Implicit narratives and narrative agency

Evaluating pandemic storytelling

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This article proposes the concept of *implicit narrative* as an analytic tool that helps to articulate how cultural models of narrative sense-making steer us to certain patterns of experience, discourse, and interaction, and the concept of *narrative agency* as an analytic tool for theorizing and evaluating the processes in which we navigate our narrative environments, which consist of a range of implicit narratives. As a touchstone for developing these theoretical concepts, which serve not only narrative studies but also overlapping fields such as memory studies and cultural studies, the article analyzes the implicit cultural narrative that has most strongly dominated public discourse on the coronavirus pandemic: the narrative of war. Thereby, the article also contributes to the analysis of pandemic storytelling and its effects on us, as the cultural memory of the pandemic is currently taking shape and affecting our orientation to the future.

Keywords: implicit narrative, narrative agency, pandemic storytelling, narrative hermeneutics, narrative of war, covid-19, Michael Rosen's *Many Different Kinds of Love*

Introduction

Narrative scholars widely embrace the view that only narratives with a concrete material form merit being called narratives. This is a veritable narratological dogma (see, e.g., Abbott, 2021; Fludernik & Ryan, 2019), but it also finds support from narrative scholars with a background in social sciences (see, e.g., Hyvärinen, 2021). While literary narratology has privileged narrative as a textual artifact, empirical research on narrative practices has placed the emphasis on narrative as social interaction (see, e.g., Bamberg & Wipff, 2021). In this article, however, I argue that we need a conception of narrative that encompasses not only concrete textual narratives and the process of social interaction but also *narrative models of sense-making* in relation to which both textual narratives and interactive processes

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of storytelling take shape. For this purpose, I propose the concept of *implicit narrative* as an analytic tool that helps to articulate how cultural models of narrative sense-making steer us to certain patterns of experience, discourse, and interaction, and the concept of *narrative agency* as an analytic tool for theorizing and evaluating the processes in which we navigate our narrative environments, which consist of a range of implicit narratives. I suggest that these concepts serve not only narrative studies but also overlapping fields such as memory studies and cultural studies.

I will also address the need for evaluative tools for assessing the benefits and dangers of various implicit narratives, and I argue that such tools should acknowledge the existential dimension of narratives – that is, how they affect our sense of our possibilities in the world. As a touchstone for the theoretical concepts developed in this article – implicit narratives and narrative agency – I will analyze the implicit cultural narrative that has most strongly dominated public discourse on the coronavirus pandemic: the narrative of war. Thereby, the article also contributes to the analysis of pandemic storytelling and its effects on us, as the cultural memory of the pandemic is currently taking shape and affecting our orientation to the future.

Conceptions of narrative: Narratives as dialogical practices in narrative hermeneutics

There is no consensus among narrative scholars on the definition of narrative, nor is there agreement on whether we should strive to reach such a consensus. Instead, there is a wide range of approaches to narrative, informed by different conceptions of narrative, and some scholars think this is not a weakness but rather a strength of interdisciplinary narrative studies. In any case, this situation calls for a better awareness of the philosophical assumptions underlying different approaches to narrative as well as of their theoretical tensions and convergences. There is also a need for an approach that is capacious enough to be helpful in making sense of the different types of cultural work that the notion of narrative does.

Most narratological approaches see narrative predominantly as a textual or semiotic phenomenon. This position is articulated by Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (2019, p. 8) as follows: "mental representations become narratives when they are captured and communicated through semiotic means such as language, image, sound, moving bodies or through combinations of various types of signs." Traditionally narratology has defined narrative in terms of a representation of a series of events, but more recently *experientiality* has been taken to

be crucial to narrative whereby the recounted events are seen to be experienced by someone, a human or human-like subject.[1] The cognitively oriented approach that dominates current post-classical narratology emphasizes the mental dimension of narrative but, at the same time, requires narrative to give a material form to a mental representation. While traditionally narratology has not been particularly interested in the social and cultural aspects of storytelling, approaches rooted in social sciences or narrative psychology, in contrast, tend to emphasize that narrative is primarily a form of social interaction, not an artifact, but they usually privilege talk-in-interaction and are less interested, for example, in how cultural narrative models shape public discourse.[2]

Narrative hermeneutics sees narratives as social and cultural practices of sense-making and provides a framework for thinking about different kinds of narrative practices ranging from everyday storytelling practices to literary ones and media discourses, such as practices of narrating illness and health (see Brockmeier & Meretoja, 2014). Narrative hermeneutics sees narratives as *interpretative* practices: they provide interpretations of the world, of particular social situations, experiences, and events, interpretations that are relevant for how we understand ourselves and our place in the world (Meretoja, 2018). The approach of narrative hermeneutics places emphasis on how narrative is not only something that individuals create by using innate cognitive schemas, but a fundamentally cultural and social phenomenon, and on how processes of storytelling are mediated by cultural and social models of sense-making.

My version of narrative hermeneutics conceptualizes narratives as *culturally mediated practices* of *sense-making* that – as explicit narratives – present experiences as part of a *meaningful, connected account* or – as implicit narratives – provide models of sense-making; they have a *dialogical* and a *performative* dimension and are relevant for our understanding of *human possibilities* (Meretoja, 2018, p. 47). Narratives are dialogical in that they take shape in relation to other narratives they draw on, modify, and challenge; they are not mere representations but "performative in their ability to create and shape intersubjective reality," and they have existential relevance through their exploration of "human possibilities" (p. 50). When individuals narrativize their experiences in dialogue with culturally

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1. See Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2007. In the early 1980s, Paul Ricoeur (1983) already understood narrative as the human mode of experiencing time, but the focus on experience began to shape narratology only after Fludernik adopted Ricoeur's ideas into her cognitively oriented "natural narratology."

2. Michael Bamberg (2011) has used *narrative practices approaches* as a synonym for *small story approaches* – that is, approaches that focus on narratives in the making in situations of social interaction – but has recently proposed it as a methodological approach that can be used in the analysis of all kinds of narratives, big or small (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021).

available narrative resources, they thereby reinterpret cultural narrative models of sense-making in specific life situations and, at the same time, participate in shaping these models. Such dialogical interpretative processes are crucial to our ability to imagine different possibilities of thought, affect, and action. Narrative practices are, hence, integral to our agency, and they have "bearing on our sense of who we are and who we could be" (Meretoja, 2018, p. 7).

While explicit narratives are told by someone to someone on some occasion so that they have a concrete textual form, implicit narratives, in contrast, are *models* of sense-making that shape our experience and its articulation. The latter underlie specific narratives but may not be anywhere available in a material form. They need to be constructed by interpreters of explicit narratives, which carry implicit narratives within them – as what they resist or reinforce. While explicit narratives involve a rich experiential dimension, implicit narratives are skeletal (cf. Abbott, 2021, p. 53) – they provide a frame that may contain alternative scenarios, and typically they offer certain subject positions that specific persons take up in explicit narratives.

Explicit narratives, too, involve implicitness, but it is of a different type; namely, it concerns the gaps that recipients need to fill in. As Wolfgang Iser (2006, p. 64) puts it, meanings arise in "the interaction between text and reader" set in motion by an "interplay between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment": "As no story can ever be told in its entirety, the text itself is punctured by blanks and gaps that have to be negotiated in the act of reading." While the implicit dimension of explicit narratives is linked to the task of concretization or actualization (that is, fleshing out the narrative), in the case of implicit narratives the task of interpretation is a task of abstracting the implicit narrative pattern underlying concrete, explicit narratives or applying a cultural model to a specific situation.[3] Next, I situate the notion of implicit narrative in the conceptual landscape of partly overlapping concepts.

Situating implicit narratives in the conceptual landscape

A range of concepts have been developed to capture the dynamic between individual processes of narrativizing experiences and the cultural forms that mediate and regulate these processes. Among these concepts, attempting to theorize the

3. The concept of implicit narrative can also be applied in the analysis of talk-in-interaction (for example, an implicit narrative can take shape in the process of social interaction), but in this article, I will focus on the type of implicit narratives that function as cultural narrative models underlying public discourse (on the pandemic).

intersubjective, cultural forms that underlie individual narratives are those of *canonical (life) narratives* (Bruner, 1987), *schematic narrative templates* (Wertsch, 2008), *master narratives* (Bamberg & Andrews [Eds], 1994), and *masterplots* (Abbott, 2021).[4] Drawing on Roger Schank and Robert Abelson's (1977) script theory, Anthony Amsterdam and Jerome Bruner (2000, p. 21) call tacit narratives "scripts" – that is, representations of temporally ordered sequences of actions that guide our actions and expectations: "Established scripts (sometimes called stock scripts) are the hidden cargo of narratives, often tacit rather than explicit, but always there." Bruner (1987) calls them *canonical forms* to allude to a culturally recognized canon of scripts. This, however, may give a false impression of a well-known canon, whereas cultural narrative models often affect us without our awareness. Moreover, we have to do interpretative work in order to understand which implicit narratives dominate in a certain social situation or cultural context, whereas "script" has the connotation of a written text that actors follow (very consciously), which is not something that needs to be constructed through interpretation. The notion of implicit narrative has the advantage of drawing attention to something that needs to be constructed by interpreters.

An interlinked discussion in memory studies concerns the way in which remembering is not merely an individual, psychological process but always already mediated by socially shaped cultural memorial forms; narrative psychologists, in particular, have emphasized the significance of narrative forms in mediating memory.[5] One of the pioneers of cultural memory studies, Frederik Bartlett, is usually credited as the first to use the concept of schema in the modern sense. He wrote about "memory schemata" which form a framework that "powerfully influences both the manner and the matter of recall" (Bartlett, 1995/1932, p. 296). James Wertsch (2008) uses the notion of *schematic narrative templates* to draw attention to the way in which recurrent narrative schemas function as tools for collective memory. This concept, however, has the connotation of a rigid, fixed

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4. Moreover, MacIntyre (1984) refers to a "stock of stories" which constitute the "initial dramatic resources" of a society, but this is a rather descriptive expression, which he does not develop into a theoretical concept.

5. See Laanes & Meretoja, 2021. This discussion goes all the way back to the founding moments of the study of collective/social/cultural memory, when Halbwachs (1925) argued that we remember in "social frameworks of memory." More recently, Ricoeur (2004/2000, p. 392) has written about "cultural forms" that shape our "capacity to remember (*faire mémoire*)" and Rigney (2005) about "memorial forms" that circulate across cultural contexts. As Bruner (1990, p. 56) summarizes, memory largely functions through narrative: "The typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form, and … what does *not* get structured narratively suffers loss in memory." On the links between narrative and memory, see also Brockmeier, 2015.

pattern (as in stenciling) that remains unchanged over time. Schema also alludes to something universal, beyond cultural and social contexts, as universal cognitive schemas in cognitive science. Although there is a strand of schema theory that acknowledges that schemas can evolve through experience and carry within themselves historical, social, and cultural layers of meaning (Bartlett, Vygotski, etc.), in modern cognitive science, the concept of schema has been used predominantly with reference to relatively unchanging and largely universal cognitive structures, understood in terms of neuroscience and computational models of information processing.[6] The notion of implicit narrative draws on the sociocultural approach to schemas, but while, in psychology, schemas are what individuals construct (even if in relation to their cultural contexts), implicit narratives, as cultural models of sense-making, are specifically cultural phenomena that shape individual and public meaning-making practices. I suggest that it would be worth enriching the discussion on cultural memorial forms with the concept of implicit narrative because it acknowledges the role of interpreters in constructing narrative models, which evolve and are in a process of perpetual change as they are interpreted and reinterpreted in specific situations. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that implicit narratives function not only afterwards as models of narrativizing the past but also at the time when events and experiences take shape and are given meaning while they are unfolding. At the moment, for example, the cultural memory of the pandemic is in the process of being formed at the same time as the pandemic is unfolding, and culturally dominant implicit narratives shape this process.

In recent years, many narrative scholars have come to use the notions of *master* and *counter narratives* to acknowledge the dynamic nature of the narrative environments in which we are entangled and the intertwinement of narratives with relationships of power (see Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Lueg et al., 2021; Meretoja, 2021). These notions pay attention to the narrative dynamics in which some narratives are socially and culturally dominant and others contest them.[7]

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6. Even cognitive anthropologists who focus on cultural schemas are interested in "how systems of cultural knowledge are constrained and shaped by the machinery of the brain" and in commonalities in linguistic knowledge systems that point to "basic characteristics of human thought" (Casson, 1983, p. 440–441). A detailed discussion of the concept of schema in cognitive science is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that Piaget also makes room for the possibility that schemas can change over time (accommodation vs. assimilation).

7. Some have questioned the notions of master narrative and masterplot because "master," allegedly, carries within itself the colonialist legacy of masters and slaves. The notions of mastering and mastery, however, have a broader semantic field than the colonialist one, and the point of the term is precisely to denote culturally dominant narratives and to draw attention to relations of power and domination in narrative practices. This link to power is lost if we refer

H. Porter Abbott (2021, p. 53) argues that *masterplot* is a preferable concept, but others think it has a problematic connotation of a mastermind setting out a plot. Abbott criticizes *master narrative* for not following the story – narrative distinction. Traditionally, story has referred, in narratology, to the sequence of events that is recounted in a narrative, whereas narrative includes not only the "what" dimension (the story) but also the "how" dimension – that is, the narrative discourse through which the story is rendered and communicated. I see his point, but at the same time, I believe we should be sensitive to the cultural work that the concept of narrative does. Narratologists do not have a monopoly on the use and definition of narrative, and we should also seek to conceptualize and theorize different social uses of the concept. The notion of master narrative is widely used and plays an important role in cultural self-understanding, after decades of cultural analysis that has deconstructed various master narratives, such as the legitimizing master narrative that portrays colonialism as a process of "civilizing" the allegedly backward people whose communities colonialism has devastated.

I argue that instead of saying that master narratives are not real narratives, we should work towards a broader conception of narrative that encompasses both concrete textual narratives and *tacit* narratives that guide our processes of sense-making. The distinction between implicit and explicit narratives is intended to do such work. Master narratives are typically implicit because they can be construed from public discourse, but they are rarely told in an explicit form. As the covid-19 pandemic is unfolding, the implicit master narrative dominating the way in which it is framed in the media and politics is the narrative of war. It is a narrative pattern that underlies many concrete (explicit) narrative accounts in which patients or healthcare workers fight against the virus or the nation as a whole is summoned to a collective battle. It is rarely told anywhere in a fully fleshed out textual form, but it functions as a model of sense-making that guides us to cast certain actors in certain roles and creates *narrative assumptions* (Meretoja, 2021). The narrative model of war creates the assumption that there is a war between us and them, us and the enemy, and the virus is cast in the role of the enemy. The main actors in a narrative of war are soldiers – on both sides.

Matti Hyvärinen (2021) has argued that master narratives are not real narratives, since they rarely exist anywhere in a concrete, textual form and lack, de facto, temporality. However, some narrative scholars have questioned the centrality of temporality to the notion of narrative. Cognitive narratology emphasizes experientiality rather than temporality as central to narrative, and small story research has drawn attention to narratives in the making, social interaction that

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to master narratives as "collective narratives," for example, which brings to mind a more democratic process of mutual co-creation of shared narratives.

involves positioning with regard to narratives that are in the process of being planned or constructed but may not exist anywhere in a textual form (see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Irrespective of what one thinks of the temporality of narratives in general, in my view it is not entirely true that all master narratives lack any kind of temporality. The master narrative of war, for example, creates the assumption of a temporal development: from a declaration of war to drawing up a war strategy and tactics, fighting key battles, developing new weapons, mourning sacrifices, and conquering the enemy or being defeated by it. It creates the assumption that certain actions have certain consequences; in particular, it suggests that a courageous fight is likely to lead to conquering the virus.

I suggest it is productive to analyze the dynamics of narrative and memory by looking at the implicit narratives that regulate the ways in which various social phenomena are narrativized and how the cultural memory of these developments takes shape. For example, we can analyze how the cultural memory of the pandemic is in the process of being formed in a narrative environment in which the narrative of war is used as the dominant narrative frame. The implicit narratives that underlie and shape dominant memory are frequently invisible and taken for granted; they often only become visible once they have been contested by counter-memories and counter-narratives.[8] Implicit narratives guide us to remember certain things and forget others and to privilege certain perspectives and experiences at the expense of others. This process involves developing a certain *narrative imagination*, in relation to what can be called a *narrative unconscious*, a reservoir of implicit narratives that are so taken-for-granted that we are blind to them. Bringing implicit narratives to the level of awareness through processes of self-reflection, such as in dialogue with works of art or perspectives of others, is a way of enhancing one's narrative agency and has potential to expand one's *sense of the possible*.[9]

8. Just like individual narratives exist in narrative environments shaped by the dynamics of master and counter-narratives, in memorial environments some memorial forms are dominant and others marginalized. Dominant cultural memorial forms can be so self-evident that they are simply taken for granted, often only becoming visible when they are contested and brought to critical light by counter-memories (see Foucault, 1977; Zemon Davis & Starn, 1989).

9. I develop this idea in more detail in Meretoja, 2018. On narrative unconscious, see also Freeman, 2010.

Narrative agency

We practice our agency by making sense of our being in the world in cultural webs of implicit narratives, which we interpret and reinterpret in the situations in which we find ourselves. I call narrative agency our ability to position ourselves in relation to implicit narratives that steer our actions, self-understandings, and orientation to the future. Narrative agency refers our ability to navigate our narrative environments: to use, (re)interpret, and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narrate our lives, relationships, and the world around us.

There is a certain prejudice in socially-oriented narrative studies against the concept of agency. Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews, and Maria Tamboukou (2013, p. 7) write, "Work that addresses event narratives, or stories co-constructed in talk-in-interaction, tends to be least interested in issues of agency, most aware of the varied and 'troubled' subject positions occupied by narrators." The notion of agency, however, does not automatically carry with it the assumption of autonomy, of subjects capable of using narratives freely to express their individual agency. I understand agency as socially conditioned and regulated, and I see the notion of narrative agency as a useful way of signaling that culturally mediated narrative practices participate in constituting us as subjects capable of action, while simultaneously recognizing that as agents of narrative interpretation, we are both constituting and constituted (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 11–12).

In philosophy, the notion of narrative agency has been used to emphasize the role of narrative self-interpretation in the process that brings about "the integration of the self over time"; as Catriona Mackenzie puts it, the concept is linked to an understanding of such narrative integration as "dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision" (2008, pp. 11–12). The narrative dimension of agency, however, is not only at play in processes of *self*-interpretation but is more broadly a constitutive aspect of the ways in which we participate, through our actions and inactions, in narrative practices that perpetuate and challenge social structures. Narrative agency is part of the same conceptual family as narrative identity, which also emphasizes the processual, dynamic, and antiessentialist nature of the construction of a sense of self in time (Ricoeur, 1985, pp. 442 – 447; 1991, p. 437). The concept of identity, however, is linked to the question of *who* whereas the notion of agency shifts the focus to action, to our ways of acting and affecting the world. Approaches that see narrative agency as the agency of the subject who tells the story highlight the way in which narrative itself is a form of action and can have empowering potential as it allows subjects – including disadvantaged, marginalized subjects – to tell their own stories (Brockmeier, 2015, pp. 177 – 179; Ritivoi,

2009). I see narrative agency as linked not only to the act of storytelling but also to the processes of navigating our narrative environments, which involves relating to various narrative norms that affect our actions, choices, and modes of discourse.

Agency is commonly seen as a capacity. It is linked to self-determination and the ability to take control and have an impact (see, e.g., Bamberg & Wipff, 2021). It can be seen, however, to involve more broadly being the subject of an activity or process, whereby it refers not only to the capacity to affect but also to the capacity to experience, to be affected, to be touched and cared for. There is a strong cultural norm that privileges the ability to exert control over the capacity to connect with others, but this norm is highly problematic, as I will seek to show in my analysis of pandemic storytelling.

The concept of narrative agency allows us to examine past worlds as spaces of possibility in which certain actions, thoughts, and affects were possible and others impossible or difficult. In the past world, the future was not pre-determined but open, and the inhabitants of that world used their agency to orient themselves towards a certain future. This perspective invites us to explore how the people of past worlds practiced their narrative agency. Which implicit narratives did they follow and contest? How did those implicit narratives limit their possibilities, and did they engage in practices of resistance? How did they struggle to find their own narrative paths? It also allows us to see the current historical world as open to different futures that we are in the process of making.

Narrative agency can be enhanced or diminished. Amplified narrative agency can manifest itself as, for example, a stronger awareness of one's possibilities of action in relation to one's narrative environments or as the ability to construct counter-narratives that challenge culturally dominant narrative models. The concept of narrative agency provides an analytic tool for evaluating different narrative practices in terms of their potential to enhance narrative agency.

I have earlier provided a model for analyzing and evaluating narratives from an ethical perspective by using six evaluative continuums. These continuums explore whether narratives (1) expand or diminish our sense of the possible, (2) cultivate or distort personal and cultural self-understanding, (3) promote or impair our ability to understand the experiences of others in their singularity, (4) participate in building inclusive or exclusive narrative in-betweens, (5) develop or impede our perspective-awareness, and (6) function as a form of ethical inquiry or dogmatism. These are not meant as dichotomies but as heuristic tools for evaluating different ethically relevant aspects of narrative practices (Meretoja, 2018, Chapter 3; 2021, p. 39). In what follows, I will expand the notion of narrative agency into a theoretical model by differentiating between its three central dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. In

fleshing out these three dimensions, I will suggest how the aforementioned six aspects of narratives map onto the three dimensions of narrative agency.

First by *narrative awareness*, I mean awareness of culturally available implicit narratives that affect people's lives by functioning as models of sense-making. In our culture, there are certain dominant ways of telling about different aspects of life, such as success, motherhood, or illness.[5] Cultural narrative models affect us whether we like it or not, and bringing them to the level of conscious reflection allows us to evaluate them critically. Narrative awareness involves *narrative self-understanding* (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 98–107) concerning what kinds of narratives we use in making sense of our lives, and *narrative perspective awareness* (pp. 125–132), which means awareness of how each narrative is told from a certain perspective and involves interpretation, selectivity, and meaning-giving.

Narrative self-understanding consists in our understanding of implicit narratives that affect our lives as narrative patterns that we tend to repeat when we tell about our experiences. Narrative scholars have debated whether our sense of who we are is shaped more by "small stories" – that is, situational stories linked to everyday interaction (such as stories we share over dinner or updates in social media) – or by life-narratives concerning the whole life course (that is, taking-stock type of introspective narratives) (see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Freeman, 2014). However, these two are inextricably entangled. Our narrative self-understanding shapes both storytelling in everyday social interaction and how we make sense of the overall direction in which our lives are heading. We can become more aware of how our sense of our life course functions as an implicit narrative that affects how we share small stories in social situations or of how our personal ways of narrativizing things are linked to broader cultural-historical mentalities, structures of feeling, and politics of emotion (see Williams, 1980; Ahmed, 2014).

Narrative perspective awareness involves awareness of how narratives tend to foreground someone's experiences in a certain situation and give meaning to events from someone's interpretative horizon. The narrator's perspective always involves selectivity: by choosing something to be told, something else is left out. Perspective awareness involves awareness of how each story can be told differently – from someone else's perspective, interpreted by someone else. It allows us to challenge culturally privileged perspectives and tell stories of the aspects of the past and present that tend to be forgotten.

Second, *Narrative imagination* refers to our ability to imagine different life trajectories and personal and collective futures and to creatively and critically engage with cultural narrative models in ways that allow us to go beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present. The notion has been discussed by several narrative scholars, including Jens Brockmeier (2009, p. 227), who links it to a cre-

ative "what if" dimension of our everyday practical actions and Molly Andrews who describes imagination as a "social faculty" at work when "we think about our lives as they have been lived, and as they might be led" (2014, pp. 7, 10). Mark Freeman (2014) associates it with narrative reflection on the goals and objectives that direct one's actions and with imagining one's future self – a self that will be or should be. In my model, crucial to narrative imagination are *a sense of the possible* (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 90–97) and *ethical inquiry* (pp. 133–142).

By *a sense of the possible*, I mean the ability to imagine different routes to different futures and how things could be otherwise. It involves a sense of how different worlds function as spaces of possibility in which certain experiences, affects, thoughts, and actions are possible and others impossible or unlikely. Our sense of the possible is shaped by the relationship between our narrative unconscious and narrative imagination (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 18–21). Insofar as we are able to articulate and critically assess the implicit narratives that steer us to narrativize the world in certain ways, we have more space to explore alternative practices of meaning-making. In other words, our narrative imagination is not merely predetermined by cultural narrative models that dominate our narrative unconscious; we can envisage different life trajectories and ways of narrating how things could be otherwise.

The ability to imagine different possibilities promotes undogmatism, which is crucial for the ability to engage in *ethical inquiry*. Hans-Georg Gadamer explores undogmatism as a requirement for finding new modes of asking questions. Questions open up a space in which things appear in a certain way but remain in a state of indeterminacy; they invite us to reflect on "possibilities of meaning" with an undogmatic, open mind (Gadamer, 1997, pp. 362–375). Narratives can function in the mode of ethical exploration if they are characterized by narrative openness – that is, undogmatic willingness to let go of one's privileged narratives and look at things from the perspective of a plurality of narratives. This creates conditions for genuine dialogue between different perspectives. Recognition of such a plurality of perspectives is crucial to democracy, characterized by what Hannah Arendt describes as "the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" who insert themselves into the human world through speech and action (1998, p. 73).

Third, *narrative dialogicality* refers to how we become who we are in relation to other agents in the world, in relational, dialogical processes that are narratively mediated. It means our ability to enter in a dialogue with others and their stories and to participate in creating new intersubjective narrative spaces. Representatives of the Dialogical Self Theory have emphasized that we are constituted in dialogical relations with other people by internalizing the voices of our significant others so that we entertain a dialogue between different voices within us (Hermans, 2001). Important theorists of dialogicality also include Mikhail

Bakhtin (1984, p. 293), who argues, "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth," and Charles Taylor (1989), for whom we are constituted in a dialogical relation with narrative webs in which we are entangled. I have suggested that we are constituted through three levels of dialogical interaction: we become who we are, first, in dialogue with others; second, through internal dialogue with voices and subject positions we have internalized; and, third, through dialogue with cultural models of sense-making, an important part of which are narrative models – that is, implicit narratives that we perpetuate, challenge, and reinterpret (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 75–83). Although all narratives are dialogical in the sense of taking shape in dialogue with other narratives, some narratives particularly emphasize their narrative dialogicality by foregrounding a critical dialogue with dominant implicit narratives or their explorative, open-ended, tentative, inconclusive nature, thereby inviting recipients to participate actively in the dialogue. Narrative dialogicality involves the ethical dimension of *encountering the other non-subsumptively* (Meretoja, 2018, pp. 107–116) and transformative potential linked to creating new intersubjective spaces, *narrative in-betweens* (pp. 117–125).

With reference to the non-subsumptive, it is useful to distinguish between ontological and ethical dialogicality. The first refers to the way we are always already dialogically constituted (relationally, in reciprocal relationships with others), the latter refers to a normative ideal of genuine dialogue, which requires fundamental openness and responsiveness, courage to be exposed to the other and let the other challenge one's preconceptions. Encounters that are dialogical in the latter strong sense imply the ability to encounter the other as a singular subject – without appropriating the other with one's own concepts, theories, or narrative templates. In such a dialogical relationship, we respond to what others have to say, we listen and are willing to change our preconceptions. What I have called *non-subsumptive narratives* function in the explorative mode: instead of subsuming the other under a pre-given mold, they engage with the singularity of the other's experience by being fundamentally open to the other.

Narrative dialogicality also involves the ability to participate in creating new *narrative in-betweens*, intersubjective spaces that open up new possibilities of thought, affect, and action. Our engagement with such narrative in-betweens is a relational, interactional process that involves not only telling fully fleshed out stories but also more nuanced and often embodied ways of relating to narrative practices and their normative aspects. Foregrounding the dialogical aspect of narrative agency is hence a way of acknowledging how narrative practices can function through "interactional narrative performances" (Brockmeier, 2015, p. 179). Challenging dominant narrative norms can contribute to building new narrative in-

betweens that can make it possible to imagine new relationships and communities and thereby create conditions for solidarity and social change.

Pandemic storytelling: The implicit narrative of war

As the coronavirus pandemic has unfolded and changed the world before our eyes, a story of war has come to dominate the public imagination, particularly the way the pandemic is narrated in politics and media. In spring 2020, world leaders from Donald Trump (2020a, 2020b) to Emmanuel Macron (2020) waged a war on the "invisible enemy." Trump characterized the pandemic "the worst attack" ever on the United States: "This is worse than Pearl Harbor, […] this is worse than the World Trade Center." Prime Minister Boris Johnson called his a "wartime government" (2020a) and the virus an "alien invader" (2020c); he told Britons that "in this fight we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted" (2020b). Although the declarations of war were more frequent in the early stages of the pandemic, the implicit narrative of war has persisted. For example, President Joe Biden (2021) used his first days in office to pledge a "full-scale wartime effort" to combat the virus, and when the delta variant emerged as the dominant one in spring 2021, his administration and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) framed the situation in terms of "a new phase of the war" (Abutaleb, 2021).

As research on political rhetoric of leaders during the covid-19 outbreak shows, such rhetoric "shapes collective meaning making around the pandemic"; it not only "reflects underlying engagement with the norms and values of their followers but also performatively reshapes public understandings of and responses to collective situations like global crisis" (Montiel et al., 2021, p. 748). This is evident in how the implicit narrative of war and the concomitant military vocabulary was quickly adopted by journalists (see, e.g., Wise, 2020) and health officials, for example, who began to refer to the health workers on the "frontline": the British National Health Service (NHS) invited "an army of volunteers" to "report for duty" and "start helping the NHS in its fight against coronavirus" (NHS, 2020).

Scholars have observed that the use of historical analogies is widespread in political discourse to interpret an unfamiliar current event in terms of a familiar, known past event (Banjeglav & Moll, 2021, p. 354).[10] It is understandable that

10. Banjeglav and Moll draw on the following definition: "An historical analogy is applied when a person or group draws upon parts of their personal and/or collective memories, and/or parts of 'history,' to deal with current situations and problems" (Brändström, Bynander, & Hart, 2004, p. 193).

the analogy of war has been widely adopted because knowledge of war is widespread: even when we have no personal experience of war, we are all exposed to war imagery in school and in the media, and wars are an important part of collective memory (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau, 2018). Cultural differences are significant, however, in terms of what war means in different communities and what kind of collective narrative memory of war is dominant. In the context of the pandemic, comparisons to the Second World War have been particularly prominent in such Western countries as the United Kingdom and the United States, in which the cultural memory of the Second World War has the positive connotation of a collective effort that led to victory. In Germany, in contrast, political leaders have generally refrained from war rhetoric, as the history of Nazi Germany has made them acutely aware of problems in romanticizing war. According to a comparative study of two societies with recent war experience, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, political leaders made more frequent comparisons to the war in Croatia, where the war is remembered in terms of a narrative of victory, than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the collective memory of war is more divided and dominated by traumatic memories; in both countries, however, there is also much criticism of the parallelization with the war, usually on the grounds that the war was much worse and/or something unique (Banjeglav & Moll, 2021). Research also suggests that female leaders tend to be more critical of war rhetoric (see Dada et al., 2021).

Political leaders generally use the implicit narrative of war to emphasize the gravity of the situation and to justify emergency legislation and suspension of certain civil liberties in the effort to curb the pandemic, but why does it appeal to the general public? If we look at it from the perspective of agency, we can observe that it makes the crisis intelligible by ascribing the agency of a soldier first, to patients; second, to healthcare workers; and third, to the public as a whole (Meretoja, 2020). By attributing agency to "us" at a time when we feel helpless, the implicit narrative of battle functions as a means of creating an illusion of control. Instead of positioning us as passive victims, it turns us into courageous soldiers in a fight against a common enemy. Thus, the use of the war narrative is understandable, but it is nevertheless deeply problematic. I will next analyze the implicit narrative of war from the perspective of narrative agency. I will not only take examples from political speeches but will also compare and contrast three personal narratives: an interview with Holocaust survivor Jerry Rawicki (Ellis & Rawicki, 2020), a covid memoir by a Finnish woman whose husband was in the ICU with covid (Pylvänäinen, 2020), and a memoir by British children's author Michael Rosen (2021) on his experience of severe covid. These three personal narratives, interestingly, reflect different relationships with the implicit narrative of war.

Narrative awareness

Framing the pandemic in terms of the implicit narrative of war tends to weaken (rather than contribute to) narrative awareness. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the implicit narrative of war is usually not presented *as a narrative* – that is, as a culturally mediated interpretation of things – but rather as a neutral, objective account of reality. It is hence a *naturalizing narrative* (Meretoja, 2018, p. 12) that appears as a self-evident, natural description of the state of affairs and not as a particular way of framing the phenomenon – a framing that activates certain narrative assumptions. Speeches by world leaders is not a genre that would, in general, engage in critical self-reflection or increase our awareness of the interpretative frames through which we make sense of the world. The outbreak of the pandemic, however, was an exceptional event, and it is by no means evident how it should be framed and presented to the general public. In this situation, some world leaders did, in fact, use their power to draw attention to the frames we use to makes sense of the pandemic. For example, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said early on that the pandemic is not a war but a "test of our humanity" (Carter, 2020). He juxtaposed two different narrative frames, thereby inviting the public to reflect on their implications in a way that increases the public's narrative awareness.

The implicit narrative of war quickly spread from political speeches to personal narratives shared in social media, interviews, and memoirs that are now starting to be published. In the early stage of the pandemic (the spring of 2020), even such highly culturally aware and sensitive people as the researcher Carolyn Ellis and Holocaust survivor Jerry Rawicki, in an interview Ellis conducted with Rawicki, self-evidently refer to the virus as an "invisible enemy" as they compare the Holocaust and the pandemic. Ellis remarks: "There you knew that people were trying to kill you, and if you gave them a chance you would be killed. Now you might escape the virus or you might not. It's an invisible enemy. Right?" Rawicki confirms: "That's correct." (Ellis & Rawicki, 2020, p. 614)

For Rawicki, the most difficult part of the pandemic is uncertainty and unpredictability. It is not clear how to fight this war. However, for those who fall seriously ill and for their close ones, the war narrative gains a different meaning. When Boris Johnson was hospitalized with covid, Trump declared that Johnson would be fine because he is such a "strong person": "Strong. Resolute. Doesn't quit. Doesn't give up." (*Washington Post*) The narrative of war creates an illusion of control – as if we could win the war by simply fighting hard enough. By the same token, however, the war narrative problematically positions patients battling for their lives as winners and losers. It implies that those who survive fought so hard that they made it, while those who failed to survive are losers, quitters, who

lost the battle because their fighting spirit was not strong enough. This is a harmful narrative framework that gives a false impression of the struggle against the virus as a battle in which the right attitude and mental abilities make all the difference, instead of factors such as access to treatment, genetic disposition, and level of immunity.

One of the first covid memoirs published in Finland, *Koronahelvetti: yhden perheen selviytymistaistelu* (2020, Covid Hell: One Family's Fight to Survive), tells the story of an ordinary Finnish family – a married couple and their three children – all of whom fall ill. The wife is the narrator, and much of the story focuses on her husband, a middle-aged man who is hospitalized and put into a coma. The narrative is framed as a battle against the deadly virus. When the daughter visits her father in the ICU, she tells him to do battle: "I explained to Dad what had happened and said: 'Now, Dad, you will fight!' And then I said: 'We won't let you quit. You WILL COME home!' […] 'I said to him that now he has to follow his own life wisdoms. Particularly the one when he always tells everyone else to fight to the end and not give up.'" (Pylvänäinen, 2020, p. 118–119) When he shows signs of recovery, the family declares victory in the war: "It feels like we have won the war – a long, cold and ugly war. … Dad is a survivor." (p. 132)

The memoir whole-heartedly embraces the culturally most readily available narrative model, which is understandable, as it allows the family to retain a sense of agency. As a victorious war narrative, however, it misses the opportunity to confront the contingency and fragility of life and presents covid-19 as something that can be won with the right attitude. Its belligerent way of framing the story probably feels particularly problematic for those whose loved ones did not make it.

More broadly, the war narrative of the pandemic impedes rather than enhances our narrative self-understanding. Masking itself as a self-evident way of seeing the pandemic, it dangerously directs us to a false analogy that makes us think of the pandemic in terms of a military conflict and of the virus as an intentional agent who makes plans and creates war strategies. A military crisis is man-made and takes place between human agents. The enemy has objectives, strategies, and tactics; it attacks us, defends itself, and responds to our actions. The virus, in contrast, is not an intentional agent who plots against us, as the war narrative tricks us to believe. It does not have a consciousness and is not capable of rational planning. When we talk about the virus as if it were a human agent, we anthropomorphize it, which gives us a distorted view of what we are dealing with. Michael Rosen's *Many Different Kinds of Love* (2021), an illness memoir that recounts the author's experience of falling ill with covid, can be read as a counter-narrative to the war narrative, and it interestingly thematizes the temptation to think of the virus as an intentional actor: "It is hard not to think of it as having intent, that it

is doing things because it wants to. Tiny viruses with enormous brains. [...] I tell myself this is neither scientific nor helpful" (pp. 162–163).

The spreading of the virus is based on random mutations in its genetic make-up, some of which help it survive better in the environments in which it finds itself. The virus multiplies in interaction with its environments, and we have an immense responsibility in shaping these environments. Thinking of the pandemic in terms of a combat between the enemy and "us" and the competitive framing of this war (as a competition between nations) impedes us from understanding our responsibilities in protecting the planet and in terms of global solidarity (in distributing the vaccines, for example).

More broadly, resorting to the narrative of war means missing the opportunity to understand the *complexity* and *specificity* of the pandemic. It distracts us from understanding, for example, the root causes of the pandemic and the psychosocial, existential, and economic challenges it engenders. So far, there is no absolute certainty of the origin of the coronavirus pandemic (although the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan has been widely considered the most likely source of the outbreak), but what is known is that wildlife exploitation and habitat destruction (fueled by deforestation and global warming) create ideal conditions for pandemics like this (see, e.g., Vaughan, 2021). These are complex phenomena that are difficult to understand through narratives that focus on human-scale developments, framed in terms of a conflict between human-like agents. As for the psychosocial aspects of the pandemic, most people do not get the severe form of covid-19 but instead have to deal with challenges linked to social isolation, experiences of anxiety and meaninglessness, worries about loss of income and prolonged uncertainty. Past experiences affect how individuals cope with these social and psychological challenges. For example, the previously traumatized may be more vulnerable to the psychosocial effects of the pandemic (Jeftic et al., 2021). For Holocaust survivor Jerry Rawicki, the Holocaust works as a "matrix" against which to consider the pandemic (Ellis & Rawicki, 2020, p. 614): "The Holocaust is always superimposed on the pandemic and the pandemic makes me think about the Holocaust" (p. 611). Rawicki underlines the differences of the experiences of the Holocaust and the pandemic: "Indeed, then it was all about surviving each moment," whereas the pandemic is more like "being in jail" (p. 614). The implicit narrative of war blinds us to the uniqueness of the sensory experience of the pandemic – that is, what it feels like to live in isolation and uncertainty for months, having far more information available than we are able to process. This experience is very different from the sensory experience of an armed conflict (see Fairbanks, 2020).

Moreover, the narrative of war tends to impoverish *perspective awareness*, as it usually does not make visible the perspective from which it is told. It is presented as a self-evident, neutral description of the state of affairs and not as a selective account told from a certain restricted perspective. Often, it is told as a call to arms that serves purposes of legitimation and privileges a discourse of heroism that distracts us from structural inequalities, such as the toll on low-paid women (see Booth, 2020; Clarke, 2020). Sometimes the narrative is told from the perspective of political leaders and sometimes from the perspective of patients, health workers, or the general public. In each case, however, it tends to be a *naturalizing narrative* that does not foreground the perspective from which it is being told or shift between perspectives so as to underline that each narrative can be retold from a different perspective.

In these times, there is a particularly strong need for awareness of the way in which each story can be told differently, from another perspective. Perspective-taking could help us imagine different experiential positions, such as the perspectives of those in vulnerable positions. In contrast to the war narrative, Rosen's (2021) counter-narrative creates perspective awareness through its polyphonic composition: it lays out a number of different perspectives – stories of the nurses, family members, and voices in the media – and presents, side by side, the notes written by nurses at the intensive care unit, frequently telling him, in the second person, to fight hard: "You are doing fantastically well and fighting hard. […] Keep fighting, Ella C and Lizzie" (p. 24); "You are a fighter and can do this" (p. 39). The nurses and doctors' perspective is contrasted with his: "There is now a ledger telling / the story of all my ups and downs. / I have become an account. / […] My body has become theirs" (p. 61). The healthcare workers' vocabulary of fighting does not fit his experience of helplessness, of having to relearn basic things, how to stand up, how to walk. He feels he does not meet the expectations that are set for him: "I feel bad that I am so helpless" (p. 69).

By juxtaposing different perspectives and textual genres (including those of the bedside diaries written by the nurses), the narrative contributes to our perspective awareness in a way that may help us fathom the normative pressure that the implicit narrative of a courageous battle can create in patients: "It feels as if they have expectations way beyond what I'll ever do" (p. 108). Implicit narratives create implicit expectations, and the ones created by the war narrative are often overwhelming or even suffocating from the perspective of patients and others affected. These expectations are left unsaid, but they nevertheless affect us: they lay out the positions that are available and in which we are expected to fit. Ultimately, the war narrative implicitly asks patients: will you be a winner or a loser?

Narrative imagination

Not only is the analogy of war misplaced on factual grounds; it also misses the opportunity to cultivate a pandemic imagination that builds on the narrative imaginary of solidarity and a sense of interdependency rather than on the destructive and divisive imaginary of war. If we take seriously the existential relevance of narratives, we must acknowledge that narratives are not only accounts of what has happened; they also open up and close down possibilities. Currently, the implicit narrative of war dominates our narrative unconscious, but if we were able to bring it to the level of consciousness and take critical distance from it, we would be freer to cultivate alternative pandemic imaginations.

If we think of the implicit narrative of war from the perspective of our sense of the possible, it directs us to think of the unfolding of the events in terms of whether we will survive the attacks of the enemy, how big the casualties will be, and whether the war will end in victory or defeat. As Rawicki compares and contrasts the pandemic to the Holocaust, he seems to think that the main lesson to be learnt from the Holocaust is that unimaginable things can happen: "I always say that not to think about things that can happen would be shortsighted. […] Especially during times like now, we have to think about what is going to happen; that is how we prepare ourselves" (Ellis & Rawicki, 2020, p. 612).

In the beginning of the Holocaust, few people could imagine the atrocities that were to unfold; when the rumors spread, many people thought that surely it is impossible that such things could happen. Hence, thinking of the Holocaust can be a reminder of how the beginning of horrifying events rarely announces itself as a beginning of terrifying things to come. In that sense, the implicit war narrative can work as a preparation for unimaginable losses.

However, if we evaluate the narrative of war from the perspective of how it guides us to think of the future more broadly, including how we imagine the post-pandemic world, this implicit narrative arguably diminishes our sense of the possible – our ability to imagine different routes to different futures and our sense of how things could be otherwise. If we fixate on the war narrative, we miss crucial possibilities concerning the future, such as the possibility to develop new forms of solidarity based on a more acute understanding of how we are fundamentally dependent on one another, as inhabitants of a shared planet that we cannot control in the way we thought, and, drawing on such understanding, the possibility to build a more sustainable and just world for future generations. Instead of seeing the pandemic in terms of nations competing in the war against the virus, it would be more productive to take it as a lesson on the fragility of life. We could narrate it as a still open-ended story of a point in history in which humankind faces the opportunity to choose between routes to different futures – as a story of a histori-

cal crossroads in which we face the possibility of choosing a route towards a more sustainable future based on understanding of our fundamental interdependency.

The war narrative does not invite us to engage in ethical inquiry. It does not present existential questions as questions but, instead, takes the idea of human existence as a struggle to survive as a self-evident dogma. The pandemic imagination that revolves around war blocks us from seeing how human existence is fundamentally relational, how dependent we are on other human beings, other species, and nature as a whole. In these times, there is an urgent need for the kind of narrative imagination that could help us see the complexity of our interconnections with nature and the way our attempts to control it can backfire.

A crucial existential dimension of the pandemic is a prolonged sense of profound uncertainty. Patients who become seriously ill with covid have to learn to live with fundamental uncertainty. As Rosen puts it, "Now everything's not certain. I don't know what will be" (2021, p. 18). Those who stay well also must deal with uncertainty. For Rawicki, for example, the most difficult thing about the pandemic is "the unknown," the unpredictability of everything (Ellis & Rawicki, 2020, p. 611). This is the case on an individual level, but it is also the case on a collective level. It has become increasingly difficult to predict the future. Instead of articulating the ongoing nature of the global health crisis in terms of different "phases of the war" (Abutaleb, 2021), it would be better to address the uncertainty through an exploration of questions that remain without definitive, conclusive answers. No one knows what will happen, and it is one of the crucial challenges in this world situation to learn to live with this ongoing uncertainty and lack of control. In public discourse on the pandemic, it is mainly approached as an epidemiological issue, but it is just as much an existential challenge. Arguably, to address this challenge, we need narrative resources very different from the military ones to cultivate a narrative imagination that helps us confront the prolonged uncertainty and the urgency to change the direction in which humankind is heading.

Narrative dialogicality

Third, what does the narrative of war look like from the perspective of narrative dialogicality? What does it do to our ability to enter in narratively mediated relationships with others, to our ability to understand others through narratives, and to the forms of relationality in which we are entangled through shared narratives, including narrative in-betweens that we perpetuate, build, and imagine?

Telling about the pandemic in terms of war typically functions in the subsumptive mode and does not further sensitivity to the uniqueness of each experience. For example, it does not do justice to the experience of those in various vulnerable positions, such as those who have experienced an actual war and find

the language of war retraumatizing (Martínez García, 2020), those at high risk due to their profession or medical condition, the elderly or teenagers who suffer from isolation, or children trapped in abusive homes or refugee camps. These groups experience differently the social and psychological effects of the pandemic because they are in drastically different situations, facing different types of struggles depending on their socio-economic situation, underlying health issues, family background, and so on. The narrative of war tends to homogenize very different experiences through a fixed template that problematically suggests that what matters is the fighting spirit, will power, or courage of those affected. Moreover, it gives the problematic impression that "we" are all fighting the same war and are in some fundamental way in the same situation. This is a way of desensitizing us to the otherness, uniqueness, and complexity of different embodied, socially situated, lived experiences.

Overall, when the narrative of war remains implicit, it easily functions in the mode of a subsumptive narrative under which the pandemic in all its diverse and contradictory dimensions is subsumed as if it were one thing. Particularly when it is not fleshed out in the form of a temporal narrative that develops through the complexities of lived experience, it tends to be little more than a definitional category that equates the pandemic with war. When the implicit narrative is told so that it becomes (partly) explicit in the context of particular individual experiences, it becomes individualized and can contain elements that are not reducible to the war narrative. For example, in Pylväinen's *Koronahelvetti*, the temporal, diary-like format of the narrative helps readers relate to the situation of the family full of fear and anxiety for their loved ones. However, as this memoir does not challenge the culturally dominant narrative models of making sense of the pandemic, it tends to reinforce the subsumptive use of the war narrative. Understanding the multiplicity and complexity of the experiences of the pandemic requires a range of stories and an openness to confront the unfamiliar, strange aspects of experiences that do not conform to the readily available general models of sense-making. Rosen's *Many Different Kinds of Love* productively stresses precisely the aspect of needing to learn, in a situation that is completely new to everyone, having to learn even who one is after the illness: "I am getting to know this person. / This is not me / This is me" (2021, p. 161). Rosen's narrative invites readers to participate in the dialogical exploration of what it is like to recover from a near-death experience and a sense of losing oneself. It juxtaposes the dominant cultural narrative of war with experiences that cause friction with that narrative. It thereby functions in the mode of the non-subsumptive: it explores what happens when our categories are insufficient and we confront something so unfamiliar that we become strangers even to ourselves.

If we evaluate the narrative of war from the perspective of intersubjectivity and relationality, more than anything, it turns people and nations against each other. It is a divisive narrative that emphasizes competition. Every day, we see charts that compare how well different nations are doing in the war against the virus, currently framed as a vaccine race. Countries are grouped to winners and losers. The narrative of war is typically used in a nationalist context, as a call to arms. It is addressed to a nation, to a people, to build unity against a joint enemy. This is a dangerous narrative given that the pandemic shows precisely that international collaboration is needed to curb the virus. Research on the political rhetoric of world leaders shows that a sense of "us"-ness tends to be built by stoking "national fervor" in "populist hotspots" (such as the US, UK, Turkey, Brazil, and India), which have sought to "strengthen collectivity by privileging a specific people," whereas countries tuned to international collaboration have sought "wider collectivity" by emphasizing the nation's unity with the global community (Montiel et al., 2021, p. 758, 762).

The narrative of war is also dangerous because it blinds us from seeing that our joint vulnerability and fundamental dependency on one another are inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing. This crisis could be an opportunity to embrace our shared vulnerability, dependency, and destructibility as crucial and inescapable dimensions of the human condition. We tend to idealize agency that is linked to autonomy, control, and independence. However, agency is also about the ability to respond to others and their touch, thoughts, needs, and affection; to share experiences, anxieties, and hopes; to be attached to and care about beings beyond ourselves. If we were able to acknowledge this, we could foster narratives that emphasize agency linked to our ability to deal with uncertainty by sharing that experience with others. We could see this aspect of our agency as a strength that we can cultivate together. Narrating the pandemic in a way that embraces our shared vulnerability could help us imagine a society that takes as its starting point our interdependency, the fact that we are all in need of care and support at various stages of our lives. No one survives alone; no one thrives alone. This way of thinking renders problematic the neoliberal idea of self-sufficient individuals who can control their lives autonomously, the idea that hard work and clever use of one's resources automatically lead to success and invulnerability.

In other words, the pandemic could be an opportunity to build a new *narrative in-between* that encourages solidarity between people, nations, different groups, and communities. In one way or another, we are all in this together, but at the same time it is crucial to acknowledge that due to structural inequalities, the pandemic affects certain groups and certain countries much more severely than others. Acknowledging both our togetherness, as inhabitants of a shared planet,

and the structural inequalities could be a starting point for a global narrative in-between which strengthens a sense of solidarity across differences.

Conclusion

The era of the pandemic has made salient the fundamental ways in which culturally dominant implicit narratives steer our actions, hopes, anxieties, and orientation to the future. I hope to have shown how, overall, the fixation on the implicit narrative of war does more harm than good and how it is a profoundly dangerous, limiting narrative that diminishes human potential and may have devastating global ramifications. So far, there is little evidence that humankind has learned anything much from the pandemic. However, narratives are not only representations of what has happened, de facto. They also hold open possibilities and close others. I have sought to show how turning away from the narrative of war could open up the possibility of a new global awareness of mutual dependency and a new sense of solidarity, which could help us build a more socially and environmentally just world for future generations. In this moment, there is an urgent need for narratives that hold open the possibility we now have to leave behind an unsustainable way of life and to imagine a world based on solidarity, care, and a sense of connection.

It is also important to acknowledge that culturally dominant implicit narratives do not automatically define our narrative agency. It is crucial how we *engage* with implicit narratives. I hope my analysis of pandemic storytelling has demonstrated how critical engagement with problematic implicit narratives can contribute to collective narrative agency, providing analytic tools and narrative resources that can expand our sense of the possible. The concept of implicit narrative could be a useful tool for many types of narrative analysis – from the analysis of narratives taking shape in social interaction to narratives that structure public discourse and steer the self-understanding of individuals and communities. Narrative agency is a concept that allows us to analyze how agents position themselves in relation to culturally mediated implicit narratives and how various narrative practices limit us or empower us. Narrative agency can be studied at the level of individuals, but it takes shape relationally, in dialogical processes, and can also be studied on a collective level. The collective narrative agency of groups and communities can be analyzed in terms of how they perceive their possibilities, what kind of level of awareness they manifest, how they are able to imagine different futures and diverse forms of relationality and solidarity. Implicit narratives and narrative agency are analytic tools that can, at best, contribute to both cultural self-understanding and to such interdisciplinary fields of inquiry as narra-

tive studies, memory studies, and cultural studies. Both inhabitants of past worlds and those of our current world practice their narrative agency to navigate the limits and affordances of their narrative environments, in negotiating various ways of remembering and imagining as ways of connecting the past, present, and future.

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