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# Stories of the storm: the interconnection between risk management strategies and everyday experiences of rurality

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## ABSTRACT

Households play an important role in risk management. In this article, we take a closer look at risk management strategies applied by rural citizens in relation to an actual situation: a specific storm. The storm chosen, named Ivar, hit the northern parts of Sweden in December 2013 and caused major blackouts and heavy problems for road and train traffic due to extensive tree falls. After the storm, there were persistent problems with electricity, Internet, telephone communications, heating and drinking water supply, especially in the affected rural areas. The aim of this article is to explore the interconnection between risk management strategies and living conditions among rural citizens affected by this storm and its aftermath. The empirical material consists of narrative interviews with households from the area most affected by the storm: a small company town where the citizens were without electricity for 5–10 days after the storm. Our analysis resulted in two broad storylines ('stories of social dismantling' and 'stories of capability') illustrating how household risk management is intertwined with subjective experiences of rurality. That is, the households made sense of their experiences of the storm by relating them to an urban norm and to the everyday experience of living in 'the periphery'. By that, rural households' risk management strategies can be understood as a manifestation of different power relations in society (urban/rural, centre/periphery) as well as being embedded in the everyday experience of rurality.

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## Introduction

In December 2013, the storm Ivar hit the northern parts of Sweden and caused major blackouts and heavy problems in road and train traffic due to extensive tree falls. After the storm, there were persistent problems with electricity, Internet and telephone communications, heating and the drinking water supply. Worst affected by the storm were those living in rural communities, where about 10 000 households were without electricity for 5 – 10 days. This article focuses on how households experienced this specific storm event as embedded in their everyday life. More specifically, this article emphasizes how households' risk management strategies were influenced by everyday experiences of rurality.

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Research that deals with subjective understandings of risk is actually a quite well established field within in the sociological genre of risk research. In *Risk and Everyday life* from 2003 Tulloch and Lupton uses 'risk biography' as a theoretical metaphor in order to illustrate how people understand risk as a part of their personal history, geographical identity, personal characteristics and so forth. In other words: our understandings of risk are expressions of who we are. This fact has been elaborated further in various ways by sociological risk researchers, for example by acknowledging that understandings of risk correlate with factors such as age and gender (Bergman and Wall 2017; Wall 2014; Wall and Olofsson 2008), disability (Sparf and Öhman 2014; Sparf 2016), ethnicity and place of origin (Lidén and Olofsson 2020), sexual orientation (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2017) and parenthood (Ekholm and Olofsson 2017). However, of special relevance for this article are the studies that have enlightened how both understandings of risks and the management of an actual crisis are influenced by everyday experiences of rurality {Guldåker 2009; Heidenstrom and Kvarnlöf 2018; Wall and Kvarnlöf 2019}. In studying how rural citizens managed the consequences (extensive blackouts) of the storm Gudrun, that hit the southern parts of Sweden in 2005, Guldåker (2009) emphasizes the importance of the strong social networks that characterized the affected rural communities. Another study (Heidenstrom and Kvarnlöf 2018) shows how not only neighbourhood and social capital but also materials (e.g. to actually own a camping stove) and knowledges (e.g. to know how to use a camping stove) associated with rurality play a significant role in households' capability to cope with blackouts. With this article, our ambition is to develop this field of knowledge by focusing on how households' risk management strategies are influenced by subjective experiences of rurality.

In this article we apply the concept of *risk management strategies* as a way to emphasize the interconnectedness between sense-making and management of risk. The concept of risk management strategies has been used by others (see for example Van Winsen et al. 2016) in order to explain how risk perception and risk attitudes influences individuals' risk behaviour. Thus, by drawing on the concept of risk management strategies perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in relation to risk are understood as being integrated with each other. Van Winsen et al. (2016) especially emphasizes that individuals' risk behaviour is shaped by their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, a specific risk. This goes well in line with the theoretical framework of 'sense-making of risk' (Wall and Olofsson 2008; Wall 2011) that is elaborated further down in this text.

Thus, the *aim* of this article is to explore the interconnection between households risk management strategies and experiences of rural living conditions.

## The diversity of risk management strategies

The complexity of household risk management strategies has been emphasized by researchers in recent years. In particular, the various means for strengthening household risk management have been a focus. For example, social capital such as networks, family, neighbourhood, and local communities have been identified as crucial for households' abilities to prepare for risky situations and manage crisis (Diekman et al. 2007; Rooney and White 2007; Kim and Kang 2010; Paton and Johnston 2001). However, what households actually do – how they prepare for a specific risk and/or manage an actual event – has not been sufficiently elaborated (Donahue, Eckel, and Wilson 2014; Rademacher 2013). In other words, there is a research gap in terms of the role of households, particularly concerning how the households themselves experience, make sense of and manage specific situations characterized by risk (Diekman et al. 2007; Henwood et al. 2010; Hawkes and Rowe 2008). By acknowledging rural aspects of household risk management strategies, we also believe that this study could make an important contribution to the field of risk communication. Rural parts of Sweden, and its citizens, are many times invisible or foreseen in governmental risk communication campaigns. While authorities acknowledge the need for approaching large varieties of target groups there is still a need for developing communicative

strategies that incorporate and acknowledges heterogeneity within populations (Olofsson 2007; 2011). This study offers important insights about how household risk management can be understood in relation to subjective experiences of rurality and hopefully authorities can use it in order to strengthen their communication with rural citizens.

Both national (Swedish) and international risk policies emphasize the need for local action and responsibilities in relation to risk. Lately, household risk management strategies have become an object of individualizing and responsabilizing processes, where citizens of today are expected to take on responsibilities in the field of risk that once belonged to the state (Bergström 2018, Kvarnlöf and Montelius 2020, Rådestad and Larsson 2020). In Sweden, such responsabilizing social security discourses often reveal themselves in different information campaigns directed towards citizens (Bergström 2018, Kvarnlöf and Montelius 2020). These information campaigns, containing 'empowering' guidelines on how households may (should) strengthen their own preparedness, have been interpreted as expressions of governmentality – as techniques of control through which the state strive to construct the 'prepared citizen' (Bergström 2018, Kvarnlöf and Montelius 2020). However, what researchers from this field so far has been mainly concerned about is how citizens are being positioned in governmental discourses on risk management, much less so how or if citizens position themselves in relation to these discourses. The need for acknowledging subjective understandings of dominating social security discourses, as well as how citizens understand and respond to risk in a more general sense has been put forward by several researchers (see for example O'Malley 2010, Lupton 2013). In this article we have chosen to put the interviewees own stories at the centre of our analysis in order to make a contribution to the field of research on subjective understandings of risk management strategies.

## **Sense-making of risk and rurality**

Literature on household risk management seldom considers the social or geographical context in which these households operate. Instead, pre-established policy definitions of risk management have formed the starting point for studies of households' abilities to manage specific situations (Siegrist and Gutscher 2008; Kapucu 2008; Thieken et al. 2006; Levac, Toal-Sullivan, and O'Sullivan 2012; Terpstra and Lindell 2013). As noted by Heidenstrom and Kvarnlöf (2018), this top-down approach is heavily biased towards official and policy-oriented definitions and often fails to recognize the performativity of household risk management. The need to further explore the social and cultural contexts is emphasized within the field (Heidenstrom and Kvarnlöf 2018, Perry and Lindell 2003). In this article, we will explore how sense-making processes and risk management strategies relates to everyday experiences of rurality by emphasizing the specific context, in this case within a Swedish rural context.

Sense-making, as a theoretical concept, can be defined in various ways. Here, we use [removed due to anonymization], who draw on the likes of Karl Weick's (Weick 2001; Weick and Sutcliffe 2001) and Alfred Schütz's (1967) perspectives on the individual's creation of meaning. That is, sense-making of risk can be used to illustrate the personal understanding of a specific phenomenon (Wall 2011). Sense-making of risk has been described as also including the individual's structure of meaning as actions towards the specific risk. Further, the concept illustrates the importance of context, that is, sense-making of risk implies that how risk is understood and evaluated is embedded in the social and spatial contexts of everyday life (ibid.).

Sense-making of risk is also related to norms and values embedded in specific places (Pollini 2005a, 2005b). As Tolonen puts it, 'even in a late modern and global world, individuals are surrounded by different social and cultural contexts – they live and learn somewhere with somebody' (2005: 344). Theoretically, we argue that social contexts are to be understood from a relational perspective, for example, rurality is understood in relation to urbanity (Mormont 1990).

This perspective implies an interdependently constructed relationship between centre and periphery, emphasizing power relations embedded in the interrelations (Massey 2004). As Eriksson puts it, 'social relations do not exist, nor are they best understood, in some abstract purity. Instead, they must be understood relationally and situationally in both space and time, and in terms of a variety of spatial scales' (Eriksson 2010, 13).

In Sweden, rural areas are often defined according to their distance from Stockholm, the capital, and are associated with a lack of both social and economic resources (Eriksson 2010). This kind of definition is inspired by ideas of hierarchical ordering, where urban areas are seen as more 'modern' and more valuable than rural areas, which are defined as being part of 'the past' (Paulgaard 2008; Eriksson 2010). We live in a neoliberal era that 'celebrates urbanity', Eriksson (2010) argues, where an urban norm dictates the living conditions not only for urban citizens but for rural citizens as well. This dichotomization between urbanity and rurality can be related to a relational perspective on centre-periphery (often relating to the early work of, e.g. Frank 1977). Such theories illustrate not only ideas related to specific places, but also how power relations inform ideas of specific places. From this point of view, centre and periphery are *not* seen as dichotomies but rather as constructed in relation to each other, whereas the idea of centre can only be socially constructed in relation to an idea of the periphery.

## Methodology

### *The storm*

On the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 2013, a storm called Ivar hit the northern parts of Sweden and caused a major blackout and problems with road and train traffic due to extensive tree falls. The storm affected a geographical area as large as one-third of Sweden, but the degree of devastation varied largely within this area. The interviews for this study were all conducted in one of the most affected areas during the storm, an industrial community in the northern part of Sweden inhabited by approximately 350 persons. The village was once built around two larger industries, or factories, where the majority of the villagers' work. The village and its industry blossomed during the 1960s and 1970s, but the number of inhabitants (as well as working opportunities and property values) has since decreased considerably. For example, the current population could be compared to the 1000 inhabitants of the village during the 1960s.

During the night the storm hit and the following day, the company town was isolated, as trees covered the only road leading into the village. Thus, during the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, citizens in the village could not go to work, and the school was closed. Another major event in the village was the fact that the storm lifted the roof off one of the major factories in the town; the roof crashed into a power plant and caused a serious fire. After the storm, households were without electricity and in most cases without water and ICT communications as well for 5 to 10 days. The fact that the village where our interviewees live suffered so badly from the storm could be explained as a combination of at least two unfortunate circumstances: its location at the epicentre of the storm and its poor electricity and ICT infrastructure. However, the large factory was a so-called 'prioritized object' on the power line, meaning that it still had electricity even though households in the village did not. Thus, for the people working at the factory, their workplace became an important resource in coping with the blackout. If they needed to take a shower, bring home drinking water or charge their phones, they simply went to work. Those who did not work at the factory but in a nearby town that did not experience the blackout used their workplace in a similar way. In sum, all our interviewees were without electricity at home but had electricity in their workplace. These initial turbulent days were followed by a week without electricity or running water at home, and in our analysis, we will turn our focus to how our interviewees made sense of this situation.

## Data collection and material

The analyses in this article are based on retrospective narrative interviews conducted in June 2016. All the interviews focused on everyday life during and after the storm in December 2013. The interviewees were recruited in a village hit by the storm. The researchers came in contact with the interviewees through a personal contact that has a personal history and connection to the village. The researchers themselves has no relationship or personal history with the village or its inhabitants. All the interviews were made in the interviewees' homes. In total, stories from 8 interviewees are included in the material.

In this article, the interviewees are presented with fictitious names. The first letter (A—E) in the name defines which of the five interviews each person relates to. This means that Anna and Anders were interviewed together, while the interview with David is an interview made with him alone. In this case, the same capital letter also defines relations, that is, the A-couple and so on. The only interviewee living alone is a woman with the assigned name Elisabeth.

<i>Anna</i>	Teacher, 55 years old.
<i>Anders</i>	Industrial worker, 52 years old. Together with the A-couple lives Anna's 13-year-old son.
<i>Bo</i>	Industrial worker, 55 years old.
<i>Beata</i>	Industrial worker, 54 years old. The B-family includes a 20-year-old daughter living with her parents.
<i>Carl</i>	Sawmill worker, 52 years old.
<i>Caroline</i>	Conductress, 35 years old. The C-couple have two children together; both the teenagers are living in the house part-time, whereas both the smaller kids do not live with the family at all.
<i>David</i>	Salesman/installations engineer, 55 years old. David is married, but his wife did not participate in the interview. The D-couple have two grown-up sons. None of them live with them now, but one of them was still living at home during the storm.
<i>Elisabeth</i>	Assistant nurse, 56 years old. This interviewee lives by herself but has two grown-up sons. During the storm, she went to one of them, as there was no blackout where he lived.

## Analysis method

Narrative method and analysis constitutes the foundation of present article. Using narrative analysis, it is possible to visualize how stories about a storm can be interpreted as stories about rurality and not only living conditions among rural citizens affected by a storm and its aftermath, but also about risk management strategies. Inspired by performative perspectives on narrative analysis (Peterson and Langellier 2006), we argue that narratives give access to knowledge about the ongoing creation of social relations. As mentioned earlier, sense-making of risk is intertwined with norms within the specific context, and norms are understood as being performative (Morison and Macleod 2013). Moreover, the performative turn in narrative method and analysis notes that stories can be understood as performative, that is, the story itself is part of the constituting process of the phenomenon it is relating to (Peterson and Langellier 2006). This means that norms are defined as phenomena built up through identifications with social positions. This approach relates to how social science risk research has deepened during recent years, especially in regard to how power relations take part in the subjective understanding, evaluation and actions towards risks (Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007; Montelius and Giritli-Nygren 2014; Olofsson et al. 2014). Such power relations can focus on gender, ethnicity, age as well as other power relations such as urbanity and rurality.

The analysis was conducted by the authors together. First, we read the transcripts several times, without discussing them with each other. During the first reading we asked ourselves: What are the interviewees telling us? What are their stories? Later, we met and discussed the

stories found in the material and analysed comprehensive narratives in the material. Specific parts of the material were coded and sorted at the same time as categorizations were made and re-made. In this step of the analysis, distinctions between various parts of the material were made, relating to the findings. However, this does not imply that narratives found should be understood as entirely separate, but as mutually overlapping (cf. Keady et al. 2009). From this process of interpretation and re-interpretation, collective narratives, *storylines*, describing the material where established (cf. Gergen 1988; Keady et al. 2009). The material analysed is based on transcripts in Swedish. That is, all quotations (below) is translated to English by the authors.

The two storylines put forward in the analysis reflects the most central narratives of the interviews. The first one, *The story of social dismantling*, reflects the interviewees experiences of living in a rural area. In doing this, the storyline circles around lived experiences of inequality, failing infrastructures and welfare in rural areas of Sweden. The second storyline, *The story of capability* more specifically reflects how the interviewees handled the crisis, which in turn reflects several aspects of rural identity and what it means to be a rural citizen. Thus, while the first storyline captures experiences of structural conditions of rurality, the second storyline captures subjective understandings and experiences of what it means to be a rural citizen (during a crisis). By that, the storylines found should be understood as interconnected, describing complementary perspectives on how personal stories of the storm inform about risk management strategies and everyday experiences of rurality.

## Analysis

In this study, we asked questions about how our interviewees understood and managed the consequences of the storm Ivar. The interviewees own narrations of the storm, based on interviews with households that were affected by the storm, are at the centre of our analysis. At first sight, these are understood as stories about managing an everyday life without electricity. However, the analysis shows that what is actually narrated is how the households managed and made sense of the situation in relation to the specific living conditions. That is, by the narrative approach, we found out that these interviews could also be understood as stories about everyday experiences of rurality from a risk management perspective. When our interviewees reflect upon risk management and their everyday life after the storm, they relate to their experiences of being rural citizens. Based on these stories, the analysis gave two broad storylines linked with each other (the story of 'social dismantling' and the story of 'capability') that illustrates how household risk management, can be understood as intertwined with subjective experiences of rurality, interpreted below.

However, we would like to start the analysis by letting Elisabeth introduce us to the storm and the situation following it:

I remember it so well, that when the storm calmed down, I thought that 'well now the light will soon be back as well'. I don't know, I guess I thought that 'it's over now'. But it wasn't (laughter). This was just the beginning. (Elisabeth)

In this quote, Elisabeth laughs over the fact that she (naively enough) thought that 'this was it' once the storm 'calmed down'. Little did she know what was to come. Several of the interviewees follows Elisabeth in defining the loss of electricity, rather than the storm per se, as the 'real' event to handle. For them, maintaining an everyday life without electricity and running water for several days caused more problems than one night of heavy winds. Elisabeth continues her story about the days at home without electricity:

(...) that [the worst thing] was probably the darkness. It was dark everywhere. Outside and indoors. Morning and night. I worked during the days. Everything becomes so unpractical inside the house when it is dark like that. It's like you can't move around as you wish to. I just used the kitchen, the living room and

the bedroom during these days. Well, the bathroom of course. And that was a story of its own (laughter). To wash up, taking a shower in the dark and with freezing water. Well, that wasn't very pleasant. (Elisabeth)

In the quote above, Elisabeth paints a picture of the messiness of everyday life without electricity. Simple things as moving around in one's own house, using the kitchen and the bathroom suddenly becomes very unpleasant (the last one particularly unpleasant one could guess by the laughter of Elisabeth). Without electricity, her home becomes a dark and uncomfortable house.

### ***The story of social dismantling***

The first storyline found in the material, on '*social dismantling*', captures the collective narrative on how experiences of structural conditions of rurality frame household risk management strategies. That is, being without electricity illustrates the structural conditions of rural risk management strategies. Here, it is important to remember that the interviewees' stories take place in a rural context; more specifically, they contextualize their stories within the structural conditions that come with living in a rural industrial community. Like many other Swedish industrial communities, the one in which our interviewees live, has gone through enormous transformations during the last 20 to 30 years. Elisabeth paints quite a sad picture of how the village she lives in has changed since she first moved there:

Interviewer: When was this house built?

Elisabeth: '86. 1986. We moved here when the house was just built. God, that was a totally different time. This village has really changed since then. Now, many houses are empty and abandoned. It's so sad. Considering expansion in this village today, that is not even on the map.

This particular village's social dismantling is not only evidenced in falling property values. In the interviews, social dismantling also comes to light through experiences of inadequate infrastructure both regarding electricity and ICT communications. That is, the risk of short- and long-term blackouts is narrated as a part of rural households' everyday life. From that, the interviewees all share the understanding of the plausible loss of (electrical) power not only as a risk to handle in case of storm, but as a consequence of living in the periphery where rural communities (and their infrastructure) are not given the same priority as urban communities. Thus, the need of risk management strategies is narrated as embedded in everyday life living in this particularly area of Sweden. The interviewees say that they have become used to the loss of electricity, both in 'normal' times and in bad weather, such as the previous storm Ivar. More so, as illuminated within this storyline, our interviewees make sense of these frequent blackouts by relating them to the structural conditions of rural areas in Sweden, where they narrate their small village in the north as being systematically downplayed in favour of other, more highly populated areas in Sweden:

It's a little strange that we in this village were affected so hard [by the blackout] when the closest town just a couple of kilometres away didn't have the same problem at all. I don't know, it's almost like our small village is not as important. It's not the same rush. (Elisabeth)

We have experienced a number of blackouts. And last year was a stormy one. And as good as all energy is produced in the north, all water energy. But we have the worst power lines in the whole country. That is amazing (laughter). (Anders)

In the quotes above, both Elisabeth and Anders make sense of the frequent blackouts through a centre-periphery framework, where the 'periphery' (their village) is perceived as not being given the same priority as the centre (in this case a smaller town or larger cities). In addition, Anders brings structural and political dimensions of unequal electricity infrastructure to light by mentioning that even though electrical power is produced in rural northern parts of Sweden, the very same parts of the country have the worst electricity infrastructure. Even in rural

areas, the loss of electricity hits in different degrees. As shown in the first quote above, the town situated less than 10 km from the village was not affected by the blackout to the same degree. On the other hand, rural areas 'in the woods' outside the village were even more affected by the blackout. Even within a rather small part of rural Sweden, there were major differences between the centre (here understood as the village) and the periphery (here associated with living 'in the woods'):

Mom, she lives up in the woods around here, and they were without electricity for a very long time. ... 'That's strange', I said, 'our electricity is back by now'. So, they [the electricity company] had forgotten about them. They were without electricity several extra days just because of that. (David)

Our interviewees made the differences in the duration of the blackouts understandable in terms of prioritizations; as being or not being prioritized. That is, the more rural your home is, the less prioritized you are and the more is up to you to manage. Moreover, rurality and the perception of not being prioritized were consequently positioned in relation to urbanity and those who are actually prioritized. For example, Elisabeth left the industrial community during the blackout to stay with her son who lives in a larger city nearby, since 'they [in the larger city] didn't have any problems with electricity'.

In this section, we have shown how the storyline on '*social dismantling*' of Sweden (exemplified in the electrical and ICT infrastructure) in rural areas plays an important role in how our interviewees make sense of the blackout that followed the storm Ivar. We find it particularly interesting to observe how the experiences of living with an inadequate electrical and ICT infrastructure is situated within the framework of urbanity and rurality and how this emphasizes the unequal structural conditions between urban and rural areas in Sweden. Paradoxically, it is also through these everyday experiences of unequal structural conditions (i.e. blackouts, bad mobile connections) that their risk management strategies are built. That is, the need of risk management strategies due to storms is narrated as part of the living conditions of a part of the country understood as less prioritized.

### ***The story of capability***

We will now move on to how our interviewees actually managed the consequences of the storm. Here, we will show how they make sense of risk management by relating to the specific conditions of living in or nearby a small industrial community in a rural part of Sweden. That is, in this section, the second storyline named '*the story of capability*', illuminates how our interviewees narrate themselves as responsible and capable *rural* citizens as they share their stories of how the consequences of the storm were managed within the local community.

When the interviewees were asked to retell their stories about the storm and its aftermath, taking care of practical things was narrated as specifically meaningful to them. That is, a common story of being responsible, active and capable emerged from the material. Instead of waiting for the accountable authority and/or company to handle the consequences of the storm, our interviewees took care of several practical issues themselves:

Carl: Yes, one of the neighbours cut up those trees [making the road open again].

Caroline: Yeah, someone from here. They were out already when the trees were still falling. Someone came with a chain saw in his hand and started. So, it was made quite fast. Thus, it was someone living here that made it, otherwise, it would have taken far more time.

Carl: Well, I don't know who else should have made it?

In this quotation, the interviewees describe how a practical problem – in this case trees falling across the main road – was handled by the locals, illustrating how *the locals* are portrayed as responsible, a perspective recurrent within this storyline. However, the picture of the local is not

limited to localness, to being 'of this place', but is also tied to certain qualities of the local. That is, the local is equated with the capable. Simultaneously, being capable is described as necessary because there is nobody else to count on. As seen in the above quotation, whereas the couple interviewed note, that if the locals had not taken care of things, they have no idea who would have. That is, the local is narrated in relation to 'who else' – implicitly, who is accountable – and is contrasted to the perceived absence of the authorities and/or companies accountable of taking care of, for example, clearing the roads of fallen trees. In the above quotation, the local is described as capable and active, someone who 'with a chain saw observed in his hand' can handle trees fallen on the road. That description typifies *the capable local* as a person having both the physical and material resources and the relevant knowledge in this particular context, as seen in the example of cutting up trees fallen over the main road. Such a narration can be further understood as a portrayal of a blue-collar worker, which relates to the specific location where the interviews occurred: an industrial community in a rural part of mid-northern Sweden. That is, even though the storyline found in the material, where the interviewees are praising the capable local (as in this example), the language contextualizes the situation (in particular the capable local) within the rural community where risk management support from the responsible authorities and/or companies is not expected. The notion of the capable local relate to the absence of accountable actors. This is highlighted in the following extract, whereas one of the interviewees recounts a situation where some trees had fallen on a power line and caused a short circuit:

Anders: After a couple of days, people begun to get their electricity back. But we didn't. So, I went out, taking down some trees lying over the electric cable here. Which shorted. So, I took them away myself.

Interviewer: So, you were without electricity for a longer time than other people around?

Anna: Yes. Yes, we were. We were not first in line, so to speak. We had to wait.

Anders: Yes, that was the case. We are not many on this particular cable, so they kind of prioritized others. I even had to call, telling them that there were trees over the electricity cable. However, then I was over there taking away the trees by myself and called them back and told them. So, then they turned on the power. No, I think it was bad.

In the quotation above, the interviewees (Anna and Anders) describe the need to take care of things by themselves due to the absence of the company responsible for the power lines. Worth noting is the fact that it is a quite dangerous task that Anders consider himself capable of doing here. The quotation also illustrates their frustration over not being prioritized and over the passivity of the electricity company.

In the interviews, capability is narrated as tied to the specific conditions of living in this particular (rural) town. It is not only in the first example of the fallen trees that collective capability is emphasized, there are several similar examples shared by our interviewees. Sharing material resources (such as a generator) can serve as another example of the collective capability in the neighbourhood:

That [sharing a generator between neighbours] was what we did. In that case, we helped each other. Those not having generators had to borrow one. (Beata)

Yet another example of collective capability and sharing among neighbours were identified when it came to water supply. Households that were relying on the official water supply system lost their connection to the system due to the breakdown, while those having their own well still had water. One day when Anna and Anders (who were without water at the moment) came home from work they found a pleasant surprise in front of their door:

When we came home that Friday, they [neighbors] had put a bucket of water outside our door.

We hadn't asked for it or anything, it was just there. You just understood that you had to help each other through this. Simple as that. (Anna)

However, not all interviewees narrate neighbourhood support in positive terms. Some describe the relations between neighbours as 'extremely strong' (Bo, below), while others paint a more complex picture of neighbourhood support. The two opposite perspectives on the neighbourhood are exemplified in the following quotations from two separate interviews:

Sure. Neighbours. So, it is over here. The neighbourhood watch in the countryside, it's extremely strong. It doesn't matter what it is, you get help. That's the case. Probably, it's worse in neighbourhoods where you don't know your neighbour. (Bo)

Anna: However, I think generally, if you think about neighbourhood cooperation, it isn't that good here. No, it is kind of special. It's surely especially in this particular village. An old industrial village.

Anders: I moved here, and one will like never be part of the community.

Interestingly, those who speak about strong relationships talk about 'us', whereas those who find relations problematic define themselves as being from 'elsewhere'. Furthermore, the outsider perspective on the neighbourhood is illustrated in how the interviewee (Anders, above) describes the neighbourhood as something he will never truly be a part of.

In this section of the analysis, we have showed how 'the story of capability' is brought forward as a central aspect of how risk management is made sense of by our interviewees. More so, the concept of capability is used both in order to describe rural identity, and more specifically one's own rural identity, and in order to describe the collective efforts regarding risk management that were performed by the neighbourhood and local community.

## Discussion

The above analysis shows that, while narrate everyday life during and after the storm, the participants' begun not only to describe what happened, but also how managing the effects of the storm was understood in relation to social and spatial contexts. Narrating the experiences of the event became a process of sense-making (Weick 2001; Weick and Sutcliffe 2001; cf. Wall 2011), of household risk management.

The analysis illuminates the social and spatial dimensions of sense-making (cf. Wall 2011) by showing how household risk management strategies are interconnected with the specific social and spatial contexts. In the stories told, we found that the characteristics of the specific industrial community, especially the experiences of '*social dismantling*', seems to be important for the participants' understanding of the aftermath following the storm. The concept of the industrial community includes social as well as spatial dimensions but also the important dimension of centre-periphery, that is, a dimension of power. By emphasizing the perceived dismantling of the industrial community, the households' stories reveal narratives about power and powerlessness, related not only to the rurality of their specific living conditions but also to ideas about how to value people living in various parts of the country.

Furthermore, in regard to the narrations of the rural citizen in terms of '*capability*', we can see that the portrayal is clearly contextualized within the rural community and contrasted to the idea of urbanity. That is, what is defined as desirable is related to what is found *needed* in terms of risk management within the rural community. The participants illustrate that it is important to be *capable* due to the absence of responsible authorities. The stories of capability can be understood in relation to social networks thus capability is here narrated in relation to the social milieu. As illuminated, for example in the conversation between Anna and Anders on cutting down trees hanging over the power lines, this was something needed by the whole local community. Likewise, the sharing of water supplies and generators, make the importance of social relations visible. These results line with previous studies whereas the strong social networks have been emphasized regarding households' capability to prepare for risky situations and manage

crisis (cf. Diekman et al. 2007; Guldåker, 2009; Rooney and White 2007; Kim and Kang 2010; Paton and Johnston 2001).

Further, the storyline on capability express the frustrations resulting from not being prioritized by the companies responsible for electricity. In addition, the relational perspective on centre-periphery is further emphasized in interviews where various groups within the community are defined. As we have seen, the participants spoke about 'us', meaning a specific community, and about 'them', meaning those 'from elsewhere'. As seen in the analysis, the relationship between rurality and urbanity becomes part of the description of whom to trust. To sum up, we have discovered that risk management strategies in this particular context is intertwined with living in a community perceived as periphery.

However, our analysis found that household risk management was informed not only by the structural aspects of living in the countryside but by the *ideas of rurality* as well. Instead of relating merely to the specific conditions of living in a rural area (cf. Guldåker 2009), the participants meaning-making was related to ideas of rurality as opposed to ideas of urbanity. Household risk management strategies can thus be interpreted as a reflection of an urban norm. That is, the households included in the study, not only took their specific locale into account in how they dealt with the situation, but expressed an understanding of the situation defined by an over-reaching urban norm. The dichotomization between urbanity and rurality found in the material can thus be related to a relational perspective on centre-periphery (often relating to the early work of, e.g. Frank 1977). Such theories illustrate not only ideas related to specific places, as in this case of the company town, but also how power relations inform ideas of specific places. From this point of view, centre and periphery are not seen as dichotomies but rather as constructed in relation to each other, whereas the idea of centre can only be socially constructed in relation to an idea of the periphery. However, in Sweden, the notion of 'periphery' is most often understood as meaning rural areas (Keskitalo 2009), whereas such rural areas are associated with a lack of resources and being far from the centre (that is, Stockholm, the capital of Sweden) (Eriksson 2010). In addition, the ideas of urbanity/rurality are often defined as intertwined with ideas of modernity. That is, urbanity is understood as being, to a higher degree, 'modern', while rurality is associated with the past (Paulgaard 2008). Such ideas are then followed by the idea of different places being hierarchically ordered, whereas urbanity is understood as more valuable than places associated with rurality (Paulgaard 2008; Eriksson 2010). In the empirical material analysed here, the power relations associated with urbanity/rurality strengthen our understanding of how risk management strategies of the households is interconnected with living conditions and how these living conditions are narrated due to norms and power relations in society.

Through the interviews, the participants discovered that they actually were prepared in various ways, as well as what kind of improvements in their risk management they now see they needed. In our interviews, the hierarchical order between urbanity and rurality is exemplified through the interviewees' sense of not being prioritized (within the electrical infrastructure). This feeling of not being prioritized also illustrates the relational aspect of centre-periphery, whereby rural areas (understood as periphery) are described as not being prioritized in favour of urban areas (centre). The social dismantling of rural areas, and how this has become a normalized aspect of the participants' everyday day life, is seen in their experiences with an inadequate electrical and ICT infrastructure. However, it is also in and through these everyday experiences that risk management is being constructed, both materially and mentally. That is, risk management strategies are here found to be embedded within these stories on everyday life situations due to the storm. Thus, risk management strategies is found to be embedded within narrations focusing 'social dismantling' and 'capabilities' within the local community.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The method used in this article (interviews and narrative analysis) offers an in depth insight into the interviewees experiences of a storm and its aftermath. This method also make it possible to

contextualize experiences as parts of a larger story of everyday experiences. In this article, we have turned our focus to rural citizens and how they make sense of risk management strategies. However, in terms of diversity within populations there are of course far more varieties and diversities to consider such as gender, age, ethnicity and functionality. It would be an important contribution to future studies on household risk management strategies to further investigate how people of different age, gender and ethnicity experience and manage risk in their everyday life.

## Conclusion

Here, we have explored the interconnection between risk management strategies and living conditions among rural citizens affected by a storm and its aftermath. We have emphasized that the households interviewed narrate themselves as rural citizens at the periphery. In so doing, aspects of power relations were brought to light, where the robustness that is often associated with rural households (Guldåker 2009; Heidenstrom and Kvarnlöf 2018) was framed in terms of accepting the subordination to urbanity and the urban norm. The knowledge of household risk management strategies can be deepened by examining the power relations associated with theoretical perspectives on centre-periphery. That is, risk management must be further analysed in relation to the relevance of various living conditions in different milieus, whereas the importance of power relations defining those conditions from a centre-periphery perspective is important to illustrate. Household risk management strategies can be understood as a manifestation of different power relations in society related to rurality and urbanity; thus, households risk management is embedded in the everyday life context.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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