Lifestyle migrants or “environmental refugees”?—Resisting urban risks

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Abstract
A relatively large group of immigrants to rural parts of inner Scandinavia are of German and Dutch descent. Many are families with young children having moved to unpopular areas, characterised by declining populations and services. Seven households of Dutch and German descent were interviewed with a narrative approach to explore their decision to migrate. It is revealed that they do not fit the common explanations of lifestyle migration. A “tale” of escape emerges as they describe what they wanted to leave behind, primarily risks associated with a neoliberal urban environment such as stress, aggression, and competition. The rural is described as a restful and safe space, like Hobbiton, where urban environmental refugees can exhale and live life a bit more lugnt. Drawing on Focaults “care for the self,” their experiences of the negative effects, of the individualisation of risks, neoliberal competition, and an accelerating society render evasion to a new environment into a means of risk avoidance.

KEYWORDS
counterurbanisation, escape, lifestyle migration, neoliberalism, resistance, risk avoidance

1 INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I’m thinking ... it’s a little bit like the tale the Lord of the Rings. Sweden is a little bit like Hobbiton, it’s a bit kind and pleasant; sure, they are a little bit strange sometimes and you do not understand everything, but at least it is safe and secure here, and out there is the big world where it’s like the Russians and ISIS, and Sauron. But here it feels very safe and secure and stable. (Alfred)

The quote above is from a German interviewee talking about his decision to move to, and stay in, an area of Sweden with decreasing population. Moreover, his family is not alone. Relative to the existing population of the rural communities they settle in, there is a phenomenon of remarkably large numbers of immigrants of especially German and Dutch origin (Overvåg, 2012). A quick explanation of these migration numbers may be that these are lifestyle migrants; clearly, they have moved to the countryside, and most likely, whatever better quality of life they expected there, but as this quote hints, there may be additional aspects to consider. In this paper, seven households of Dutch and German origin, who could be considered lifestyle migrants or counterurbanisers, living in the predominantly rural region of Värmland, Sweden, are interviewed. The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons behind these households’ decision to move to rural Sweden. What were the motivations behind this decision, and how can perspectives of risk and safety, as indicated in the introductory quotation, be of importance?
There is a mainstream narrative of lifestyle migration or counterurbanisation, where people move from urban to rural environments for various antiurban and prorural reasons. The reasons primarily being the rural idyll (i.e., greenness and slower pace of living) or a better quality of life (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Verdich, 2010). It is also seen as safe, free of stress, and including a widened social network (Argent, Smail, & Griffin, 2007; Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Other reasons for migrating to a rural setting are work or career opportunities (Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010), and amenities at the new location, both natural and/or cultural (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011).

Rural in-migration patterns are often explained by theories of counterurbanisation or lifestyle migration/amenities migration, and these theories become of interest for rural regions when trying to attract in-migrants for economic growth (Berger, 2008). The localities to which the participants in this study have moved are characterised by low economic development, a lack of jobs (Martinsson, 2012), declining commercial and public services (Aronsson, Norell, & Nilsson, 2012), and often, declining populations (Nilsson, Aronsson, & Norell, 2012)—areas which Nordström even declared as “junkspace,” at an economic seminar at the Nordic Business Forum Sweden in early 2017 (cited in Turula, 2017). The “smaller population centres” depicted by Westlund (2002, p. 1407) largely resemble the areas in the region that these migrants have moved to, where small towns have even demolished housing stock due to the effects of urbanisation. Although often abundant in natural capital, cultural amenities are scarce or diminishing. It seems unlikely that neither opportunities for work nor the cultural amenities, often depicted as important for regional development (Berger, 2008), are the main motivations for their decision to move.

The overall numbers of lifestyle migrants are increasing, and Benson and O’Reilly (2009) conclude that this increase is due to “increased levels of reflexivity in the contemporary world” (p. 620). Although the concept of reflexivity in the contemporary world hints at large-scale societal changes, as a main motivator for lifestyle migration, it does not further explain what aspects of contemporary society are forcing, or inspiring, these migrants to go through with it. Like Benson and Osbaldiston (2016), I am critical of the lack of theoretical depth when it comes to lifestyle migration. It would be easy just to classify the migrants in this study as lifestyle migrants or counterurbanisers—surely they are—but that does not answer why they are lifestyle migrants.

1.1 Previous research on lifestyle migrants

Eimermann (2015), studying Dutch immigrants in a similar area close to this study population, found urbanisation and overpopulation to be the push factors, and he also found a strong return reasoning among these migrants (Eimermann, 2014). Work and income for lifestyle migrants in general are primarily to fund their lifestyles or “better life,” rather than what motivated their move (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009), or, as found for this region, primarily to make moving possible (Overvåg, 2012). The mainstream narrative among lifestyle migrants also include contrasting their new location to their previous one, and they often “stress the unique and embodied relationship that they have with the landscape” (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009, p. 612).

Images and narratives of a rural utopia, like the rural idyll, has been a part of western culture since classical Greece (Swaffield & Fairweather, 1998), and it is sometimes being taken for granted, as an unquestioned truth, on different levels of society (Halfacree, 2008). However, research has also found that although counterurbanisation can explain much of the migration into popular rural areas, the metropolitan fringes or with easy access to transport, it fails to explain the motivations for migrating to more remote or unpopular rural areas (Westlund, 2002). This seems to be especially true for the Scandinavian context, with small metropolitan areas and vast rural landscapes (Grimsrud, 2011). Although the mainstream narrative of counterurbanisation exists in Scandinavia as well, research shows that counterurbanites in rural areas primarily place more importance on jobs, family ties, or returning to their roots (Grimsrud, 2011).

According to Grimsrud (2011), many models on counterurbanisation, such as Mitchell’s (2004) and Halfacree’s (2008), overlook “the importance of family ties or other bonds to the area” (p.651). Accounting for this “one could say that rural in-migrants are rural by belonging” (Grimsrud, 2011, p. 653). Bijker and Haartsen (2011) came to the same conclusion even for migration patterns within the densely populated Netherlands that the mainstream urbanisation narrative fits well on the migrants to what they call popular rural areas (i.e., the metropolitan fringes or rich in amenities such as coastal beaches). Age also matters as younger age groups are more likely to move to a popular periurban rural area than a remote one, and retirees can be more inclined towards more remote rural areas (Hjort & Malmberg, 2006). According to Bijker and Haartsen (2011), the demand for housing, as reflected in housing prices, is an indicator of the popularity of a rural area as a higher demand for housing will generate a higher price. Housing prices in the areas where the interviewees in this study now live are low, by both the regional and the Swedish average (Svensk mäklarstatistik, 2017a, 2017b). A migration group who would be interested in more remote and unpopular areas, however, would be the group that Mitchell (2004) and Halfacree (2008) call the back to-the-land movement. A first glance at the migrants in this study suggests that they differ in some significant ways, from what would be expected, such as having moved to unpopular areas with limited career opportunities and seemingly without family ties to the area. Most of them also belong to an age group, which should be more inclined to urbanise rather than counterurbanise, and neither do they appear to be part of a radical back-to-the-land movement. Considering the culturally etched narrative of the rural, easily mainstreaming any discussions about motives, it is a challenge to see beyond the quality of life argument, perhaps other theoretical concepts related to modern life might be successful in broadening the understanding of current motivations of counterurbanites. As the initial quote indicates, the concept of risk could perhaps be fruitful for this purpose.
INDIVIDUALS AT RISK IN A NEOLIBERAL TIME OF ACCELERATION—A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

First of all a risk always indicates two things: it is something unwanted which affects something valued, and there are uncertainties regarding whether or when this unwanted event will take place (Hansson, 2012; Renn, 1998). In addition, risk is always subjective, as both mental models (Slovic, 2000) and sociocultural processes (Lupton, 1999) influence risk perception. This means that experienced risk is not necessarily correlated to actual probabilities of an event happening.

One important aspect of the modern "risk society" is the process of individualisation, which Beck (1992) argues will put the blame for societal and structural failures on the individual; that is, societal risks become individualised. Although Benson and Osbaldiston (2016) critique the explanatory value of individualisation for lifestyle migration, some aspects of the individualised society can be fruitful for a theoretical understanding, like the individualisation of risks and competition. The responsibility of individuals for the societal risks affecting them leads to individuals becoming precarious (Beck, 1992; Brown, 2015), and the precariat of unsafe individualised workers can arguably be seen as the new, almost all-encompassing class of workers (Standing, 2013).

Individualisation and precarity not only arise as a consequence of a risk society but also are inherent characteristics of the process of neoliberalisation (Standing, 2013). Neoliberalisation in contemporary society can be considered as an overarching regime of truth (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). As such, it permeates, and even marketises, every aspect of society, including our relations to/with power and our work, as well as our leisure time and personal relations (Brown, 2015).

Another important aspect is the introduction of competition into most aspects of everyday life (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). This further enhances individualisation, especially among equals, who would be the primary competition to get ahead of. As Beck (1992) put it, "community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition" (p. 94).

According to Lupton (1999), "Risk is understood as one of the heterogeneous governmental strategies of disciplinary power" (p. 4). Anyone who does not comply with the power norm becomes abnormal, and without a higher authority, subjects control themselves and others in order to become more efficient in accordance with the norm (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). The neoliberal power norm gives us the responsibility to constantly perform, because if not, "we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible" (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88). With neoliberalisation turning individuals into human capital and human capital only, to perform and excel is no longer confined to the working hours of the day but stretches into what was previously leisure time (Brown, 2015). Competition and a pressure to perform can arguably be seen as two expressions of the same phenomenon: if you compete but do not perform, you lose. Beck (1992) also foresaw precariousness because of what he calls the achievement society and the individualisation of risks. To resist this neoliberal power, a relevant form of resistance would primarily be the everyday resistance of escape through relocation "to a physical retreat ... where a different life is possible" (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 115). Scott (2009) further claims that "The first principle of evasion is location" (p. 182), and changing this norm would be too difficult for an individual; evasion remains a conceivable option (Scott, 1989). Ball and Olmedo (2013) further argue that resistance towards neoliberal regimes may not include a higher purpose as part of the intent, but sometimes, drawing on Foucault, a "care for the self."

Foucault (2003) argues that acceleration is a part of disciplinary power intending to reduce lost and unproductive time, and according to Rosa (2013), contemporary society is experiencing an acceleration of time "because of an inherent compulsion to accelerate rooted in the law of profit" (p. 57). He calls this "social acceleration" and splits this concept into three categories: technical acceleration, that is, the increasing speed of travel and communication; acceleration of social change, which manifests itself through, for example, acceleration in rates of change in lifestyles or work, meaning that "the intervals of time for which one can assume stability [is shrinking]" (Rosa, 2013, p. 301), which in turn can lead to a fear of "not keeping up" (Rosa, 2013, p. 307); and acceleration of the pace of life, which points to the filling of time gaps with additional activities, shrinking the time available in between, and thus counteracting the potential of technical acceleration to save time (Rosa, 2013). These three types of acceleration interact in what Rosa (2013) calls "the circle of acceleration" (p. 23), as acceleration in one category tends to lead to increases in the other. Likewise, Beck (1992) argues that individualisation is dissolving tradition, creating the need for the individuals to continuously reconstruct their identities according to trends and markets. These aspects of modern society, such as pressure to perform (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Brown, 2015) and acceleration, stand in sharp contrast to the images of the rural idyll.

As society accelerates, there are also different forms of deceleration, including some that Rosa (2013) would call "dysfunctional side effects" (p. 84), such as depression or burnout syndrome, which sometimes can be seen as "a reaction to unfulfillable expectations of acceleration" (Rosa, 2013, p. 16). Beck (1992) also foresaw the individualisation of risk leading to psychological problems such as anxiety or depression. Within a neoliberal system, people are at the risk of being considered too slow, and as such, of threatening the high production speed desired by society. Slowness is a burden, and if they cannot increase their speed, they are at risk of being "disposed of" (Reheis, 2006, p. 791). Stress-related illness such as burnout syndrome is a problem within all of the European Union (EU), and it is expected to grow. In 2005, 22% of respondents reported stress-related illness (16% in the Netherlands and Germany and 38% in Sweden), and workers reported experiencing an increasing tempo at work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). In another EU study, 33% of EU workers felt exhausted at the end of the day (Eurofound, 2017). Although the causes of burnout are complex and multiple, its correlation with conflicts in work–life balance is strong (Reichl, Leiter, & Spinath, 2014), and it is the "middle class" who are working more hours under more precarious conditions due to this neoliberal social change (Brown, 2015). Deceleration, however,
can also be intentional, by acting on "the longing for a lost world of calm, stability and leisure" (Rosa, 2013, p. 85), or it can be something attributed to a place, an "island of deceleration," where it "appears that time stood still" (Rosa, 2013, p. 83). The attributes of calm, stability, and leisure tie in well with the mainstream counterurbanisation narrative and the rural idyll (Argent et al., 2007; Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Verdich, 2010).

3 | METHOD AND SAMPLING

Due to the initial findings, that existing studies and theories on migration appear to come up short in explaining the migration of this study group; this study has taken an explorative approach. As such, data collected from the "subject's own perspective" through interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 27) can be fruitful in finding new insights from this phenomenon. The overall interview style can best be described as semistructured with a narrative approach. The narrative interview focuses less on the researcher's previous ideas on what might be interesting to know but rather aims at understanding the informants (Yin, 2013). This study is abductive, as the theoretical frame was not set from the beginning but emerged along the way, thanks to the open narrative approach. After setting the theoretical frame, a theoretical analysis was carried out by a critical reading of the empirical material using a list of five precoded themes.

Choosing informants of different backgrounds and experiences and collecting the amount of data necessary to answer the research question are important aspects of credibility (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This has been addressed by choosing informants from two different nationalities, and of different ages and family situations, presented in Table 1; by using multiple entry points (four) for the chain referral, which increases the likelihood of a representative sample (Penrod, Bray Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003); and by interviewing until saturation. As the stories of the interviewees were so similar to each other, saturation was reached early; hence, there are only seven participating households, although a total of 12 participating individuals. The interviewees had lived in Sweden between 2 months and 16 years at the time of the interview. The accounts given are retrospective, and as such, they may give a romanticised picture of the new home and an exaggerated, negative account of the old (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). However, this does not completely remove the authenticity of their accounts, representing actual events and emotions lived and experienced, although it should be kept in mind when drawing conclusions. Six of the interviews were conducted in Swedish; therefore, most quotes have been translated into English. Many quotes have been slightly corrected for grammatical error, while keeping the essence and meaning of their statements. Each headline in the result section represents one of the precoded themes.

3.1 | The study region

All interviewees now live in a sparsely populated region of the "inner parts of Scandinavia" called Värmland, see Figure 1, where Overvåg (2012) concludes that Dutch and German immigrants are overrepresented. The apparent unpopularity, by the Swedes, of the region's rural areas and the overrepresentation of Dutch and German migrants make them and the region interesting subjects for research. The landscape is dominated by forests, lakes, and scattered small-scale farming, and municipal centres are small. It is sparsely populated, with 15.9 inhabitants per square kilometre in 2016, a reduction from 16.2 in 1991 (Statistics Sweden, 2017). Not counting

| TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of the interviewees |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Assumed name of adults, approximate age by decade, i.e., 40 = 40–49, and nationality | Children living at home, who migrated with parents | Children living at home, born after migrating | Type of residence and surrounding landscape | Education and employment |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Alfred, 40, and Annie, 30, German | No | Yes | House, mainly surrounded by forest | Both bachelor or higher, both employed |
| Birthe, 30, Dutch | Yes | No | House, mix of forest and small-scale farming landscape, and lake views | Nonuniversity post–high school education, employed and self-employed |
| Cathrine, 60, Dutch | No | No | House, mainly surrounded by forest | Both nonuniversity post–high school education, both self-employed |
| Delia, 50, and Dietrich, 50, German | No | Yes | House, mix of forest and small-scale farming landscape | Both post–high school education, almost comparable to bachelor, employed and self-employed |
| Edwin, 40, and Elise, 30, Dutch | No | Yes | House, mix of forest and small-scale farming landscape | Both post–high school education, almost comparable to bachelor, both employed |
| Fiona, 40, and Fabian, 30, Dutch | Yes | No | House, in rural community | Both bachelor or higher, both self-employed |

Note. To ensure participant anonymity, ages are given in decades, and distance to metropolitan centre (20–100 km) and length of stay in Sweden (2 months to 16 years) are only given at group level. Within quotation, mentioned places will be replaced with "City A, City B" and so on.
asylum seekers, the only place really growing is the region’s metropolitan centre, Karlstad, with over 90,000 inhabitants in the municipality, about a third of the region’s total population (Karlstads kommun, 2017). Except for the areas closest to Karlstad, Hjort and Malmberg (2006) would call this rural region remote. The interviewees live approximately 20 to 100 km from the city, but none of them live in a rural area within that central municipality.

4 | “WE JUST WANT SOME LUGNT”—KEY FINDINGS WITHIN THE INTERVIEWS

Almost all of the interviewees clearly stated that getting a new job was not a reason for migrating. Rather, jobs were described as something that enabled them to move, or something that enables them to stay by providing financial security. The majority of the interviewees now work in the same field as they did before migrating. Some migrated at the beginning of their professional career, and they now work within the field of their education. Only two of the participating households have really changed careers. The type of jobs, both before and after migrating, varies between interviewees and includes professions such as employment in sales, employment or self-employment in the building industry, and specialised employment in the care sector. Combined with the differences between interviewees seen in Table 1, they represent a demographically varied group.

4.1 | Urban risks and Swedish/rural safety

Although many aspects of risk and safety also can be found within the other themes below, such as different aspects of stress, acceleration/deceleration, and access to state-funded parental support, some aspects are solely described in terms of risks or safety. These primarily concern four areas of perceived risks: pollution, world instability, welfare security, and urban aggression. Environmental risks in the urban environment are primarily described as the negative health effects related to air pollution. Two households describe having problems such as shortness of breath and runny noses, which they suggest disappear or significantly improve in the cleaner rural air. Sweden is commonly described as a safe place in an unstable world, and the rural as safe compared with the urban, and the most vivid of these accounts is the opening quote, where Alfred compares Sweden to Hobbiton. Although aspects of the Swedish welfare system primarily are mentioned when it comes to work–life balance, which could be considered as a matter of family security as well, Fiona clearly mentions it in relation to giving a sense of security. She compares the Dutch and Swedish systems, should one fail to pay for one’s housing:

*In the Netherlands it’s just ..., out of your house and live on the street, with children and everything ... But here in Sweden, you can say, ‘but we have children.’ ‘Oh, but then you should have a place to stay at the least.’* (Fiona)

The stories of risk and safety can be interpreted both as reasons for migrating and as reasons for staying in Sweden, and they are perhaps the most explicitly expressed as reasons for migrating when it comes to stories about aggression and lack of trust connected to heavy urbanisation. This is also the most commonly mentioned topic concerning risks and safety (five households). It is described in terms of the risk of having your items stolen in public spaces, aggression among drivers, and people in crowded urban settings in general being quicker to aggression. Although talking about why they chose to migrate here, Gina and Gabriel explains:
Also the people there, I noticed it also in [City G1] and the big cities. You look straight forward and as soon as you see somebody or have eye contact my first reaction is to smile and ... be polite, and especially [City G1] and [City G2], as soon as you look up towards people they are chest out and aggressive: “What do you want from me?” (Gabriel)

Like if you threaten them with a smile ... everyone walks around in their own bubble and you cannot go through it, or they want to punch you, I do not know ... (Gina)

In summary, besides these explicitly stated risks, other risks in the following themes also become apparent during analysis. Aspects of risks in their previous urban environment and safety at their new rural location are multiple and varied and explained both as reasons to leave the urban and to stay in the rural.

4.2 | “Lugnt” or peace of mind

All interviewees frequently use the Swedish word lugn or lugnt. Lugn/Lugnt can mean calm, peace and quiet, peace of mind, tranquil, restful, slow, or easy, as in taking it easy. Translating the word into English would make it lose some of its meaning; it is therefore retained in the translation of these quotes. The desire for or appreciation of lugn as a motive for leaving and/or staying is apparent in all interviews, and mentioned in the contexts of work, people, and physical surroundings. The interviewees’ recurrent emphasis on how lugnt their lives are now was clearly visible within the interviews, even before analysing. Some, like Fabian, mention it as part of their primary reason for migrating:

But that is the whole thing with, I wanted to move to Sweden for, eh, yes, a little lugnt, the nature, and, stress does not exist here in Sweden. (Fabian)

Several of the respondent households also explicitly describe lugnt in the terms of slowness or a stagnation of the times, compared with where they came from. This has implications for the feelings of stress and pressure (further discussed in Section 4.3) as well as the ability to enjoy life, as expressed by Fabian:

Here you can enjoy life a bit more. Yes, it was like that [in the Netherlands] as well; some 30–40 years ago it was lugnt there as well. (Fabian)

Fiona even describes the rural community as “moving in slow motion.” However, lugnt is primarily referred to when making comparisons between their past and current locations, such as when they describe travelling back to visit family and friends. Elise describes the differences in traffic when driving between the Netherlands and Sweden:

That’s when you notice a big difference, and every time when we go back [home to Sweden] as well, then it’s just really, like, pause [exhaling loudly], so, oah, now we are back home again, in little Värmland. (Elise)

Also, worth noting is that several of the interviewees emphasise how they live an ordinary life or even the same kind of life as before. Dietrich sums this up:

But really, in the long run you live the same life really, just a bit less stressful ... You just live more lugnt in the forest, and that is good. (Dietrich)

In summary, it is interesting that the reduction in speed at their new rural home is often experienced as slow motion or past times. There is no doubt that the desire for lugnt is an important motivation for moving, or to put it another way, the desire to not feel stressed.

On the Importance (or not?) of the Green and the Local/Rural

I grew up with nature, and there was dirt under my feet if you walked around, and that does not exist in the Netherlands. ... That feeling that everything was asphalt or bricks or ... It was from door to door or wherever you went. And then this feeling of being able to live in nature but to still live a completely normal life – that was very appealing to me (Birthe).

This is how Birthe summarises her experiences from spending part of her childhood in a developing country compared with living in the Netherlands and what attracted her to move to Sweden. There are many aspects of the rural environment that are important to their stories of both leaving and staying, such as space, culture, and, as in the quote above, nature. However, it is primarily expressed as appreciation of the open spaces, tranquility/lugnt, and solitude it can provide. Sometimes this is expressed in more abstract terms like a freedom of the mind, but most often as the simple fact that you can walk in a forest without meeting any other people. Edwin describes nature or the forest in the Netherlands like this:

When you have planned to go for a small walk in the forest, you drive in a queue to the forest. You park your car, if there is any parking space left, and then you walk in a line on a paved path in the forest, and that is the forest! (Edwin)

This is almost identical to the wording used by Fabian in explaining why they decided to move:

In the Netherlands, if I’ll go to a forest for a small walk ... on a Sunday, there will be a line of people. There were a hundred, a hundred people in a small forest, and here you can walk in the forest for 3–4 hours without meeting anyone else. (Fabian)

Alternatively, as Cathrine expressed it while explaining why she migrated, after she called herself and other Dutch immigrants “environmental refugees”:

Here there are days when I cannot see my neighbours down there [points out the window and across the field], because it’s too foggy ... At those times you can get the feeling that you are all alone in the world ... That’s why I say “environmental refugee”. (Cathrine)
Although a couple of interviewees mention aspects of being closer to nature in terms of the greenery itself, in relation to their reason for moving, most of them do not. Although nature is an important part of their stories about what they like about their current location, it seems to be secondary when it comes down to the decision to move. This becomes even clearer when considering this quote by Delia:

“We had a good relationship with nature, because it also exists in Germany ... We are actually quite disappointed, because there are fewer animals here than ... around [city D]. (Delia)"

Some describe cultural aspects as part of the adventure of experiencing a new living environment, and others say the cultural differences are not too big. However, the most interesting urban–rural difference, perhaps, concerns knowing your neighbours.

“We lived in the centre of [City A] ... I did not even know who lived behind the door opposite mine, even though I had lived there for perhaps 5–6 years ... and here, now, we actually know everyone within surely a five-kilometre radius, and you consider everyone your neighbour. You have some form of relationship with every one of them. (Alfred)"

Others also speak of their neighbouring communities, as when Fiona talks about inviting neighbours for social gatherings.

“An interesting commonality between the majority of the interviewees is that deciding on Värmland, and even Sweden, seems rather random, as only one household said it was Sweden and Värmland in particular that was the dream destination. A couple of households also considered France, Norway, and even the countryside in Germany for migration, one describes randomly finding a suitable business to take over and a couple describes searching widely and stumbling upon advertisements for cheap housing in the region. Housing prices are an important aspect, and although they may not be a reason for migrating, the low cost of housing in parts of rural Sweden is certainly something that facilitates the move. Several interviewees talk about something similar to a wow sensation when first learning about local prices for housing.

“We bought a house for 360,000 SEK ... You do not even buy a garage for that sum in the Netherlands. (Elise)"

In summary, although nature or the greenery is obviously important to the interviewees, it does not seem as if it is nature itself that they primarily appreciate, but rather the lack of people therein. At the same time, they seem to appreciate knowing their neighbours. So although they like solitude, they do not want to be completely isolated.

4.3 | Balancing work and life

Stories about work–life balance are a major theme throughout most of the interviews. One of the clearest visible aspects of this comes from the four households with young children, all of whom describe Sweden as something like heaven for working parents compared with where they came from. Although it is not something they had in mind before migrating, but rather came as a pleasant surprise after they moved or had children, it is something they now cannot imagine living without.

“Vabba!“ I do not believe that there is any comparable system [in Germany], and then what do you do? You need to have a grandmother who takes the child, because ... you cannot stay at home. Those are the main reasons I would say? [for staying in Sweden] ... And now we compare ourselves quite a lot with friends who are still in Germany, how they are doing, how they are working, and what it looks like for them [laughs]. (Alfred)"

Birthe has experienced giving birth both before and after migrating to Sweden. She recounts that having a baby was very stressful with little paid parental leave, starting to use daycare at 14 weeks, sleeping poorly while trying to perform at work and pumping milk at work, and the difficulties of not having more relatives nearby to help. In Sweden, she describes her experiences like this:

“I did not want more children ... because I experienced it as pretty difficult and stressful and really tiring ... Then to be at home for a year ... I found it to be so heavenly nice. I had no stress. I knew there was daycare available if I needed it after a year ... and those things did so much for me as a mother, that now in Sweden, for my children, I do not have to worry about anything, and I do not have to think, oh shit, what if they get ill – shit, shit, shit, what to do. ... NO WORRIES! And that is amazing. (Birthe)"

Now divorced, she also attributes to the Swedish welfare system her ability to live a good life even as a single mother and describes it as a “human freedom” to be able to choose whether you want to stay with a partner or not. Another part of the work–life story is the practicalities of commuting in a heavily urbanised area.

“Work was pretty good, but it was stressful going there. The road wasn’t that long but sometimes I needed 2–3 hours, and well ... that wasn’t that much fun [laughter]. (Delia)"

That this is important for the participating families is further enhanced by two of them making changes to where they live or work here in Sweden to even further reduce commuting times (now primarily due to distance rather than traffic).

Work–life balance also includes the pressure experienced to perform at work. This is expressed both as sick leave or caring for a sick child not being accepted, or at the least, generating disapproving looks:

“But here if your child is sick and you Vabbar, no one comes and looks at you strangely. (Elise)"
and as demands for a near-meticulous perfection and efficiency at work:

The demands are much higher in the Netherlands. You have to perform to the max, and [for] every small error ... you get a, uh! [slaps his hand]. And here in Sweden it’s like we were 10 years back. (Fabian)

Alfred, on the other hand, phrases this in terms of the different expectations of his professional knowledge:

In Germany [they] expect you to know everything ... and I have to pretend I know everything ... Otherwise, they will not come back, because you are not competent. (Alfred)

He describes Swedes as appreciating his honesty in looking things up for them rather than pretending he already knew. This aspect of pressure to perform also stands out clearly in the interview with Gina and Gabriel, even though they are still in their early twenties and at the beginning of their working lives.

You have to be [roar] - What's the word? ... Yeah, everything you do, you have to do it best. (Gina)

They push you to perform and make it a competition. (Gabriel)

Fabian describes his current work as lacking of such demands, as a German colleague gave him the tip to slow down so as to not over-achieve compared with the Swedes. “So we took it easy. ... We have to slow down here” (Fabian). Most of these aspects concerning work–life balance, even the parents’ amazement over governmental policies, can be summed up in a discussion about stress, and its opposite, lugnt. Although life in the urban setting is described as stressful, tiring, and full of demands, throughout all the interviews, work and life in their current rural setting in Sweden is described as peaceful, quiet, slow, and without the requirement to constantly perform at their peak. As Fiona put it:

We want to live as well, not just live to work but to live, and work a little bit to get some money so that we can live [laughs] ... We feel that we can enjoy life more here. (Fiona)

Resisting the Urban—“I don’t want to live there again”

We spent a lot of time in the forest, we took a lot of walks, and we felt it was so “lugnt”! If you lived like we did in [small rural community in Sweden], it felt like the sixties in the Netherlands. ... I feel it’s like everything passes on a bit “lugnt” and comfortable and no big demands. In the Netherlands they demand a lot from everyone and it’s just ... you talk fast, you do things fast. I believe it’s the same if you live in a big city [in Sweden], I do. (Fiona)

Fiona summarises both deceleration and pressure to perform, while reflecting on why they did not want to leave their Swedish vacation home. She is also clear that pressure to perform is something she connects to the urban environment, as does Gina, while explaining how she wanted to get out of the Netherlands because “it is too crowded and I don’t like ... the people”, before continuing to explain pressure and competition, as quoted in the section on work–life balance.

The theme of resisting the urban is closely connected to all the other themes in the interview analysis, as more than half of the segments found here are also coded under another theme. The stories told in the interviews are full of examples of specific or general aspects of the urban lifestyle that they wanted to get away from, as when Cathrine, at the beginning of her interview, says:

I believe that we are environmental refugees. (Cathrine)

And later she expands on why she used the term “environmental refugees” she explains:

It is so goddamn full of people in the Netherlands, and here you can have some lugnt, and you can enjoy nature. (Cathrine)

That the Netherlands is crowded is a recurrent theme among the Dutch. Besides the previously mentioned environmental risk of air pollution, the primarily urban problem of noise pollution can also be seen as a risk, here explained by Dietrich:

Every sixtieth second an airplane, and the autobahn intersections, the big freeway – swoosh swoosh! – everywhere. You can look at the map [outside City D]. Damn! I do not want to live there again! [laughs]. (Dietrich)

Although many of the interviewees report missing certain aspects of urban life, most frequently mentioned are family and friends, certain foods, and sometimes the larger variety of choices connected to an urban environment. However, this lack of choice is also mentioned in connection to a slower and more stress-free life, which is considered desirable. Although some say they might move on to other “adventures,” all interviewees, like Dietrich, above, emphasise that they will never move back. Similarly, Alfred, while describing an offer to go back for a job that he describes as the jackpot career-wise, says:

I almost panicked when I heard her voice. I ... no, no, no, never [smiles]. (Alfred)

Or as Edwin states,

People are a bit more lugnt here, and I believe that suits me perfectly. You can say that after nine years I would never move back: maximum two weeks’ vacation in the Netherlands, but that does not even feel like a vacation. (Edwin)

In several of the households, it also became very clear that one of the partners was the main driver behind the decision to move. However, even the nondrivers, although perhaps telling the clearer stories about missing their family and so forth, have become convinced that
they by no means wish to return, due to the differences in living conditions they have discovered since the move. Elise explains:

_"I believe you do not notice it [the difference] until you have seen the other side. ... Now I feel it every time we go down [to the Netherlands] that just, my God, that I have not noticed before that everyone is always in a hurry."_ (Elise)

Although this type of story, of course, may be amplified by a desire to not create a conflict within the relationship, it is also very much apparent, for example, with Birthe, whose ex-husband was the primary initiator of migration.

_Before we divorced there was nothing we thought was bad [about the current location in Sweden] that made us want to move back, so why [would there be] now? ... I do not want to move back and perhaps never be able to have what I have now, even as a single mother."_ (Birthe)

In summary, it is not necessarily the Netherlands or Germany specifically that they wanted to escape, but rather the urban life heavily influenced by neoliberalism that they had there. That they wanted to get away from something perhaps rather than to gain something is emphasised by most households clearly explaining how they wanted to leave their previous place and considered different countries and areas for relocation. The final choice seems rather arbitrary, based, for example, on where they happened to get jobs (Alfred and Elise) or finding an advert for cheap housing (Fabian and Fiona).

5 | **DECELERATION AND ESCAPING RISKS—A CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

As the initial quote indicated early on, aspects of risk and safety might be important for the understanding of these migrants. Risks are more or less subjective perceptions (Slovic, 2000) of the chances of something unwanted happening (Hansson, 2012; Renn, 1998). Although briefly mentioned by O’Reilly and Benson (2009), the concept of risk is rather lacking when it comes to research on counterurbanisation or lifestyle migrants.

The open narrative-style interviews have generated new insights into the reasoning of the “lifestyle migrants” to this area. That the multitude of aspects of risk would stand out so clearly was not expected and might have been missed had the interviews been more structured. Although being retrospective accounts, and thus potentially romanticised, the remarkable similarity of the stories told by different households, despite large differences in age and length of time since migration, adds strength to the results pointing to something real. With seven interviewed households, there are certainly more stories to be found among the Dutch and German migrants, but the coherency in these stories of leaving makes a strong case for the push factors being of greater importance than the pull factors. Although these people can still be classified as lifestyle migrants or mainstream counterurbanisers, the motivations of their decision to move seem to be more influenced by aspects of risk and safety than previous theories on lifestyle migration or counterurbanisation have emphasised.

### 5.1  **Lifestyle Migrants, yet clearly not**

Something that immediately stood out was how clearly they all expressed the desire for _lign_ (lign). It is something that can be found in many themes like work-life balance, through the desire of less stress or lesser demands at work, or concerning nature and greenery, as it seems that it is not nature itself that is at the root of their desire but the tranquillity and lack of people that it brings, a finding that is quite contrary to lifestyle migrants stressing a “unique and embodied relationship ... with the landscape” (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009, p. 612). So even when a desire for nature is expressed, it seems that it is often based on a desire to get away from something that they find hectic, stressful, and risky. Although the abundant nature might be a reason for choosing their new location, it does not explain why they decided to leave. This is exemplified by Delia and Dietrich talking about enjoying nature in Germany and by the fact that a recurring theme in the stories about nature is the lack of people in said nature, exemplified by Edwin and Fabian. Further enhancing the lack of explanatory value of previous studies is the fact that these migrants have all moved to “unpopular” areas without the pull of family or friends, and rather than the “unique and embodied relationship” (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009, p. 612) with the landscape, they stress the normality of their lives. The age of the interviewees also suggest that they should be more likely to move to an urban centre or to a periurban or popular rural area, as explained by Hjort and Malmberg (2006). Neither are they part of Mitchell’s (2004) and Halfacree’s (2008) back-to-the-land movement, which otherwise might have explained their preference for more remote rural areas, as only Delia and Dietrich live on a small farm, and even they stress the “normality” of their life. Although the migrants interviewed in this study largely fit the definition of lifestyle migrants as described by Benson and O’Reilly (2009), considering the above-mentioned emphasis on leaving something behind, I find it hard to primarily call them lifestyle migrants, as, for example, Eimermann (2015) does. Rather, by giving the story of leaving the attention it deserves, other theoretical explanations stand out. A key quote here is by Cathrine, as she explicitly says, “I believe that we are environmental refugees.” They are not environmental refugees in the sense that they are asylum seekers or that their homes have been destroyed by natural disasters, but rather in the sense that they find the urban neoliberal way of living so undesirable that resisting it though escape, leaving family, friends, and the relative comfort of a known system and language has become the desirable option. Another noteworthy difference from previous studies is that, contrary to Eimermann (2014, 2015), the migrants in this study have no return reasoning whatsoever, in spite of otherwise strong similarities in both study group and area between the studies, a difference, however, which this study cannot explain.
5.2 | Resisting power norms, an avoidance of risks

Contemporary processes of modernisation, such as individualisation, neoliberalisation, and social acceleration create a society of individuals living in precarious conditions, under constant pressure to perform while being/becoming personally responsible for tackling risks, even those arising at the societal level. The dependence on the volatile trends and markets for identity construction (Beck, 1992), together with increasing individualisation, highlights that both “risk society” and neoliberalisation have strong connections to the feelings of an accelerating society. Speed and performance/competition, as described by, for example, Rosa (2013), Brown (2015), Beck (1992), and Ball and Olmedo (2013), are found problematic, undesired or risky by the interviewees. In addition, as suggested by Brown (2015), it is primarily the middle class who suffer from the increased pressure and demand for speed, fitting well with the overall demographics of this study population. The interviewees describe the disciplinary power of the neoliberal power norm as the constant pressure to perform, competition, and the need for higher speed. Arguably, this stressful situation also plays a part in creating the urban aggression often mentioned by the interviewees. The respondents clearly perceive risks in the urban society, which they do not see in the rural society. These include both the above-mentioned perceived risks as well as the experienced or perceived risk of violence in crowded places, where one might not even know the neighbours, and the actual measurable risks clearly connected to an urban environment, such as air pollution. It also seems that they have a desire to know their neighbouring community in a way they do not see happening in the urban environment. There is also a strong relationship between health risks and a stressful environment. Although none of the interviewees mentions stress in a clear relation to risks or safety, they all talk about experienced stress with regard to their previous work or surroundings. As stress can be considered a significant health risk, it is important not to forget experienced stress and the expressed desire for lugnt when discussing risk and reasons for leaving. Stress, or at least part of stress problematics, can be seen as originating from the individualisation of societal risks (Beck, 1992) and social acceleration (Reheis, 2006; Rosa, 2013). However, we cannot from this study say much about the difference in actual risks to human well-being, in terms of measurable damage, between the urban and the rural, but considering the subjectiveness of risk (Lupton, 1999; Slovic, 2000), it is possible to argue that the urban is experienced as more risky than the rural. In escaping the urban risks they perceive and the disciplinary power norm of neoliberalism as described by Lilja and Vinthagen (2014), they have relocated to a rural area in a different country. Considering the discussion about “care for the self” by Ball and Olmedo (2013), it can also be concluded that these migrants do not themselves necessarily have to be aware that it is aspects of the disciplinary power of neoliberalism that they are resisting. Rather, resistance can be based on the “simple” realisation that these aspects of their life make them feel unwell or uncomfortable. However, when what is being resisted, or escaped, are phenomena such as aggression, stress, and performance demands, resistance can also be seen as risk avoidance.

5.3 | Rural Sweden, a sanctuary of slowness?

There are recurrent stories of slowness or feelings of living as in earlier times, like the stories told by Fabian about work–life balance and pressure at work, Fiona comparing rural Sweden to the Netherlands in the sixties, and Elise describing traffic differences between the Netherlands and Sweden. These examples are just a few of the ones to be found within the interviews. The description of rural Sweden in terms of slowness or of past times corresponds well with what Rosa (2013) calls “islands of deceleration,” or at least, islands where acceleration is not yet as dominant. Although neoliberalism and the same urban risks surely exist in Sweden as well, the important factor here would be the vast rural landscapes, low population, and few major cities, and perhaps not the nation itself. Furthermore, the migrants in this study, although escaping the crowded and hectic urban life, have not gone completely off grid into the wilderness. Most of them still have regular jobs, live in “normal” homes, and go on family vacation trips. Therefore, although they may have escaped or avoided some of the risks and worst-felt effects in their decision to move, they have not escaped the neoliberal system as a whole and for example stress-related illness is also an existing problem in Sweden (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). So, although for the moment they may have escaped to an island of deceleration in the form of the Swedish countryside, a question that remains to be answered is for how long the rural can resist acceleration and remain a sanctuary of slowness.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest to report for this study.

ENDNOTES

1Not including the large influx of asylum-seekers, especially around 2015, as they cannot be considered lifestyle migrants.

2Note that what is perceived as stress can differ between countries.

3To vabba (from the acronym VAB, Vård Av Barn) meaning to stay at home caring for a sick child while receiving a governmental funded temporary parental benefit.

4Although not considered a motive, it is noteworthy that migrating between EU member states is not bureaucratically complicated.

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