



Engagements with uncertain futures – Analysing survivalist preparedness

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ABSTRACT

Much like any grand-scale social disturbance, COVID-19 has brought increasing attention to emergency preparedness on global, national, and individual levels. Although independent preparedness is considered to play an important role in disturbance and emergency-related survival, little attention has been paid to the ways in which individuals conduct their preparations or the social aspects of these preparatory activities.

This article investigates the ways in which survivalists engage with uncertain futures by preparing. Survivalism is a cultural movement that anticipates and prepares for different kinds and scales of disasters and disturbances. The analysis seeks to clarify for what, how, and why Finnish survivalists prepare for. This study employs an experimental setup that combines two different types of media material; media representations about survivalists made by journalists, and online discussions written by survivalists themselves on a Finnish survivalist web forum page. The data was subjected to qualitative thematic text analysis.

The factors that motivate preparedness vary from ordinary and personal inconveniences to general and global disaster scenarios, which co-exist despite their different scales. In practice, the survivalist approach continuously moves between speculative futures and the material present. The survivalist worldview balances between different, seemingly opposite poles: norm-criticality, self-sufficiency, privacy, and collectivism.

1. Introduction

Much like any grand-scale social disturbance, COVID-19 has brought increasing attention to emergency preparedness on global, national, and individual levels. The ensuing discussions have focused on, for example, surviving the crisis and, retrospectively, the inadequate level of preparedness. For citizens, the emergence of the pandemic in spring 2020 was a wake-up call to many in thinking about their own level of preparedness. Although independent preparedness is considered to play an important role in disturbance and emergency-related survival, little attention has been paid to the ways in which individuals conduct their preparations or the social aspects of these preparatory activities (Donahue, Eckel, & Wilson, 2014; Laurikainen, 2016).

Studies have shown that individuals overestimate their preparedness, have poor understanding on possible risks, and consequently are not sufficiently prepared for catastrophes (Donahue et al., 2014). For these reasons, a more concise understanding of individual preparedness is of pivotal importance for surviving the hardships, and ultimately, viability.

This article brings to focus the preparedness of a specific group of individuals: Finnish survivalists. Survivalism, which is also referred to as preparedness, is a loose cultural movement that anticipates and prepares for different kinds and scales of disasters and

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disturbances. As a group of people focused particularly on the unexpected hazards, survivalists or preppers provide an entry point to study the ways to engage with futures during a time when preparing for the forthcoming has become increasingly topical.

Despite being a highly visible topic in popular culture – movies, fictional literature, TV series, and reality shows – survivalism is an understudied topic in academic context, particularly outside Northern America. Barker (2019) suggests that prepper culture has been subject to both “media ridicule and academic dismissal” (for media ridicule see also Campbell, Sinclair, & Browne, 2019). Survivalism has been described as a challenging research topic due to the informality and fluidity of the actions that preppers take (Mitchell, 2002). Furthermore, the concept has some unwanted ideological connotations related to it (see Lamy, 1996; 1997; Rantanen, 2015), which may have an impact on the popular perception of the culture.

The objective of this article is to shed empirical understanding on the understudied topic of contemporary non-American survivalism, and to investigate how preppers cope in times of uncertainty. What is investigated are the ways in which survivalists and preppers engage with uncertain futures by preparing. Specifically, the analysis seeks to clarify i) for what, ii) how, and iii) why are survivalists preparing for. The first part of the analysis concerns the outspoken, explicit threats, for which Finnish survivalists prepare for. The second part addresses the actions through which these threats are prepared for. The third part focuses on the deeper, partly explicit yet partly implicit worldviews, values, and ideologies which guide survivalist preparedness. These three levels of analysis account for survivalist engagement with futures.

This study employs an experimental setup that combines two different types of media material: 1) media representations about survivalist and preppers made by journalists, and 2) online discussions written by preppers themselves on a Finnish survivalist web forum page. The data has been gathered in 2010–2017, and is analysed with qualitative thematic text analysis.

The remainder of the article proceeds in the following manner. Section 2 examines prior work on preparedness and survivalism. The research data and the methodological approach are elaborated in Section 3. The results of the three-level analysis are summarised in Section 4. In Section 5, the results are discussed as a survivalist engagement with uncertain futures.

2. Survivalism and preparedness

Clarification on the use of the terms ‘survivalism’ and ‘preparedness’ in this article is required before the literature review on the concepts. Indeed, some of the people presented in the media texts that are analysed in this article, call themselves ‘preppers’ instead of ‘survivalists’. The concept of ‘preparedness’ is often favoured over ‘survivalism’ in Finnish public discourse, since survivalism is still considered to refer to Northern American contexts and practices that commenced after the Gold War (Karosto & Karppinen, 2011). In this article, ‘survivalism’ (alternatively, ‘prepping’) is the culture studied; ‘survivalist’ (alternatively, ‘prepper’) is used synonymously of the “members” of this culture, and ‘preparedness’ refers to their actions and approach to futures.

2.1. Preparedness

Whereas preparedness is an essential part of survivalism, preparedness refers to a wider set of actions utilised in several other contexts than by survivalists only; by nation states, institutions, or other individuals. In the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction terminology, preparedness is defined as “[T]he knowledge and capacities developed by governments, response and recovery organizations, communities and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent or current disasters” (UNDRR, 2020). Independent preparedness or self-preparedness refer to the activities conducted by individuals or communities. Simply put, preparedness means readiness for an approaching event or conditions. Importantly, it includes the idea of being organised and obtaining the required resources to meet the circumstances (Donahue et al., 2014). For Anderson (2010), preparedness as a logic of legitimising anticipatory action has been formalised after 9/11, as a response to different potentially disastrous large-scale threats for liberal-democratic life.

Although preparedness occurs in the here and now, there are different conceptualisations on its temporal ‘target’. For Lakoff (2007), preparedness is a form of security rationality, which offers security experts tools to encounter the uncertain, non-calculable threats with disastrous potential by *intervening* in the present. Preparedness is necessary in order to approach future events that are neither probabilistic nor necessarily calculable, but could prove to be disastrous (ibid.). Despite the emphasis on action, risk perception and mitigation are also in important role for preparedness (Donahue et al., 2014). Ben Anderson conceptualises preparedness a specific logic through which futures are acted on in the present moment. Action based on preparedness is targeted at mitigating the aftermath of an event. (Anderson, 2010). The opposite stance to preparedness for Lakoff (2007) is insurance, and for Anderson (2010) preemption and precaution.

2.2. Survivalism and prepping

Philip Lamy describes survivalism as a “loosely structured yet pervasive belief system and set of practices focusing on disaster preparedness” (Lamy 1996, 14). Most survivalists believe that the social, economic, ecological and industrial world is in trouble and will collapse, and the anticipated man-made or natural disasters are answered with necessary practices, identified well before the cataclysm (Lamy, 1996; Wojcik, 1999). Even though their reasons for taking action may differ, what unites preppers is their anticipation of different possible futures and the preparation for encountering them (Mitchell, 2002). Indeed, the survivalist focus moves between the present and the forthcoming. Barker (2019) defines prepping to consist of three active, ongoing ‘imaginative-material’ practices, which concern value, a multiplicity of temporalities, and crisis.

Survivalists turn different speculated scenarios into practice by exercising the skills and knowledge they consider necessary for survival. Next to definitive grand disasters such as end-of-the-world scenarios (Rahm, 2013) and nuclear disaster (yes, even after the

Cold War) (Wojcik, 1999), non-apocalyptic and temporary threats are imagined (Mills, 2019). Prepping often manifests in the collection of items that are necessary for one's defence, safety, relocation, or nutrition as well as in the improvement of social, mental and physical skills that are vital to one's survival (Rahm, 2013; Wojcik, 1999). Escaping from society and self-sufficiency are often-times at the core of survivalist tactics (Lamy, 1996). In general, appropriate preparing helps survivalists to endure even the most serious disasters (Wojcik, 1999).

In a western context, the origins of survivalism are often connected to the United States and the geopolitical tensions that prevailed there during the Cold War. The most recent influential event that has increased the interest towards preparedness — especially in the U.S.A. — occurred immediately after the 9/11 attacks in September 2001, after a quiet era. Nevertheless, the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States had an impact as well: over 13 000 Americans were reported to have registered with immigrant authorities to seek residency in New Zealand immediately after Trump's election (Osnos, 2017).

The present-day survivalist movement and disaster-prepping phenomenon in the United States have been said to resemble a lifestyle movement (Kabel and Chmidling, 2014). Despite attracting Caucasian men "of conservative or independent political affiliations" (Wojcik, 1999), survivalism does not represent a cohesive, easily categorised group or subculture (Rantanen, 2015; Wojcik, 1999). Survivalism has been described as a contradictory project that both rebels against prevailing societal norms and reproduces and reinforces the status quo (Rantanen, 2015). It is both a response to and a consequence of modern times and rationalisation. Survivalists do not reject the social order, but desire something different – for example, creativity instead of control. (Mitchell, 2002.)

Anonymity and secrecy are seen as critical to ensure one's safety, which challenges any efforts to successfully estimate how widespread the culture is (Wojcik, 1999). Most of the academic studies have been conducted in the USA (Kabel & Chmidling, 2014; Lamy, 1996; Mills, 2019; Mitchell, 2002; Rantanen, 2015), with the few recent exceptions of prepper cultures e.g. in Europe (Campbell

Table 1
Research data.

Item nr.	Source media	Title of the text (translated by author)	Type	Content	Reference
1	YLE – The Finnish Broadcasting Company	What does a Finnish survivalist prepare for?	Radio interview at transcribed as text by the author	Interview of Pasi Karosto on survivalism and preparedness.	Häkkinen, 2013
2	YLE – The Finnish Broadcasting Company	Warrior of the collapse tribe	Documentary television film transcribed as text by the author	Miika Vanhapiha prepares for The End of the World as We Know It.	Richt, 2016
3	YLE – The Finnish Broadcasting Company	Survivalists prepare for everything	Report	Pasi Karosto discusses survivalism.	Niiranen, 2010
4	YLE – The Finnish Broadcasting Company	Finnish survivalist does not build a bunker	Report	Pasi Karosto discusses survivalism.	Toivanen, 2013
5	Ylioppilaslehti (student magazine)	May the end of the world come	Report	Pasi Karosto and moniker Metsäsusi discuss survivalism. References to survivalismi.com forum.	Hallamaa, 2012
6	Aamulehti (daily newspaper)	"This is how I became a witch" – Miika Vanhapiha sees visions and gathers a collapse tribe in Forssa	Report	Miika Vanhapiha discusses collapse and witchcraft.	Karhunkorpi, 2017
7	Maaseudun tulevaisuus (daily newspaper)	Survivalist reserves food for a couple of months in home	Report	Pasi Karosto discusses home emergency supply.	Koljonen, 2011
8	Helsingin Sanomat (daily newspaper)	Markku Teräs has learned to hunt rabbits with a bow and to make lanterns out of pig bladder – survivalists prepare for the day when society collapses	Report	Markku Teräs and Vesa-Pekka Rantalainen discuss emergency preparedness	Nieminen, 2017
9	VOIMA (free magazine)	Survivalist wants to live!	Report	Several survivalismi.com forum users interviewed about survivalism.	Vähähyppä, 2010
10	Survivalismi.com web page	Survivalismi.com	Web page	A list of seven categories, 52 sub-categories and 1022 discussion topics	S.com 2017–2017e
11	Survivalismi.com web page	How you prepped today	Forum topic	484 posts	S.com 2017–2017e
12	Survivalismi.com web page	Personal SHTF ^a	Forum topic	14 posts	S.com 2017–2017e
13	Survivalismi.com web page	Highlights of 2016	Forum topic	18 posts	S.com 2017–2017e
14	Survivalismi.com web page	Is survivalism out of fashion?	Forum topic	50 posts	S.com 2017–2017e
15	Survivalismi.com web page	Survivalism and spouses and other close ones	Forum topic	38 posts	S.com 2017–2017e

^a "SHTF" is survivalist slang and stands for Shit Hits The Fan. It is used to refer to catastrophic events.

et al., 2019), UK (Barker, 2019); Sweden (Rahm, 2013); and Finland (thesis by Takkinen, 2020). Due to the prevalence of prepper culture in popular culture, there have been several studies on the media representations on the topic (Foster, 2014; Kelly, 2016).

3. Material and methods

The privacy of many survivalists poses a challenge to analytical efforts. Some studies have successfully examined survivalists and preppers with ethnographic approach (Mitchell, 2002), and by gathering data with interviews (Barker, 2019; Takkinen, 2020). Despite the importance of online activity for survivalists, their virtual communication has not been widely investigated in academic literature. The few exceptions are Rahm (2013) study on Swedish Survivalist Forum and the netnographic study on European preppers by Campbell et al. (2019).

In this study, the data was gathered from two different types open online sources. All items are listed in Table 1. First, nine mainstream media texts, published between 2010–2017, were gathered from public media sources (items 1–9 in Table 1). These texts and audiovisual products were created by journalists, reporters, and a documentary maker for the public audience. The searches were first conducted within two large national media sources (Helsingin Sanomat, Finland's largest daily newspaper, and YLE, the national public broadcasting company of Finland), followed by an additional data collection process using Google. All audiovisual items focusing primarily on Finnish preppers or survivalists were included in the sample. The low number of results shows that survivalism has remained a marginal topic in mainstream media.

Secondly, six online discussion text items were gathered from an online discussion forum for Finnish survivalists, survivalismi.com (items 10–15 in Table 1): the index of the website and five discussion forum topics. Each topic consists of messages submitted by online forum members who identify as survivalists or preppers or, alternatively, wish to discuss survivalism and preparedness within this online community. Due to the vast amount of material available on the website, filtering was made according to an initial analysis of what would best describe the survivalist engagement with futures. From the analyst, this required active use of the forum. This approach resembles digital ethnographic orientation, which aims to “develop an understanding from the inside” and observing a culture from a very close proximity (Hine 2015, 19). As a result, a purposive sample was gathered. Out of 1022 available topics, five were selected for further analysis. These five topics included 604 individual posts, which are pieces of text written by the members of the forum, identifiable only by their chosen nicknames. The length of each post varies from a few words to hundreds of words. The gathered material was openly available for everyone to see without registering to the website.

Although media is the common denominator of the chosen material, these items can be categorised into two types according to each item's origin, nature, and authorship. The mainstream media texts on survivalists and preppers have been made by reporters for the public, and the online forum texts are written by survivalists primarily for their own community.

The online research setting in this article has some implications that are necessary to keep in mind. Firstly, studying the communication of a group of anonymous participants online sets challenges to the interpretation of the data, as the analyst may not understand the specific tones or meanings shared by the community. In order to increase the reliability of the study, items from mainstream media were collected for a more ‘official’ viewpoint on survivalism. Analysing web forum discussions only would not have provided a sufficient understanding on the topic. At the same time, only a few persons in Finland are willing to discuss their survivalist practices in public. Thus, mainstream media texts alone were not deemed to fully represent the diversity of Finnish survivalism. The online forum texts – written by the survivalists themselves, for the prepper community – were gathered to provide a plurality of viewpoints on the discreet prepper culture and to go beyond the ‘official’ description of the culture. Despite the differences between the two types of data, the topics they discuss are mostly the same ones. The main difference is in the plurality of viewpoints, as the online web forum offers an uncensored environment for multiple voices.

Although interaction between the analyst and the preppers could have occurred in the online environment, the analyst did not engage in the online web forum. Thus, there has been no chance to ask elaborating questions from those studied. The results of this study cannot be read as a purely objective ‘truth’ of Finnish survivalism. One of the main advantages in studying survivalism online is that a digital platform offers an entrypoint to the social side of the culture. It would be challenging, if not impossible, to access the preppers as a community offline due to the discreetness of their movement. The study aligns partly with what Hine (2015) calls unobtrusive digital ethnography: a non-reactive way of drawing on data that can be found. The approach suits to situations where acquiring authentic responses or observing does not work (ibid.). Accessing the particular social relations of survivalists would not been possible were it not the web forum.

The analysis process utilised qualitative thematic text analysis, with all data analysed as one unit. In qualitative thematic text analysis, the construction of analysis categories can be formed either inductively from the data, or deductively, on the basis of a theory (Kuckartz, 2014). In this study, the analysis was data-based, making the approach inductive and iterative. One of the most important characteristics of qualitative content analysis is the establishment of analysis categories that are sufficiently precise (Silverman, 2001). The process of categorising and coding the material was multi-staged, which is typical of the thematic qualitative text analysis process (Kuckartz, 2014). In practice, after the first readings, the three levels of the analysis together with analysis questions were formulated. These three levels provide were considered to provide an account on survivalist engagement with futures by responding to what for (Section 4.1), how (Section 4.2), and why (Section 4.3) survivalists prepare. Next, the first coding process took place, and the data was assigned in the form of text passages to the three main categories in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program. These contents were differentiated by creating sub-categories from the data, in accordance with any emerging differences. Next, the data was explored thoroughly, and text passages within each of the main categories were assigned to and analysed under sub-categories.

4. Survivalist preparedness in Finland

4.1. The threats

Contrary to the stereotypical image of a survivalist who is armed from head to toe, actual survivalists consider their ordinary life as fundamentally important to their survival. Everyday, small-scale factors are matters of preparedness to survivalists. Overall, it is considered worthless to prepare for global issues if one is not prepared for the everyday coincidences. As one person in the forum notes,

“It is more worthwhile to prepare for ordinary SHTF scenarios than any unlikely threats. Many like to prepare for every type of nuclear war, but then ignore their everyday matters completely.”

The acronym SHTF (‘Shit Hits The Fan’) is survivalist slang that is used most commonly as a reference to large-scale catastrophic events. One of the discussion topics in the forum is called “Personal SHTF”. The posts in this topic imagine long-term disturbances to one’s accustomed way of living. One example of a personal-scale disaster is divorce, as one user explains:

“My wife found another man and moved in with him. I was prepared for everything, even a zombie invasion, but this came completely out of the blue. No warnings, no signs whatsoever. An excellent example of how a situation can turn completely in a flash. In no way was I prepared for this.”

Next to the sorrow caused by the loss of one’s companion and relationship, divorce also causes economic disturbances. [Barker \(2019\)](#) points out the prevalence of personal crises within UK preppers as an aftermath of precarity and increasingly uneven resources. Another forum member imagines a scenario where they do not have access to their current resources. Instead of an apocalypse, the imminent threats to the person are homelessness, unemployment, and a dependency on social welfare:

“I prepare for situations where I could lose my apartment, as a person like me with no credit rating would immediately be in trouble. [...] So, if you’re afraid of the world ending or something like that, and you fill your closet with gas masks, I, on the other hand, could very well end up on the street one day, like a hobo without booze.”

The same forum member later explains how they practise surviving without an apartment. Yet, they try to do it in a way that does not make their prepping “a self-fulfilling prophecy”, in which they would end up homeless.

Despite the frequent references to Finnish survivalism as an ordinary practice, a variety of political, economic, environmental, and social threats that go beyond one’s home and backyard are present in the data. These events are neither fixed nor known in advance, necessitating ongoing speculation. In general, everyone defines their own scenarios and required steps themselves. In the forum, topics such as the situation in North Korea or Finnish immigration policies are speculated. Overall, the unknown something that could occur is believed to originate from beyond Finland’s borders. According to a forum member, these threats are becoming too complex for an individual to encounter. While a few years ago people were interested in the ways in which one could survive with scarce economic resources or in a barter economy following an economic collapse, the reasons for preparing are currently becoming too varied and nearly impossible to respond to:

“If you look at an updated list of threats and compare it to the earlier one, an ordinary individual survivalist can prepare for an economic collapse, but not necessarily for these current threats.”

In survivalist slang, TEOTWAWKI stands for ‘The End Of The World As We Know It’, or the most severe threat imaginable. It emerges from global threats and escalates into uncontrollable measures. Interestingly, the emblematic threat in American survivalism – nuclear war – still serves as a reference point in Finnish discussions, despite the differences between these two cultures. One forum member explains that preparing for a nuclear explosion is a good idea, since, post-disaster, preppers can isolate themselves from the now-dangerous environment. Thus, assessing what is really needed in such a situation is a good exercise in general, and it includes another key advantage:

“There is, however, one special factor when it comes to protecting oneself from a nuclear explosion. It is hurry. Specifically, the hurry to a shelter. The element of time, one’s reaction speed, is maybe the factor that divides the population into survivors and perishers.”

Elevating the nuclear disaster to an iconic status illustrates the survivalist approach to threats well. It does not necessarily need to happen, but it serves as a reference point for any preparations related to encounters with large-scale hardships. In TEOTWAWKI scenarios, the threats themselves are not as important as the bleak futures that will follow them in the aftermath.

In conclusion, the threats from which one wishes to survive come in different shapes and sizes, and they vary from the mundane and personal to the general and global. Interestingly, one can expect to survive only if one’s ordinary life is in order. Leaving the coffee maker on when you leave home can disturb the success of your daily life, but it does not prevent you from speculating the events of a worldwide societal collapse.

4.2. The actions

In their guidebook on Finnish survivalism, Karosto and Karppinen suggest that survivalists aim to address threatening situations in advance by creating risk analyses and conducting the necessary preparations for these future scenarios. When an anticipated event takes place, their chances of survival – by following these pre-imagined procedures and using the acquired skills – have become more probable. ([Karosto & Karppinen, 2011](#)). Throughout the data, the Finnish approach is distinguished from the popular and stereotypical images of American survivalist culture. The ordinariness of Finnish preparedness is emphasised through regular references to the importance of keeping the everyday safe. Pasi Karosto, himself a practicing survivalist, describes his routine in the following way:

“First, you think about how your day will go, from morning to evening. From the moment you wake up, think about where you will step after you get up from bed. Did the kids leave their toys on the floor, could you accidentally step on them and hurt yourself? [...] When you leave home, check that you took your keys. Did you remember to switch off the coffee maker? And what about the yard, are the lights on? Is it sanded? Is it slippery?” (Häkkinen, 2013)

Yet, there is a need to speculate further by acquiring knowledge on and evaluating possibilities for more severe hardships. One online forum member explains how survivalists tend to observe their surroundings constantly and stay up-to-date with the news:

“I aim to keep up with domestic as well as foreign happenings every day. Particularly when there’s a disaster taking place in some part of the world, I follow the news a lot so that I can contemplate its possible effects here, in my home country.” (Vähähyppä, 2010)

After speculating and choosing their scenarios, the survivalist will prepare by acquiring the necessary material resources, skills, and knowhow for each scenario. Each item is imagined and selected for a specific purpose: a car that can navigate challenging terrain, a storage room with enough space, and the right shoes for specific weather conditions. Next to a large variety of skills from growing your own food, tying knots, and identifying plants, everyday actions, such as visits to the dentist, hemming a pair of pants, doing your laundry, or using a standing desk, are considered methods of preparation. An understanding of economic systems – value added tax, accounting, and the marginal tax rate – is of the essence, as better finances provide access to better resources.

The idea of a future that is different from the present guides the practical preparedness in the present. Thus, consumption deviates from the mainstream: inadequate standard solutions are often modified to better meet one’s specific purposes. For example, one forum member explains how they have modified a refrigerator into a dehydrator, which works better than any solution available in stores. Next to this kind of ‘object potentiality’ of imagining it in different circumstances (see Barker, 2019), data features notions of ‘skill potentiality’. Traditional practices and, for example, farming tools are considered viable options, as modern tools and equipment can fail in a power shortage. Radical disruptions exert a fundamental influence on the skills that are required. For example, being able to light a fire using only a stone is considered important, since once production stops and resources run out, there is no use for a bunker if one cannot cope without any matches. (Nieminen, 2017).

Survivalists hone their skills and test their materials in good time by what can be considered as simulation of futures. Sleeping outside in cold weather, practising crisis relocation, or starting a fire in challenging conditions is easier in the present rather than during an actual emergency. The ability to cope with surprises is crucial for survival and can be rehearsed by practising the speculated scenarios in the material present, as one forum member explains:

“I alter my routines. I’ve driven to neighbouring cities for groceries and searched for new petrol stations to fill up my tank. And, naturally, I’ve looked for new driving routes to these locations. This is because if scenario X actually happens, the ensuing hoarding could result in scarce resources or petrol running out at a specific location.”

4.3. The worldviews and ideologies

Several ideologies co-exist in the data, which is most likely a result of the heterogeneous nature of survivalism. The four main ideological discourses emerging from the data concern relationships between survivalists and others, others being people and institutions.

4.3.1. Norm-criticality

The survivalist worldview is critical and even dissident towards the official policies and state. Overall, the mainstream is abandoned as inadequate. For instance, survivalists consider official recommendations on e.g. home emergency supplies insufficient for survival. When asked if he considers the national emergency supply to be sufficient and up to date, the survivalist Karosto hesitates:

“I am not exactly aware of its level, but we are always told that everything is ok. Nevertheless, I do not think that it is enough. Each individual should be personally responsible for themselves, as you cannot always trust the state or society to come and help on time if something does go wrong.” (Häkkinen, 2013)

Rahm (2013) states that survivalists deem any business-as-usual approaches as insufficient, and concentrate instead on “speculative prophesying”, positioning survivalism as a norm-critical way of organising their everyday lives. Norm-criticality is indeed considered fundamental to survival. Despite the high level of trust that Finns place in the authorities in times of emergency (Laurikainen, 2016), distrust towards authorities in disasters is frequently mentioned in the data. One forum member feels that people suffer from a dangerous feeling of safety, specifying that they have not forgotten how things have descended into chaos before:

“The more I read history, the more I look after my own supply of canned food.”

Kabel & Chmidling (2014) suggest that some of the core ideologies within the prepper movement include a mistrust towards the federal government as well as a responsibility to provide for oneself and one’s family members in a disaster, as any governmental services will fail to do so. In prepper cultures, dependency is often seen as unjustified belief in a system (Campbell et al., 2019).

Although Karosto denies that the idea of a state of anarchy guides his preparedness, he admits that there is truth to the saying that ‘we are nine meals from anarchy’ (Hallamaa, 2012). The prepper Miika Vanhapiha refers to the possibility of violence when discussing how a collapsed tribe may choose to defend itself:

“If things escalate and we are faced with fundamental questions such as life or death, then people have the right to struggle for their survival.” (Richt, 2016)

This is consistent with the previously drawn conclusion that the survivalist approach – convinced as it is of the forthcoming collapse – does not aim to reform the system (Lamy, 1996). With their own shadow infrastructure, they challenge capabilities of the networked

infrastructure (Barker, 2019). Tierney (2013) suggests that resilience arises from and exists within social order. Thus, the imminent element for preventing future disasters is a better understanding of the social forces that produce them, and making communities and societies more resistant to disastrous events. Importantly, survivalists take the matter into their own hands. Indeed, Barker asks, whether preppers can challenge neoliberal processes. According to the results, survivalism does not aim to do so. Since the collapse cannot be prevented by those in power, it can only be survived by some.

4.3.2. Self-sufficiency

One frequently addressed tactic for distancing oneself from the system is self-sufficiency. Picking and preserving berries and mushrooms as well as hunting are popular topics when people discuss daily preparedness. By imagining a future where basic metabolic needs, such as food, shelter, and water are provided by a shadow economy instead of officials, preppers expose the infrastructural weakening and possible future failure of the state (Barker, 2019). One forum member states that their goal is to be as independent from the rest of society as possible. Blacksmith Markku Teräs, who prepares for crises – substantiates the point clearly by noting that self-sufficiency is pivotal for long-term preparedness and that good equipment will not guarantee one's survival forever:

"A bunker is a temporary comfort [...] Sooner or later, it will run out of food if you cannot replace your supplies." (Nieminen, 2017)

The possibility of achieving self-sufficiency is considered to be better in the countryside. Urban lifestyles are seen as overly comfortable, numbing city dwellers into an illusion that everything is fine. In one article, an anonymous prepper paints a grim picture in which the lonely suburban survivor will reap their post-apocalyptic "reward":

"If you can manage to survive for around two years (and two cold winters) with your own supplies, you can finally crawl out of your 'bunker' into a bunch of riches. After society stops and every suburbanite has been wiped out by cold and hunger, you can expect a massive inheritance." (Hallamaa, 2012)

In an ideal case, the "post-industrial culture based on fast-paced consumption" is abandoned, as Vanhapiha suggests (Karhunkorpi, 2017). Yet, a complete escape beyond the prevailing capitalist economic system and culture of consumption is difficult. Preparedness, as illustrated earlier in this analysis, strongly revolves around supplies and equipment, which are more or less produced by the very system that self-sufficiency seeks to abandon.

4.3.3. Privacy

The journalist Nieminen (2017) describes Finnish survivalism as akin to "[...]Finnish sorrow. Small-scale and ordinary". Another attribute that suits the stereotypical image of Finnish sorrow is hiddenness, which also applies to survivalism as a privacy-oriented movement. According to Vähähyyppä (2010), one of the reasons for the discreet nature of Finnish survivalists is the perceptions of others: "[o]ne keeps quiet about their survivalist tendencies, since others easily consider them weird." These perceptions partly stem from the representations of American survivalists. In one article, the associations between survivalism and far-right movements in the United States are estimated as the main reasons for wanting to remain anonymous (Hallamaa, 2012). However, secrecy also serves as a survival tactic:

"An additional reason is that, in the event of a societal collapse, a survivalist who is prepared for it will not want a pack of beggars at their doorstep." (Vähähyyppä, 2010)

4.3.4. Collectivism

Yet, somewhat paradoxically to the concepts of self-sufficiency and privacy, collectivism plays an important role in Finnish survivalism. Social skills and goodwill are considered highly beneficial to one's future endeavours. One forum member prepares by taking care of their neighbour's cat. Conservatively, family is seen as a unit that provides its members with intergenerational support. Miika Vanhapiha takes this idea further: his communal unit of choice is a "collapse tribe". He questions the idea of the mythical lone-wolf prepper:

"I think that survivors are people who are social, who can cope with other people, get help and also offer help and who can network in different ways. So, in my opinion, the most important resource when it comes to self-sufficiency/collapse-oriented thinking is social capital." (Richt, 2016)

For many survivalist Finns, supporting one's peers also increases one's own chances of survival. Although there are notes towards suspicion towards others, the data is partly in contrast with the results of European preppers from Campbell et al. (2019), which emphasise preppers as against group ethics and not sharing advice. An example from an anonymous survivalist illustrates this difference:

"I don't lose anything if share what I know. If I can help someone survive on their own, that person will not be as big of a burden to rescue workers in a possible disaster situation." (Vähähyyppä, 2010)

Considering the norm-criticality and social ideologies of preppers, it can be suggested that a chosen community replaces society as the de facto unit of security and survival. However, survivalism is not an ideology of inclusivity, but rather a balance between selective collectivism and complete privacy. Barker (2019) refers to exclusionary prepper gaze, which divides people into the few survivors and the many who will not have the readiness to live through the upcoming disasters.

5. Discussion

The results of the previous Section prove that survivalists assume multiple futures with different temporalities simultaneously: both the grand and mundane ones. Survivalists independently define the threats they prepare for. Gone are the days when preparations addressed a single threat. On the contrary, the end of the world scenarios co-exist with personal crises, such as homelessness or divorce. One reporter writes how a forum member “[...]prepares for a disaster that can be anything between a lay-off and a nuclear disaster” (Vähähyyppä, 2010).

Norm-criticality sets survivalists free from the official futures. Instead, the future is seen as an empty canvas that is filled with carefully speculated components concerning the future and translated into the current moment as different types of action. For Barker (2019), preppers challenge the neoliberal privatisation of the imagination and production of secure futures. The survivalist engages with the multiple futures through speculation, by choosing and preparing without any limitations regarding the types of futures that may be considered. These encounters simultaneously encompass climate change and coffee makers, terrorist attacks and divorce. It is exactly the focus on the everyday that challenges the media representations of single-future focused, apocalypse-oriented survivalists. Instead, the focus expands in all directions, and everything can be connected to everything. When asked whether Finnish survivalism is free from any ideology, Karosto states that:

“I would say that we have more of a blank canvas to work with. We can define the threats that we want to prepare for by ourselves.”

Importantly, only what is necessary deserves focus. Thus, all survivalist engagements with the future are situated in between speculation and action, a phenomenon that is well-portrayed in the free and anonymous space provided by a web forum. Rahm (2013) characterises online survivalist discussions as a “play with alternative futures”, which is enabled and limited by the real-life capacities of the survivalists, making these discussions a “hypothetical justification for their current way of life”.

The different temporalities of survivalist futures can thus be summarised by utilising Amara (1981) classification of different kinds of futures: possible (can be), probable (may be) or preferable (ought to be). For survivalists, a very wide range of challenging futures is possible. Yet, for those who are sufficiently prepared, the future after a hardship is still a possible one, unlike for those who have closed their eyes from risks.

The alternative futures, imagined through threats, resonate with the concept of counterfactuals, which concerns the basic human capacity to detach oneself from the present and imagine reality – past or future – in a way that is different from now (Black, 2015). Although the threatening futures can be prepared to, they are unavoidable. The results support Anderson’s notion on preparedness as anticipatory action mitigating the aftermath of a disaster in order for life to carry on, instead of attempting to prevent the event in the first place (Anderson, 2010). Despite their critical attitude towards the mainstream, survivalists concentrate less on how to avoid or prevent disasters and more on surviving them, once they have occurred. According to Vanhapiha, the future indeed has an “expiration date”:

“I find it hard to believe that these developments that are leading to a dramatic change or collapse could somehow be stopped or altered completely.” (Richt, 2016)

Preparedness emerges in times of uncertainty, and discourses of the future as uncertain underpin the necessity of anticipatory action (Anderson, 2010). The threats in the future will most likely and unfortunately not cease to surprise us. Thus, survivalism provides an excellent entry point for analysing engagements with uncertainty. For survivalists, the future to be encountered is omnipresent, here and now, as this forum quote illustrates:

“You see that basically anything can happen at any time. When something is too improbable, you can spend year after year saying that you just ‘don’t believe it’ or that ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’, and then it suddenly happens. And by then it may be too late.”

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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