values

Section 2.3.2 focused on the possible benefits of (practicing) taxidermy considering health, both mentally and physically. Most of the themes derived from the literature focusses on mental health, although there can also be benefits from natural history collections, such as research that will lead to useful findings for modern medicine (as described in section .3.2).

4.1.2.1 Coping with the concept of mortality

The first mental health benefit that taxidermists might value from practicing taxidermy, is that taxidermy starts a conversation and thought processes focused on the topic of death. As described in section .3.2.1, talking about death can lead to a healthier relationship with the concept of mortality, which can bring inner reflections about life and an overall peace to mind, as opposed to possible stress individuals might endure when conversation on death is taboo (Knight Nadle, 2010). Practicing taxidermy is innately connected with a dead animal to which taxidermists are physically exposed, which forces the concept of death to become tangible and physically present. The following interview results are focused on whether the taxidermists are indeed comfortable with the concept of death.

Firstly, Paul sets the tone by describing how, by practicing taxidermy, he got used to “it” (referring to the concept of death). He says that anyone can become familiar with anything, and in his case, taxidermy allowed him to become accustomed to working with dead animals. Judith says that as a taxidermist, she frequently ends up studying nature. She explains how she might see a bird of prey catching and eating a smaller bird, which she views as perfectly natural. However, when there is a video of this killing activity posted on Facebook, Judith is surprised by how many individuals respond by saying it is very sad and horrible. She figures part of being a taxidermist also means learning that death is a realistic and natural occasion. Esther and Hanny describe similar statements and further discuss how it was their childhood that already made them comfortable with the reality of death, even before taxidermy did. Esther explains she lived on a farm when she was younger and that she was exposed to many dead (or dying) animals. These experiences resulted in her realizing death wasn’t scary and that it is normal. She continues by saying how she has never held so many dead animals in her hands as she did in the past years (due to her practicing taxidermy) and she says she is handling that surprisingly well, considering the amount of death she faces. She also noted how she does not find it strange to show dead animals to other people and thinks it might have a positive effect on their views on mortality. Esther notes that she is not afraid of dying it all. She says by telling her loved ones she does not feel stress about her own mortality, they may find peace with her death when the time comes, knowing she was at peace with it.

Hanny also explains how she has no fear of death and dead animals or humans, because she grew up in nature. She takes a similar example as Judith, by describing she would see a crow eating a baby bird when she was young. She learned that those events are part of life. Hanny discusses that as a child, she grew up very close to the reality of death. She explains by how, in contrast, some children are given books by their parents about farm animals and that everything in the book is cute and fuzzy. According to Hanny, farm life is nothing like that, on a farm you might see a cat playing with half dying mice, or you would hear the gun shots of people killing pigs for slaughter, and that’s the true farm life. The same thing goes for working with a dead rat for taxidermy, she continues. When the body and brain of the rat do not work anymore, that rat is gone, it’s dead. Hanny explains that people have to realise it is no different for humans when they die. It is the way it is and there is nothing horrible or romantic about it, she says.

The stories described above show that, firstly, using dead animals for taxidermy is something a taxidermist can become accustomed to. Second, being a taxidermist naturally involves learning about the reality of nature and that death is part of that reality. Third, growing up in nature can already give taxidermists one step ahead in the process of accepting the concept of death. Fourth, talking about death might indeed lead to being more comfortable with the reality of mortality, which agrees with the beforementioned statements by Knight Nadle (2010).

In addition, three respondents say how it is of value to pose a taxidermied animal in the posture how the animal was found dead, so the taxidermied animal is clearly dead to the public. Amber: “I often pose the animals to make it seem like they are dead. They are dead of course, but that I pause that death”. Vlindertje has a similar view, saying:

I want him [the weasel] to be clearly dead, as dead as he is. I want it to be clear to the public that he is dead. And by doing so, I want that moment between life and death, before decay starts, to last forever. Actually, by posing him like that, he will always remain dead. – Vlindertje

Erwin, too, says that he wants a picture of how the animals are found dead, because that is how he wants to pose them. To him, that is a way of honouring the dead animal. There is no pretending the animal is alive. The animal is dead and it is most valuable to recognize its dead, Erwin argues.

Furthermore, both Amber and Vlindertje explain how taxidermy allows them to explore their personal views and feelings on the concept of death and that they find it interesting and/or strange how other people (i.e., non-taxidermists) can be horrified by it. To start, Vlindertje says how her work as a taxidermy artist has showed her how hypocritical society handles and views death. She finds it bizarre that if an animal dies, it will often be hidden by people. She says how that is more frightening to her than death itself. Vlindertje asks herself why that is and where it comes from, that people can be so horrified by death. She explains how taxidermy is a great tool for the mourning process and a tool to facilitate being comfortable with death. Vlindertje: “By practicing taxidermy, you are physically working with the dead animal. You wash him, you take care of him, blow-dry and comb his fur. It’s a form of very loving care.” According to her, taxidermy therefore helps people progress and understand their emotions involving death. Amber created a ritual, where every

time she takes an animal out of the freezer to start working on it, she lights a candle. She explains how she might walk around with the animal in her arms, sometimes even talking to it. She says it helps her cope with, but also honour, the death of the animal. Amber has had similar experiences as Vlindertje, where people were hesitant about her artworks because death was involved:

I notice... I made for example stuffed animals out of real animal fur, from rabbits. With the idea that people can hold the dead animal and cuddle and hug it. That is often the thing you miss when your rabbit dies [...]. I noticed that children understood it right away and they would grab the stuffed animal... But there are adults that still think: "oh boy, ill take my distance and how scary". – Amber

Chris feels the same about being comfortable with death. Because he grew up with taxidermy (his father was a taxidermist) he always had peace with the role of dead animals in practicing taxidermy. He further states that he does not fear his own mortality. However, there were two instances in his career where the project made him emotional. Chris is known for his skeleton preparations of whales. For his first whale, Chris went in a boat to spot a whale on a sandbar which according to reports wasn't doing well. When Chris arrived, the whale died in front of his eyes.

That was such a big amount of life that went out of it [the whale]. It touched me. I did not expect that to happen. I thought, well I'll be damned, I've seen so much death before and now I feel this... I felt pity. And before [it happened], I thought I will get to work quickly because he will be nice and fresh, but, yes, I just did not expect to feel that way. – Chris

Chris describes that the moment with the whale was on the edge of getting emotional because death was involved. However, another time it was harder for him to keep it together. That was when he got the assignment by a museum to prepare a premature foetus on alcohol for an exhibition on reproduction. On that moment, his wife and premature born son (who recovered and grew up healthy) were in the hospital, his son was the same size as the foetus for the museum. Chris explains how he expected to do the assignment without any trouble,

but it was harder for him than expected. He thought that nothing involving death in his job as a taxidermist could hit him emotionally, but these were two occasions that it did.

To conclude, earlier in this section is described how taxidermists value that practicing taxidermy has a positive effect on their relation with the concept of death. Also, posing the taxidermied animal in a way it is clearly dead, can be of value for this conversation on death. Furthermore, respondents explain how they think other people should know more about the reality of death, as a means to make peace with it and to not find it horrifying (or romantic). Practicing taxidermy or holding a taxidermied animal might even contribute to the mourning process someone has with the loss of someone they care about (i.e., family, friends, pets), or to learn how to deal with emotions surrounding death. However, even though a taxidermist is used to working with dead animals, that does not imply the person is emotionless about this work.

4.1.2.2 Does crafting make you happy?

The second mental health benefit that taxidermists might value, is the positive effects that crafting can have on one's mindset or happiness. Nine out of ten respondents indeed described how they value the positive effects that practicing taxidermy has on their mental state. Paul explains how he, when he is practicing taxidermy, forgets everything around him. He illustrates that by saying the radio is always on, but he never remembers what songs were playing. Judith says: "It's mindfulness. You are in the moment, doing one thing with your full attention". Vlindertje also talks about how practicing taxidermy evokes mindfulness to her, because she has to be very focused. Erwin compares it to yoga and meditation, making study skins makes him feel at ease. Esther emphasises how much she values the peace and tranquillity practicing taxidermy brings her. She explains that she is diagnosed with ADHD, and that sitting for a long period can be hard for her because she has lots of energy and always wants to move. Esther explains that she is also an artist and makes graphic illustrations, but practicing taxidermy is the only thing that really makes her focused and capable of sitting still for a long time. She is very thankful for that and for the patience she has learned from being a taxidermist.

Hanny makes a similar point by bringing the example of being in a fight with someone or having trouble at work. Practicing taxidermy makes her forget about all of that. She continues by saying: "The best thing about taxidermy, is that you have to stay focussed. You enter a sort of flow state and it feels very nice." This description can be referred back to the

theory by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described in section 2.3.2, which described this state of flow as beneficial for the mental health of individuals.

However, Hanny further explains how it is not just practicing a craft that forces her focus, it is also since the craft of taxidermy involves working with nature. She compares it to walking in the forest. When someone doesn't pay attention, they might trip over a fallen branch. Nature forces them to pay attention. So Hanny claims that it is not just the fact that taxidermy as a craft can have a calming effect, it is also because a taxidermist is working with an animal, and thus nature.

Both Chris and David expand on the claim that practicing taxidermy is beneficial for the mental state, by saying it helps them take a step away from everyday society. Chris explains how he can imagine lots of people needing or wanting to get away from the computer they have been working behind for years and start creating something beautiful themselves. He thinks working in modern society limits the opportunities for people to experience those feelings and that's why individuals start looking for a new craft to begin with. David also mentions how taxidermy helps him get away from society:

It is a kind of inner peace. You lose yourself. It is wonderful. I can lock myself up in my atelier for eight hours straight. [...]. And that is also getting away from society, letting go. It is the same passion which a football-player feels in a stadium, that feeling I get sitting on my office chair in my atelier. – David

To summarize, many respondents find the practice of taxidermy to have similar positive effects like that of mindfulness. Furthermore, they value how it teaches them patience and focus and offers them an escape from everyday life. Amber also finds it to be relaxing, however, she says that after finishing a taxidermy piece she can feel both physically and mentally tired. Physical tiredness comes from using her body (arms, hands, shoulders and back) to create something from the material she envisions, whereas the mental tiredness arises from focussing for hours upon hours, making sure she is not making mistakes. She notes how these processes can be draining at times.

One respondent, Daniëlle, expresses feeling quite opposite from the others. She describes how practicing taxidermy for her is her occupation, nothing more than that. She says that some taxidermists say practicing the craft feels like yoga to them, but she does not feel the same, however, she wishes it would feel like that to her. There are two reasons why

she does not feel practicing taxidermy relaxes her. First, she finds it to be physically exhausting, for the same reasons described earlier by Amber. Second, Daniëlle refers to herself as a perfectionist. Because of this perfectionism, she drives herself to make no mistakes and strives for the most perfect results. On the one hand, this ensures that her taxidermied objects are of very good quality. On the other hand, she is never satisfied. This satisfaction of finalizing the project might be an important factor in whether practicing taxidermy does or does not have benefits for an individual's mental state. As Daniëlle describes, practicing taxidermy does not feel relaxing to her because she is rarely satisfied with her work. Chris, on the other hand, is happy when he is finished with a project and explains it makes him feel good and satisfied to look at his finalized work. Therefore, feeling satisfied and content with the end-result might also contribute whether or not the taxidermists notice benefits to their mental state.

To conclude, nine out of ten respondents state that practicing taxidermy can feel calming and describe it with concepts such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga and being in a flow-state. Two respondents say how practicing taxidermy helps them to escape from everyday life or society for a moment. Furthermore, creating something with their hands makes them happy and is a welcome contrast to sitting behind a computer. All respondents indicate that they have learned useful skills and attributes from practicing taxidermy, such as patience and the ability to focus. This has even been mentioned by one respondent as a way to focus on the animal for a longer period of time while dealing with the urge to move along due to ADHD. Another respondent has argued that is not just any type of crafting that allow for all these benefits, its also due to the fact that the craft of taxidermy specifically uses animals. This brings the taxidermists close to nature and nature has a calming effect. However, besides of these benefits, two respondents state that practicing taxidermy can be both physically and mentally tiring. The last factor that was discussed is the importance of feeling satisfied for a good feeling about oneself. If the taxidermist is not satisfied with their finalized project, they might not value mental health benefits as much as others that do get satisfaction out of their work.

4.1.3. Values of experience

4.1.3.1. *Feeling close to nature*

Section 2.3.3.1 described how taxidermy has the ability of making both taxidermists and the public feel they are close(r) to nature (Kalshoven, 2020). Furthermore, results from the study by Eliason (2012) show that the primary motivation of being a taxidermist is to be close

to nature. The results from the interviews are in agreement with these findings, since all respondents have shared how they value being close to nature through the practice of taxidermy. To start, Erwin explains by saying he has always loved being in nature, especially to watch birds. Apart from the economic value (see section 4.1.4), the main reason he started practicing taxidermy was because he wanted to be closer to birds and learn more about them. Through practicing taxidermy and thus observing birds up close, he finds he gained admiration for birds. He further realized as a teenager, that he could not get any closer to animals than he could with taxidermy. He explains that he would often go to the zoo to watch animals, but nothing matched the closeness he felt when handling a dead animal for taxidermy. Daniëlle also explains how she always had a deep passion and love for animals and nature. She finds it to be an honour to work with animals, which you would normally not see so up close. Judith has the same experience, saying being so close to nature is her favourite part about taxidermy.

Esther says that, by practicing taxidermy, she has learned a lot about nature and animals, which makes her feel closer to nature in general. This statement agrees with the study by Bazu and Zandi (2015), which claims that taxidermy can teach individuals about animals, and in that way make those individuals feel closer connected to nature. Amber, Hanny and Chris describe as well how they all love nature and are animal lovers. Chris added that a taxidermist has to value feeling close to nature, otherwise the work they produce will not be good. David takes it up a notch, explaining:

Nature is what is most important. Many taxidermists have that, they are very committed to nature. [...]. More than most animal activists¹ who plea for a better environment. I think a lot of taxidermists share that with me. – David

To summarize, all respondents value feeling close to nature through the practice of taxidermy. Specifically, some of them feel there is no way to get any closer (physically) to animals. By being physically close to animals, the taxidermists learn more about them, and thus, about nature. This learning process consequently results in the taxidermists feeling mentally closer to nature. Three respondents claim a taxidermist needs to value this closeness, to produce high quality and meaningful taxidermy. Lastly, one respondent states that many taxidermists are more closely connected to nature than most animal activists.

¹ Translated from Dutch: “Damschreeuwer” – David.

4.1.3.2 Taxidermy as medium for artistic expression

The artistic value of taxidermy was heavily debated and discussed by the respondents. More than expected, they shared their various opinions on the artistic use (and artistic value) of taxidermy. For clarity, the results of this section are therefore categorized into sub-sections. (When) is taxidermy art?

The respondents discussed whether or not taxidermy is art and if so, which factors constitute it as art. Judith expresses her view on this subject by saying that artists create and classic taxidermists re-create. She jokes in saying, classic taxidermists are realists and taxidermy artists are surrealists. Statements by Vlindertje, Amber and Daniëlle agree with this, noting that art has an extra dimension, such as a background question, emotions or social- and ethical issues, which classic taxidermy does not address. Amber adds to that by saying classic taxidermy is not art, because it must submit to a set of rules, such as making the animal look as life-like as possible. Artistic taxidermy on the other hands grants for artistic freedom and thus does not have to submit to these rules. Vlindertje says, however, that taxidermists (including classic taxidermists) create fairy tales. She explains this by saying that taxidermists take something that people find horrific and make it beautiful. Thus, they create fairy tales, Vlindertje claims. Chris explains how he went to art school and he does not think classic taxidermy is art. He says that his art teachers would ask “what do you want to say or address with this work?” whereas classic taxidermy doesn’t address anything, it just needs to satisfy the costumer. Esther has a different perspective – all taxidermists are artists and all taxidermy is art, regardless of the discipline. She rationalizes this by explaining that all taxidermists are creators. According to her, even scientific collections can be seen as art, being little artworks (referring to study skins) that form one big artwork together, created by humans. She adds that the practice of taxidermy can also be seen as art. She refers to pictures being made of animals while in the process of being skinned, tanned or posed by taxidermists. Esther finds that this practice already carries a certain aesthetic by itself, regardless of the final product. David also has a unique opinion, describing that nature is what makes taxidermy art, not the humans creating the taxidermy. According to him, the art is already within the appearance and form of the animal by nature. It is merely the task of the taxidermists to prevent this natural artwork from decay.

Why choose taxidermy as a medium to make art?

The next section presents why some of the respondents chose to use taxidermy to make art. Vlindertje explains that she is fascinated by the relationship humans have with animals. To explore this relationship in her art, she says the presence of an actual animal is needed. She continues by explaining she feels a sort of guilt towards how humans treat animals. She wants to honour the animals by presenting them as art, and in a way receive some symbolic forgiveness for how poorly animals are treated by humans. In this manner, she deals with the emotions of her own grief (relating to society's treatment of animals). Hanny has a similar perspective, she explains that taxidermy has allowed her to make things that are otherwise not possible. Danielle similarly says she used to make art with real animals to make her artworks more unique. Amber further describes how the use of real animals in art allow her to express something other materials can't. According to Amber, this is because dead animals are fragile and vulnerable, which has a uniqueness to it. She explains the use of animals help her to tell stories related to this vulnerability. More on the use of taxidermy in art to deliver a message to the public can be found in section 4.1.5.

Valuing the artistic use of taxidermy

This last sub-section presents the various opinions of the respondents on different usage of taxidermy in art, which show how they value artistic taxidermy. It became clear that at least five respondents specifically disapprove of anthropomorphic taxidermy (posing or dressing taxidermy animals like humans, see section 2.2.2.3.3). Paul and Judith find it bizarre and disrespectful. Chris describes anthropomorphic taxidermy as tacky. He also denounces certain other forms of taxidermy art, explaining how "people want it ugly or weird. They mess up an entire sheep and call it art.". He continues by saying how he doesn't disapprove of all taxidermy art. If the artists use very subtle touches of taxidermy within their work, then he can appreciate it. But sewing together different species is a 'no-go' for him. Daniëlle also does not approve of anthropomorphic taxidermy. She explains that some taxidermy art can be beautiful, but anthropomorphic taxidermy is disrespectful. She says: "Don't make crazy idiot things. It angers me. [...] It dishonours the animal when you make the animal funny or as entertainment.". Hanny, who used to make taxidermy art, went on a personal quest around this theme of entertainment.

I started to think. Do people experience my taxidermy art as entertainment, or does it cause more than that? If it does cause more, if they really start to think about how they see animals and what their role is relative to animals, than the work has succeeded and

has a function. But if my work was just for entertainment, if I would make mice with skirts on, that would not be okay. – Hanny

A theme that often comes back in this valuation of art is whether the respondents find the artworks to be respectful or not. For example, when Erwin was asked about taxidermy art, he said he finds it forced and he thinks dramatic sculptures are disgusting and disrespectful. He says the animals should only be posed in taxidermy like they were in real life. He continues by saying:

I don't like it. No, I find it disrespectful. I would never do it myself. Never ever. No, no, no, no. Just, this is it, this is how the animal was. You have to respect that and you have to conserve him like that. – Erwin

That concept of respect often comes back with other taxidermists as well. David has a slightly different perspective on anthropomorphic taxidermy than the others described above. He explains he can appreciate a deer with a top hat or wearing a tuxedo. However, he takes the *Orvillecopter* as an example of art that goes too far. He says the “drone cat” crossed the line of respect.



Fig. 9 *Orvillecopter*, Jansen (2012)

The *Orvillecopter* is an artwork by Dutch artist Jansen (2012), who made his deceased house cat into a drone. Just as David, taxidermy artist Amber finds the artwork to be painful.

“Please don’t do that”, she says. Amber explains her statement: “With some artists I miss that respect and it bothers me a lot. I think it should be much sweeter, friendlier and more respectful.”

Esther and Vlindertje have perspectives that stand in contrast to the other respondents. Vlindertje says she find all taxidermy art cool and interesting, however, she used to be more into taxidermy art that was shocking than she is now. She explains an artist can also make good art without this effect of shock. Esther too, says accepts all taxidermy art-forms. She thinks every form can teach the public something and, furthermore, that it is not the animal used as material which makes it interesting, but the response of the public.

I find it [denouncing taxidermy art] short-sighted. There is always value. A lot of artists work with the animal to show its beauty. That might be entertainment, but it simultaneously stirs up something. I have no trouble with it, for a lot of people it is a rare opportunity to see an animal like that. It might make them appreciate the animal more. – Esther

Analysing these statements, it becomes clear that, for most respondents, there is a fine line in taxidermy art between what they value and what they don’t value. First and foremost, anthropomorphic taxidermy is mostly described by the respondents as disrespectful towards the animal. This seems to be linked to the concept of “entertainment”: is the taxidermy merely meant for entertainment? Then it has no artistic value. Does it have a function other than entertainment, such as an underlying message? Then the taxidermy art is more of value for the respondents. This fine line straddles respect *versus* disrespect for the animal. Most respondents seem to appreciate the subtle, less shocking taxidermy art more than artworks in which the animals are placed in extreme unnatural forms. However, some of the respondents also found that all forms and disciplines of taxidermy art have value.

4.1.4. Economic value

This section describes what the economic value of taxidermy means for the individual respondents. Four respondents explain how they started taxidermy for the purpose of making money. Both Erwin and Chris started selling taxidermy when they were teenagers. Erwin explains that he searched for different ways to make money as a young boy. He found a book on how to make taxidermy and hung a sign up at the local supermarket “Did your guinea-pig die or your parrot fell over? I will stuff it”. Erwin explained he made a nice amount of money doing that. Daniëlle also started to sell taxidermy for her livelihood:

From 2012, I took my art everywhere [...]. People always find it [my art] cool and beautiful and great, but it doesn't sell. And after eight years, I had a turning point. I thought, it's nice and all that people like my art, but I need to make money as well. Now, [with commercial taxidermy] I have so much projects. I have an average of 60 projects and I teach a workshop almost every week. – Daniëlle

Another theme derived from the interviews is that five respondents explain how clients and aspiring taxidermists do not realise how much time and effort is invested to make high quality taxidermy. Paul says a person has to have at least five years of experience before they can start making a living off of taxidermy. Chris tells his taxidermy students that maybe after ten years of experience they will start to impress museums, just like painters. He says: You can learn how to paint, but that doesn't make you a painter". Danielle has a similar perspective, noting that someone stuffing a couple of birds does not make them a taxidermist.

Just as aspiring taxidermists often underestimate the required time they must invest to be successful, the respondents feel that many of their clients don't fully understand the work that goes into taxidermy. Judith says some clients are very impatient. They sometimes offer more money, hoping their project will be done quicker. That is not how it works, says Judith. Paul adds that it used to bother him when impatient clients would search for another taxidermist. Today, he is not as frustrated since he has a high volume of ongoing projects. Amber describes that many people find her work too expensive, yet they don't understand the time and effort that went into it. Danielle expresses similar problems with her clients. However, since she made her prices a bit higher she notices she attracts more serious costumers.

Furthermore, Paul, Chris and Judith discuss their income as taxidermists. Chris says being a commercial taxidermist is not a good career move when considering the pay denominated by hours of work. He notes that his yearly income is sufficient, but he must work seven days a week to achieve it. Chris believes this is part of the reason why his children did not want to become taxidermists, since they have observed the financial struggle. Judith has a similar experience, saying "Let's put it like this, from a taxidermist-paycheck, you can't buy a Louis Vuitton purse". And Paul explains: "You shouldn't think you will get rich. Or think you will earn nice money, because you won't. I try to not live too luxurious. Because if you are used to that, than you shouldn't be a taxidermist."

Another topic brought up by David, Daniëlle, Chris and Paul is the competition of other taxidermists and the saturation of the market. Since 2017, aspiring Dutch taxidermists

are no longer required to obtain a diploma in order to be a registered taxidermist and sell taxidermy, like was the law before (Bos en Fauna, 2017). There are mixed feelings about this change of law among the respondents. Paul is not fond of it, because now everyone can sell anything. Chris explains:

Yes, anyone can be a taxidermist now and it shows on *Marktplaats* (a Dutch website for private buying and selling). There are things for sale that I think, how there they ask that amount of money for that. Look, it doesn't bother me, but taxidermists who do not stick out of the crowd get a lot of competition of taxidermy students who throw everything on the market. Many customers find a bird on the street and send them to the cheapest taxidermist, which is bad for beginning professionals. You can't stand up to that. But, oh well, that's not my problem, I am busy enough. – Chris

David explains he never sells anything on sale, like other stores do. He finds that sales destroy competition. “There are people who sell bats, for five Euros in bulk.” In addition, he thinks you cannot value the life of a bat with five Euros. Daniëlle has a similar opinion on the saturation of the market as explained by Paul, David and Chris. She describes that the market is becoming overrun with the influx of new taxidermists and that this is likely negatively impacting more serious, senior taxidermists. She continues by saying there are disagreements and tensions among taxidermists from them stealing each other's suppliers. Daniëlle thinks taxidermists who sell commercially are particularly problematic.

Up until now my business is going well, but I think there might come a turning point when the market is saturated. Certainly, with the speed in which the Dutch people follow workshops and start to mess around [making and selling taxidermy themselves]. – Daniëlle

As Daniëlle described, the competition is mostly considered a problem for taxidermists who sell commercially. Esther, who makes study skins for a natural history museum, says: “I am so happy we are under the wing of the museum, when you see the fights on Facebook among taxidermists about prices and rules.”

To conclude, the economic value (and economic concerns) of taxidermists is mostly present with commercial taxidermists. These taxidermists explain that they do not earn a significant income and further describe how customers might underestimate the amount of

work that goes into taxidermied animals. Furthermore, some of the respondents warn aspiring taxidermists, noting that they need to invest a lot of time to become a respected, professional taxidermist that can earn a livelihood with taxidermy. Finally, some of the respondents are concerned about the consequences surrounding the influx of new taxidermists and the loose structure for pricing and sales, as these factors may influence their livelihoods.

4.1.5. Social values

The interviews show that most topics the respondents find important regarding their profession are related to social values. Therefore, this section is divided into subsections that discuss these social values.

How taxidermists value animals

1. Individual animal

All respondents talked about how they both acknowledge and value the individuality of each animal, as described by Kalshoven (2020) in section 2.3.5.1. Chris, David, Judith, Esther and Paul all explain how each animal is different and how they, as taxidermists, notice these differences. Hanny describes how she used to be in a taxidermy group that gave all the animals they worked with names, to emphasise on their individuality. Danielle explains that, no matter how hard they will try, a taxidermist can never show the character of the animal when it was alive after it has been taxidermied.

However, both Amber and Vlindertje use their taxidermy art to try to tell the story of the individual animals they work with. For example, the taxidermied piglet described earlier in section 2.3.5.1 (fig. 7) made by Vlindertje. Amber tans and dries the skin of the animal using plants from where the animal lived, to add the life that animals interacted with. Erwin emphasizes that the value of individuality across animals is what's most important. He explains that all animals have different characters and are therefore not interchangeable. By practicing taxidermy and thus studying live and dead animals (mostly birds), he learned about the strong personalities and individualities of each of them.

When I get a bird that is ringed, I already know his or her history. And I think “Oh poor thing, if you would have watched out...”. I also had a seagull that was a chick-murderer. Then I think to myself: well, that saves a lot of babies, that you are now dead. But when I had the mother [seagull] from Alkmaar, I thought: “I wish you would have watched out, silly girl, dear, darling girl. – Erwin

Erwin finds that sometimes, some people do view animals as interchangeable. He refers to many, describing birds and all of their stories, and how all of that is unknown by humans. “We think we know everything, that we are so superior”, Erwin says. He describes another example, saying:

In a bird-rescue centre they feed the birds outside. Rats also get attracted to that. And then this guy says “I already killed a hundred and fifty rats” and then I say: “That is discrimination”. It makes no difference for the individual, whether it is a rat or a sad little duck, they are both individuals. And then if you say the little duck that is sick, I will feed and protect, but the rat that is healthy and living its life, I will kill, then I think you are crazy. Then you are discriminating. It doesn’t matter if it’s a rat, just let it live. It’s an animal with a life, with a story, with friends and family. And then you kill it, because you find rats are a bother to you! – Erwin

To conclude, the individual animal is highly valued by all the respondents. For some, the most valuable part of their taxidermy practice is to honour this individuality.

2. Animal as object

In section 2.3.5.1 is described how Johnson (2016) finds that taxidermy makes animals into objects. Although none of the respondents referred to their taxidermied animals as objects, two respondents did refer to the animals they use as material. Chris says: “I have taxidermied so many animals that I see it as materials, instead of the individuals” and he further continues “I am afraid it is material, but it is very beautiful material”. Hanny, too, explains: “You are looking closely and at one point you begin to see it [the animal] as material”. Therefore, taxidermists might not value animals as objects (even when taxidermied), however, they might refer to them as materials.

3. Humans are animals

As opposed to Johnson (2016), Niittynen (2018) argues that taxidermied animals can remind the public that humans are animals too (see section 2.3.5.1). Amber, Esther and Hanny address this, describing how by practicing taxidermy and thus studying animals, they feel connected with those animals. Furthermore, Esther and Hanny explain how they started recognizing how the bodies of humans and non-human animals are very similar.

To deliver a message to the public

Section 2.3.5.2 described how taxidermy can be used as a medium to deliver a message to the public. This following section is divided into four subsections, addressing the results, compared and contrasted with the literature.

1. Value the living animal

The study by Frank (2020) shows how taxidermists value the living animal. After analysing the results of this research, the living animal can be considered as highly valued by taxidermists, since all respondents passionately discussed their love for living animals, how they study nature, and that they practice taxidermy because of this love. For example, David describes how he will always love living animals more than any taxidermied animal. Erwin says: “It might sound strange, when you are only working with the dead. But I have so much respect for life as in, the life that the bird has.”

2. Deliver a message to the public

Section 2.3.5.2 described how Aloi (2015a) determined three narratives that taxidermy can carry. The third narrative describes taxidermy as an artwork that awakens debate. Vlindertje, Amber, Daniëlle describe how they value the message that dead animals in art carry out to the audience, and how they personally use taxidermy as a medium to transfer a message to the public. Vlindertje explains how she was taught by the art school she went to explain her artwork each time. She later realized she did not have to do that with her taxidermy artworks, because they speak for themselves. Vlindertje wants to give the animal the attention it did not get during its life, by showing its identity to the public. Daniëlle used to make art that had a social message about industrialisation and pollution. She made artworks where animals are trapped in plastic, they want to break free but are forever captured. Amber explains how she wants to maintain the vulnerability of the dead animal by showing her artwork in an intimate way, so that the viewer must make an effort to see the details. She says “A dead animal is so vulnerable, just like when you are standing naked on a stage. You have to protect that and keep it intimate in order to transfer the message correctly”.

Hanny made various taxidermy artworks to create awareness on how humans relate to non-human animals. She wants that her artworks make people think about how they view animals. For example, she took a rabbit that got run over by a car: “I enlarged that. I might a tire-track over it. The rabbit looks up at the audience like: what the fuck are you doing?”. Hanny exhibited the rabbit to visualize a bigger issue, that of roadkill. She decided to make it look a bit like a comic, because that is language humans understand. To conclude, at least

three respondents value the use of taxidermy for art, since they think it can get a message across to the public, to address issues related to animals in human culture.



Fig. 10: The artwork of the roadkill-rabbit in Hanny's atelier. (Windhorst, 2014)

3. Gothic

Section 2.3.5.3 described how individuals who identify as gothic can value taxidermy because they feel it matches their aesthetics. None of the respondents expressed this feeling. However, both Erwin and Chris did share similar perspectives on people who use taxidermy as a gothic element. Chris explains he sees a lot of (especially young) people who view taxidermy as something they can use for their “shaman practices” (addressing rituals and spirits). He says these people are particularly interested in bones and bird species like crows. He continues “Today you have so many of those girls with their black hair and black army-boots and nose piercing who walk into your atelier” and at the end of the interview Chris said, “You know, I am aware that my story will sound very different than the story of a such a girl with black boots and a nose piercing”. Erwin has had similar experiences and refers to them as “those gothic girls” and adds that being a gothic taxidermist is a new trend that came to The Netherlands from the United States. To conclude, none of the respondents identify as gothic taxidermists, however, two respondents claim there is a trend of gothic taxidermists, specifically girls.

4. Other social values

Next to the social values derived from the literature, five themes were discussed by the respondents that as well are of value for them:

1. *Ethical sources*

All respondents expressed that it is important to them that the animals they use were not killed for the purpose of taxidermy. However, there are some nuances across

respondents in what animals they will and will not use. Chris accepts animals from costumers that are hunters if the hunter has a legal permit. He further discusses how, when he was young, he went hunting with his father who was also a taxidermist. Chris does not hunt presently as he believes it is not appropriate. A dialogue from the interview with Chris presents how much he values that the animal comes from a proper (from his perspective) source:

Chris: You can't just go shooting animals. We have deer here behind our house and every Christmas there is a couple missing. I find that anti-social, that people just go and kill those deer. I do not have a lot of hunters as costumers [laughs], because I express myself like this in interviews. If a hunter comes to me with an animal that is legally shot, sure. But don't do it illegal. Don't come to me then.

Eva: And if someone legally shoots a deer behind your house and brings it to you, what are your thoughts in that case?

Chris: Yeah, I would hate that². And I would say, are you out of your mind³? I have a neighbour that proudly brought kingfisher birds to me. They accidentally got trapped in his illegal fish pot trap. Well, I really scolded⁴ at him.

Erwin, Esther, David and Hanny, too, explain how they find it inappropriate to kill animals for the purpose of taxidermy. Something all respondents describe is how they would on occasion accept animals that were legally hunted, for the purpose of managing the amount of wild animals. From the literature review, it became clear that ethically sourced animals are more commonly used for taxidermy. Erwin discusses this matter:

People say "you can't kill birds" and I don't do it, but I do find it hypocritical when you think how we kill 50 million chicken each year in The Netherlands. 50 million per year. And that not even including all other animals we kill for our pleasure. Even though we don't need that. So, yes, very nice such a pseudo-ethical norm, but of course it doesn't make any sense. – Erwin

² Translated from Dutch: "zwaar klote" – Chris

³ Translated from Dutch: "Ben je nou helemaal besodemieterd?" – Chris

⁴ Translated from Dutch: "Die heb ik wel even uitgeoeterd" – Chris

Hanny questions the ethically sourced trend, too. She says mice, that are bred and killed to be food for pet lizards and snakes, are also considered to be ethically sourced by some taxidermists. She doesn't agree with that because those mice had a horrible life. Esther adds to the discussion by saying:

You know what it is, the younger generation think they have to publicly enounce these things [the source of the animals]. I think that is more of a thing for this generation, how the animal died. – Esther

To conclude, all respondents value that the animals they use are not killed for the purpose of taxidermy. However, some of them question the norm that is being held to call taxidermy “ethically sourced”.

2. *Respect*

Another theme the interviews show is of importance, is how the taxidermist value respect for the animal. Amber, Daniëlle, Chris, Erwin and David discuss the concept of respect. Especially Erwin, who explains he has a deep respect for animals and he wants to propagate that while practicing taxidermy. The following dialogue illustrates how much Erwin values respect for the animal:

Erwin: You have to be respectful towards the dead animals. I once had a conflict with someone who didn't care. I said: “Cut it out⁵. You can go very far with me, but being disrespectful towards dead animals...” That sounds strange, that you can be respectful towards a dead animal. But don't throw and fling it [the animal] around. If I don't use a dead animal, I put it away nicely, I don't throw it out. That is a very sensitive topic with me. For me, respect in terms of taxidermy is very, very important. And if a junior taxidermist in the museum doesn't have that, he's out.

Eva: But you do cut the animal open.

Erwin: Yes, yes, but with respect. You can cut an animal open with respect. I find that so important.

⁵ Translated from Dutch: “Nu kappen” – Erwin

David has a slightly different perspective than Erwin, as presented in the following dialogue:

David: Respect is on number one.

Eva: How do you cut an animal open respectfully?

David: In that way I am not very ethical⁶. Look, a butcher does his job, does he do that in a respectful way? He does it his way, I do it my way. So, it's not like I pray to God with every incision I make in the animal. No, not that. You have to stay grounded.

Chris too, has different opinion on the concept of respect:

I find it [respect] to be a hippie-word. So many taxidermists use that word.[...] I get so many animals in my atelier. If that is truly respectful... I think [by using the word respect] you are justifying your work. – Chris

To conclude, respect is a concept that is referred to by multiple respondents, however, it is described and valued in different ways. Where most respondents find respect for the animal to be of importance, both David and Chris question the use and implications of the term “respect”.

3. *Vegan diet*

As described in section 2.1, many (young) taxidermists say they eat a vegan diet. From the respondents, Daniëlle explained she does not eat food from the bio-industry because it is not good for the animals and the environment. Both Hanny and Erwin maintain vegan diets. Both express how they do not find it justified that society breeds and kills animals for the purpose of human pleasure, which in this case refers to eating them.

4. *Pet taxidermy*

In the beginning of 2021, the dog of the family Meiland, who are famous in The Netherlands, died. The family decided to let the dog be preserved by a taxidermist (Mediacourant, 2021). After this news spread, the topic of taxidermied pets was thoroughly discussed and debated by the public. The respondents of this research shared their thoughts on the topic. Amber explains she does not taxidermy any pets, because she feels it will never be the same animal again that the owners knew and loved so well. Other respondents say that

⁶ Translated from Dutch: “Pedagogisch verantwoord” – David

they will taxidermy pets for clients, but they will not do it with their own pets. For example, Chris and Daniëlle, who explain they preserve pets for costumers, but Chris will not do that with his dachshund and Daniëlle will not preserve her bird. David says: “At the moment I have a bond with a dog, then it is a friend, and you do not taxidermy your friend.”

A similar experience is shared by Hanny, who shares an interesting experiment she conducted. She explains that she wanted to only use animals she views are ethical sourced for her taxidermy. To do so, she thought she would raise her own rats to make sure they had a good life and when they die of natural causes, she would use them for taxidermy. That way, she would be certain her sources were ethical. So, after a good life, the first rat died and Hanny put him in the freezer. But when she took the rat out of the freezer, she realized she couldn't use him for taxidermy. She continues by saying:

Look, if you have an animal that you get from the street, then it is just an animal. Then it is just a crow or a rat. But if you have pets, then you are attached to its body. There is a very beautiful and important difference, a very human difference. I thought to myself: “am I a hypocrite now?” So it awakened an ethical debate in my thoughts. I created this plan myself, that if the animal would die after a nice life, that I could use it for taxidermy. But I couldn't, I still can't. – Hanny

To conclude, some respondents express that it is difficult to taxidermy the pets of customers, since it is hard to capture the animal's character. Furthermore, multiple respondents explain they will not use their own pets for taxidermy, either because they don't want to or because their emotions prevent them from doing so.

5. How society values taxidermy

Firstly, Chris, David, Hanny, Paul and Judith discuss how they feel taxidermy is more accepted by society than it used to be. Chris says his children didn't talk about their father's profession when they were young, because it was taboo. Today, his grandchildren do not face the same issue. He further explains how taxidermy is portrayed in the media:

I get interviewed a lot for the newspaper and such. You can trust that they make a nice article out of it. When my father was called by the newspaper, they would edit his words to make it seem he was involved in some shady business. Back then, they made a very unpleasant story out of it. That changed... The attitude of the society is getting better. – Chris

All respondents express that they think taxidermy has become more popular. From the analysis of these parts of the transcripts, three themes became clear that the respondents relate to this popularity. First, there are more women than ever interested in taxidermy. Hanny says, “It was already popular when I started [practicing taxidermy]. Then it was already 25% women [taking taxidermy classes] and today it is half or even more that is female”. Amber thinks a reason for this might be that women can be very caring and practicing taxidermy can be like taking care of an animal. Esther has a different perspective, she thinks women might be breaking away from stereotypes and therefore search for “tough” hobbies such as taxidermy. The second theme related to the popularity of taxidermy is the use of taxidermy for artistic expression. Chris and Erwin say they have noticed more individuals with a desire to learn taxidermy, for the purpose of using it for their art. Vlindertje, Hanny, Daniëlle and Amber explain they started to learn taxidermy for this same purpose. Esther says, “It used to be all man in hunters outfits, so to speak. And I think now the ladies are into it, straight out of art school.” The third theme that the respondents think aspiring taxidermists value, is to become closer and more connected to nature. Judith says, “I think it [the popularity of taxidermy] has to do with the re-valuation of nature.” Vlindertje, Hanny and Amber also believe an important reason to get into taxidermy is because the themes related to nature, such as sustainability, are ‘hip’. David says: “People are not connected with nature anymore, so this way [by practicing taxidermy], they bring nature back into their lives.”

4.2 Do these values indeed differ per discipline?

Section 2.4 described how taxidermists of different disciplines might value different aspects of their jobs. Most of this estimation based on literature matched the results from the interviews with the respondents. However, there were some unexpected findings.

First, cognitive values such as the scientific and educational benefits from taxidermy were indeed most valued by the respondents who practice scientific taxidermy. However, what most of the respondents expressed valuing more was what they personally learned while practicing taxidermy, and the purpose of the final study skin comes after that. Second, the (mental) health benefits were estimated to be valued by all taxidermists. This turned out to be a correct estimation, except to one outlier (one respondent expressed not feel calmer or happier practicing taxidermy). Furthermore, all respondents but one expressed to be comfortable with the concept of mortality. However, practicing taxidermy was not always the cause of this, since some of the respondents explained they were already comfortable with the concept of death (for example, because they grew up close to nature).

Third, the values of experience were divided into two parts. The first one, feeling close to nature, was again estimated to be applicable for all disciplines. After the analysis, this estimation matched the experience of the respondents. The second part, the artistic value of experience, was matched to be valued primarily by the respondents who practice artistic taxidermy. Although this did match the results, strong opinions (including those from artistic taxidermists) were expressed regarding the artistic use of taxidermy. Therefore, not all respondents, even the artists, value all forms of taxidermy art similarly. The difference between respondents for this theme was large, as there was a great spectrum of nuances and values involved. Fourth, the economic aspects of practicing taxidermy are indeed mostly valued (or discussed) by respondents who sell taxidermy for their livelihood.

The fifth category, however, did not turn out to be a correct expectation. Social values were expected to be primarily important to artistic taxidermists. However, after the results were analysed, there were more topics related to social values than derived from the literature beforehand. A range of unexpected topics were addressed by the respondents, such as respect for the animal, the importance of a vegan diet, whether to taxidermy pet's, etcetera. These topics again differed greatly between individuals. Therefore, different social values of taxidermy can be matched to all respondents of this research, regardless of their taxidermy discipline.

5. Conclusion

Over the past decade, taxidermy has evolved as a practice and profession, becoming more diverse with both its members and the type of work that is performed. As such, placing taxidermy (and taxidermists) in one basket is an oversimplification, as there are clear sub-disciplines (scientific, classic, artistic) within the field. Indeed, with this diversification, taxidermists may hold varying values regarding their work and how it pertains to society, and these values may be influenced by the type of taxidermy they practice. The aim of this research was to determine what aspects taxidermists of different disciplines value in relation to their work. Therefore, the main research question was: *What are the values and perceptions of scientific-, classic- and artistic taxidermists, considering topics related to their profession?*

To answer this main question, five sub-questions were explored. The first sub question demonstrated how there are three main disciplines. One discipline is classified as scientific taxidermy and the people within this discipline mostly make study-skins to create a natural history collection for scientific purposes. Another is defined as classic taxidermy, the people within this group want to create taxidermy that resembles the animal in its most life-like state. These taxidermists often work commercially, as opposed to the other two disciplines. The third discipline is artistic taxidermy, of which the artists use taxidermy as a medium to make art. There is a variety of artistic taxidermy forms, such as rogue-, botched- and anthropomorphic taxidermy.

The second sub-question explores the aspects of taxidermy that could be of value for taxidermists (and occasionally the public). To maintain a clear overview of these (sometimes numerous) values, categories were created. These categories were inspired by the research of Elhuizen et al. (2020). Their categorization, of different types of valuation used for culture, was suitable for this research, since they were made for the valuation of culture and taxidermy is an cultural art and/or craft. The categories derived from the research of Elhuizen et al. (2020) were cognitive-, health-, experience-, economic- and social values. This system of sectioning the possible values of taxidermy facilitated the maintenance of a continuous thread throughout this thesis. Furthermore, it revealed how, for example, one taxidermy discipline places high value on economic benefits whereas the other discipline more highly values cognitive benefits. The third sub-question matched the values of question two to the disciplines of question one, which was needed to compare to the results.

Interviewing was used as the method to collect the data. Ten taxidermists from different types of disciplines were interviewed and asked about their perspectives on the

topics derived from the literature. The transcripts were coded, and the codes were matched to the beforementioned categories. These qualitative in-depth interviews and subsequent analysis resulted in addressing the research questions and further discovering unexpected findings. As such, this method was appropriate as the existing literature could be supplemented by aspects that were of value for the taxidermists. For instance, respect for the animal was not derived from the literature but turned out to be highly valued by some of the respondents.

For the category of cognitive values, it became clear that scientific benefits of taxidermy are highly valued by respondents that practice (unsurprisingly) scientific taxidermy. However, even more so, respondents of all disciplines addressed that they value how much they have personally learned from practicing taxidermy, such as the anatomy of animals. Many times, this individual learning process was more highly valued than the final scientific purpose of a natural history collection.

The second category presented how respondents valued the potential (mental) health benefits from practicing taxidermy. All respondents but one explained how they value that practicing taxidermy makes them feel calm, happy, or other positive influences on their mental state. Furthermore, the results revealed that the respondents feel comfortable discussing topics related to death and mortality. However, some respondents explain how they were already comfortable with these topics before they were taxidermists, so practicing taxidermy might not be the sole cause of these benefits.

Third, the experiences of taxidermists were divided into two sections. The first one presented how all respondents value the practicing taxidermy because it makes them feel more connected to nature, both mentally and physically. The second section focussed on the artistic experience the respondents do or do not feel. How the artistic experience was valued varied across a wide spectrum, from loving all taxidermy art to finding it disrespectful to use animals to make art. These artistic experiences and opinions are linked to the individual, more so than to a discipline.

Fourth, the economic benefits are as expected mostly valued by respondents who sell their taxidermy work. However, the economic struggles were more highly emphasized than the benefits. These struggles refer to challenges such as competition and long working hours. The last category focused on the social values of (practicing) taxidermy. These values, out of all categories, were most important for all the respondents. A range of social values were derived from the interviews, beginning with how much the individuality of each animal is valued by the respondents. In addition, the respondents expressed how much they value the

living animal more than the dead animal, which refutes the stereotype often portrayed in media – that taxidermists are obsessed with death and killing. Furthermore, the respondents who practice taxidermy art expressed how they value taxidermy for its ability to help them to deliver a message to the public. What they, as well as some respondents of other disciplines, value about these artworks is that taxidermy art can address political or social issues concerning animals.

The category of social values also included unexpected findings. The existing literature suggested that it is important to modern taxidermists to only use ethically-sourced animals, meaning no animals were killed for the purpose of taxidermy. Although none of the respondents kill animals for this purpose, there were some critical views by respondents from different disciplines on this ethically-sourced trend. For example, the use of mice and rats that are bred and killed to be used as food for other pets (which are widely considered as an ethical source for taxidermy) was criticized. A second unexpected finding was the number of times the concept of respect was raised by the respondents. Whereas some respondents said respect for the animal is of highest value for taxidermy, others questioned how respectable the practice of taxidermy really is, and wondered whether *respectable* is a justified term to describe the taxidermy practice. To carry out their respect for animals, three respondents maintain a vegan or vegetarian diet.

Another theme that was discussed by five respondents – of which one is an artistic taxidermist – is whether to taxidermy pets. The conclusion was two-fold: 1) The respondents mostly accept to taxidermy pets of customers, however, they often warn the customer that taxidermy can never catch the character of the beloved pet and 2) four respondents expressed they cannot or will not taxidermy their own pet, for reasons often linked to emotion. The section on social value is ended with results revealing how the respondents think the role of taxidermy in society is valued. They express there are multiple factors on why taxidermy has gained popularity over the past decade, namely: more women are interested than ever, individuals want to be closer to nature and taxidermy provides a unique medium to use as an artistic expression.

I chose to conduct a qualitative research method for this investigation to further understand how and why values are formed by the respondents. Although interviewing allows for further questioning, this method is limited by the amount of time interviewing (and transcribing) takes. This resulted in a relatively small sample size of ten respondents. Furthermore, not every respondent was asked the exact same set of questions. The interview

questions were worded differently across individual interviews, which might have allowed for different reactions of the respondents. Partly for these reasons, further research is desirable. There is a lack of academic research on taxidermy in any context and the research that is published focuses mainly on taxidermy art. This thesis revealed that there are more values related to taxidermy than only artistic value. Therefore, I encourage any academic to investigate the scientific value of taxidermy or the demographics of taxidermists in order to further understand this cultural phenomenon.

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Appendix one, overview respondents

Name	Type of taxidermy	Detail
1. Paul	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)	Years of experience:12 *Paul used to be in I.T. and made a career switch. He now has his taxidermy practice together with Judith.
2. Judith	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)	Years of experience:14
3. Vlindertje	Artistic taxidermy	Years of experience: ~9 *Vlindertje went to art school and taxidermy school in order to learn how to make art using taxidermy.
4. Chris	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)	Years of experience: >60 *Chris' father was taxidermists. Chris cant remember the first time he taxidermied an animal, but he must have been around 6 years old. He has his own taxidermy practice. He only makes classic taxidermy.
5. Erwin	Scientific taxidermy (classic taxidermy and study skins)	Years of experience: >50 *Erwin is a honorary senior conservator in a natural history museum. He makes study skins as well as classic taxidermy. He made his first taxidermy animal when he was a teenager. He was self-taught.
6. Amber	Artistic taxidermy	Years of experience:~10 *Amber went to art school and taxidermy school. She also taught herself, by doing research, ancient methods to preserve skin. She makes art using taxidermy techniques.

7. Daniëlle	Commercial taxidermy (classic taxidermy)	Years of experience:~10 *Daniëlle went to art school. She has her own taxidermy practice. She used to also make taxidermy art, but now she only makes classic taxidermy. She has won several taxidermy awards.
8. David	Commercial taxidermy (classic and artistic taxidermy)	Years of experience: ~20 *David's father is also a taxidermist. Together with his father, David has a natural curiosity shop where he also sells his own taxidermy. His specialisation is preserving fish, for which his won taxidermy awards.
9. Hanny	Artistic & scientific taxidermy (including study skins)	Years of experience:11 *Hanny has been to art school, taxidermy school and specializes in scientific drawing. She has made taxidermy art in the past, but now she mostly makes classic taxidermy and study skins for a natural history museum.
10. Esther	Scientific taxidermy (classic taxidermy and study skins)	Years of experience: ~5 *Esther is a junior honorary conservator for a natural history museum. She makes study skins and classic taxidermy. Esther is also an artist, but does not use taxidermy to make her art.

Appendix 2, Interview guide.

This interview guide is translated from Dutch to English. All interviews were conducted in Dutch. Before each interview started, I introduced the aim of my research to the respondents.

1. Before we start, do you have any questions?
2. Can you tell me about your taxidermy story?
3. Why do you practice taxidermy?
4. What are you doing now (taxidermy wise)?
5. Where do you get your animals from?
6. What is it like to work with a dead animal?
7. Has taxidermy taught you anything?
8. What do you experience while working?
9. What do you like about being a taxidermist?
10. And what do you dislike?
11. Taxidermy, is that art? Why?
12. (if applicable) Can you tell me about your art?
13. Do you feel connected to other taxidermists?
14. Do you have anything to add, or questions for me?

Appendix 3, Code Book

Code Report – Grouped by: Code Groups

All (52) codes

(mental) health values

6 Codes:

- craft
 - death
 - disgust
 - experience during taxidermy
 - taxidermied as death
 - vegansism
-

Cognitive values

3 Codes:

- anatomy
 - taxidermied as death
 - why taxidermy
-

Economic value

12 Codes:

- apprentice
- being a commercial taxidermist
- championships
- classic taxidermy
- craft

- dislikes taxidermy
 - laws of taxidermy
 - professional taxidermy
 - qualities of a taxidermist
 - relationship among taxidermists
 - type of clients
 - why taxidermy
-

Experience values

15 Codes:

- animal as material
 - art vs taxidermy
 - artistic taxidermy
 - challenge of bringing back to life
 - classic taxidermy
 - compassion
 - disgust
 - dislikes taxidermy
 - experience during taxidermy
 - future
 - is taxidermy art
 - love for nature
 - taxidermied as death
 - why taxidermy
 - wonder
-

Social values

31 Codes:

- apprentice
- artistic taxidermy
- becoming taxidermist
- before taxidermy
- children
- compassion
- Dutch nature
- ethics
- future
- growing up with
- human-animal relation
- human-nature relation
- hunting
- individual animal
- laws of taxidermy
- opinion on artistic taxidermy
- pet taxidermy
- popularity: artistic taxidermy
- popularity: craft
- Popularity: hipster
- popularity: nature
- popularity: social media
- Popularity: trend
- popularity: women
- reactions of children
- reactions of others

- relationship among taxidermists
- respect for the animal
- source of animal specimen
- taxidermy popularity
- taxidermy socially accepted