Covid-19 as a Generator of Pending Narratives: Developing an Empirical Tool to Analyze Narrative Practices in Constructing Futures

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Abstract
The article describes the basic elements of the pending narrative and develops them into a tool of qualitative analysis by taking examples from Covid-19-related reports, opinions and editorials in the news. The pending narrative is a powerful story form, persuading the responsible actors in public to take action by stirring up compelling passion for a specific goal. It has a cogency that comes from the threat that if we do not act in the right way now, the continuity of life will be jeopardized. Crises are fertile breeding grounds for pending narratives, and the arrival of the Covid-19 virus is an expressive example of a situation threatening the continuity of human life around the globe. These circumstances feed on the emergence of pending narratives, which translate the unknown, uncertain and frightening future from open, multiple and unpredictable trajectories into more closed, predictable and controllable pathways. In the development of the pending narrative into a tool of qualitative analysis, the article takes influences from narratology, Bamberg’s theory on positioning analysis, Greimas’ narrative semiotics and critical discourse analysis. It proposes that in the analysis of pending narratives we benefit from the separation of three levels. On the first level, pending narratives highlight disorder and the menacing trajectory of the anti-subject, and outline a qualifying trajectory for the subject to overcome the threat. On the second level they persuade the responsible actors and the audience to identify with the qualifying trajectory and to take action or support it. And on the third level they articulate the kind of values, identities and moral order in aid of which the required action is taken.

Keywords
narrative practice, pending narrative, Covid-19, story, interaction, ideology, empirical analysis, qualifying trajectory, emotion, master narrative

Introduction
This article looks at a central rhetorical form of persuasive speech, which I call the pending narrative (Törrönen, 2000, 2003a, 2003b). This future-oriented form of story is used to raise engagement and passion toward a specific goal of action and therefore often appears in persuasive speeches and texts to advise us how we should act to overcome a threat that endangers the continuity of life or raises immediate concerns.

The pending narrative translates the open, multiple and unpredictable trajectory of an unknown, uncertain and frightening future into more closed, predictable and controllable pathways. The audience is told how to interpret the threatening situation, a solution is offered to the problem, the responsible actors are pointed out, and an emotion-driven identity is constructed for the liable subjects to take action and eliminate the problem.

The arrival of the Covid-19 virus among us is an utmost example of a situation that is a global threat to the continuity of human life and its institutions. As a new kind of pandemic virus, which thrives on the mobility of the neoliberal society and on our lack of a cure that can be developed quickly, it not only threatens some specific groups but menaces the overall foundations, forms and trajectories of the current economic, political, institutional, social and cultural life. As a consequence, by its global spread, the Covid-19 coronavirus has become an actor that forces us to create new paths for the future. Here, the pending narrative plays an important role.

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In what follows, by taking examples from Covid-19-related reports, opinions and editorials in the news, I describe the basic elements of the pending narrative and develop them into a tool of qualitative analysis. In this, I take influences from narratology (Prince, 1988), Bamberg’s theory on positioning analysis (2006, 2011), Greimas’ narrative semiotics (Greimas & Courtés, 1982) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003).

I suggest that in the analysis of pending narratives we benefit from the separation of three levels (Bamberg, 2006, 2011). The first level refers to the referential plane of the story world and includes relational positioning of actors and their trajectories vis-à-vis one another (Bamberg, 2020). The second level deals with interaction between the narrator and the audience and includes positioning the storytellers vis-à-vis their audiences in a specific interactive relation (Bamberg, 2020). And the third level is about the ideological values and identities that the storytellers intend to transmit through the narrative by appealing to certain dominant discourses (Fairclough, 2003) and master narratives (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020).

By using a text example, I will first describe how a pending narrative can be analyzed as a narrative practice that operates on these three levels. This is followed by a range of examples of how the Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a generator of pending narratives. After this, I further demonstrate with what kinds of questions and concepts we can analyze the referential, interactive and ideological elements of pending narratives. To conclude, I will summarize the main points of the article, discuss the diversity of pending narratives and point out possible directions for further research.

The examples analyzed here do not represent the whole variety of the pending narratives that the pandemic conditions may generate. The purpose of the sample is pedagogical. By analyzing the sample pending narratives, I seek to show that as the pandemic interrupts the habitual ways of acting and gives actors a break to reflect the meaningfulness of their current practices, this feeds the emergence of pending narratives that deal with foundational issues. Also, by showing how we can investigate pandemic pending narratives, I aim to show that the tools used in their analysis are also applicable to examining pending narratives from normal times. Regardless of the circumstances, the future is for us an object of concern and an area of competing imaginations. Therefore, the pending narratives are not only a pandemic phenomenon. They are also widely performed in stable circumstances.

**Methods: The Pending Narrative as a Narrative Practice that Operates on Three Levels**

**The Level of the Story (1): Highlighting Disorder, the Menacing Trajectory of the Anti-Subject and the Qualifying Trajectory of the Subject**

On the first level, where a storyteller positions actors and their temporal trajectories vis-à-vis one another on the referential plane, the pending narrative performs only a part of the story. When a story follows the classical fully-formed ideal story, it has a beginning, a middle and an end (Aristotle, [300 BC]/1997), as well as a continuant subject (Prince, 1988). The middle section explains the temporal change the subject undergoes. Greimas has proposed that the three phases of the ideal story embody qualifying, realizing and sanctifying trajectories, which each have their own specific function within the narrative (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). The **qualifying** trajectory builds up a subject’s motivation to act, the **actualizing** or **realizing** trajectory describes the subject’s action against the anti-subject and the final, **sanctifying** trajectory, evaluates how successfully or unsuccessfully the subject accomplished the task.

On the story level, the pending narrative focuses on the qualifying trajectory. It then typically highlights the threat of the anti-subject by imagining what kind of disorder and disaster we will face if we do not act against the threat right now. For example, in the following pending narrative from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020), the storyteller creates a sense of urgency for action by pointing out that the coronavirus Covid-19 is the worst global crisis since World War Two, an anti-subject whose narrative trajectory—if it becomes realized—may seriously damage the key institutions of our lives:

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two. Since its emergence in Asia late last year, the virus has spread to every continent except Antarctica. Cases are rising daily in Africa, the Americas, and Europe (...). COVID-19 is much more than a health crisis. By stressing every one of the countries it touches, it has the potential to create devastating social, economic and political crises that will leave deep scars. (UNDP, 2020)

This emphasis on destructive effects gives motivation to build a qualifying trajectory, in which—when fully constructed—the narrator names the subject or subjects as responsible actors who need to act against the threat, outlines an action plan as an object the subject must carry out and specifies competences and resources that the responsible actors need as helpers in the accomplishment of the task (Törörinen, 2000).

The UNDP’s pending narrative is an example of the fully constructed qualifying trajectory. In line with the UNDP’s global mission, the storyteller places the program in the position of a helper that provides resources especially for poor countries in the fight against the Covid-19 outbreak. According to the narrator, the ultimate task in overcoming the threat is to promote the Sustainable Development Goals. The narrator urges each country to keep on pursuing this object:

Every country needs to act immediately to prepare, respond, and recover (...). UNDP’s support will (...) help ensure that the responses of individual countries are comprehensive as well as equitable and inclusive, so that no one is left out and countries can continue to make progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. (UNDP, 2020)
The Level of Interaction/Narration (2): Persuading the Responsible Actors in the Audience to Identify With and Realize the Qualifying Trajectory

On the second level in the pending narrative, the narrator positions the audience in a specific kind of relation to the story. By foregrounding the images of disorder, the threatening action of the anti-subject and the urgency of action, the narrator seeks to produce among the audience an obligating passion toward the task. In this sense the story elements of the pending narrative function at the level of interaction as “emotional motives,” which the narrator uses persuasively to obligate the responsible actors in the audience to identify with the qualitative trajectory, to take the position of the subject and to realize the task. The narrator can further enhance audience engagement to the task by specifying the kind of emotion that drives it, such as fear, anger, hate, pain, hope, fairness, love, solidarity, compassion, responsibility or gratitude (Autto & Törrönen, 2018). In the UNDP text, the narrator motivates the responsible actors to act out of compassion, trust and solidarity. These emotions persuade the responsible actors to leave behind the divisions and conflicts of interest among themselves and to invest in building a fairer and a more equal global order.

Moreover, in the positioning of the audience in a passionate relation to the task, focalization (Bal, 1985; Prince, 1988) and modalities (Fairclough, 2003; Suuren & Törrönen, 1997) provide important resources for the narrators of the pending narrative.

Focalization refers to a point of view through which the narrator mediates selective information to the audience about the story (Jahn, 2005). In the context of the pending narrative, the analysis of focalization provides a cue to trace whose identity is in danger and needs restoring or transformative action. We can distinguish from focalization the focalizers and the focalized objects (Bal, 1985). The focalizer is the point from which the story elements are viewed, while a focalized object specifies what is seen. In the pending narrative by the UNDP, the audience gets information of the crisis through focalizers such as “we,” “our,” “countries,” “Covid-19” and “UNDP.” Because this pending narrative is by its genre a promotional narrative of an institution, it is not a surprise that the storyteller especially uses the focalizer “we” to underline the UNDP’s own importance in dealing with the crisis:

We have been supporting countries since the very early stages of this crisis, donating essential protective medical equipment. As the response evolves, and after assessing the immediate, medium and long term needs, we are moving into the socio-economic response.

The threat of the Covid-19 pandemic is focalized by emphasizing the anti-subjects’ devastating consequences not only for global health and global institutional arrangements but especially for vulnerable people, exposed economies and developing countries.

We are supporting small businesses in Bosnia and Herzegovina (…) In Ecuador our Accelerator Lab is using crowdsourcing to connect the most vulnerable with food, goods and services (…). In the Asia Pacific region (…) we are harnessing the creativity and vision of young startups (…) In Nigeria, the UN has launched the COVID-19 Basket Fund (…) In the Arab states we are working with governments and citizens to deliver essential services.

These regions and matters are focalized as objects for extra care and resources. Also, this emphasis is in line with the UNDP’s institutional responsibilities.

Modalities help the narrator regulate the audience’s relation to the communicated information and action. As the pending narrative is a story form in which the narrator aims to instruct the public “in terms of what to do in the face of adverse conditions” (Bamberg, 2020, p. 251), the interaction between the narrator and the audience is based on both knowledge exchange with “epistemic modalities” (instruction) and activity exchange with “deontic modalities” (what we should do). By analyzing the use of epistemic modalities that express whether something is true, probably true or false, we can trace what kind of knowledge narrators mediate to the audience as realistic and believable. In our sample text from the UNDP, the narrator uses epistemic modalities mainly to convince the audience that the information s/he provides of the crisis is truthful. The examination of the use of deontic modalities, again, points out how the narrator positions the audience under an obligation to act for the established goal. “Modal verbs” such as will, must and should, as well as expressions related to demand, claim, obligation and necessity play a significant role in this (Fairclough, 2003). In the pending narrative from the UNDP, the narrator’s use of deontic expressions emphasizes the necessity to act: “(i)t will require all of society to limit the spread of COVID-19,” “We must rebuild trust and cooperation, within and among nations, and between people and their governments” and “we must also consider ways to prevent a similar pandemic recurring.”

The Level of Moral Order/Ideology (3): Positioning the Qualifying Trajectory and the Responsible Actors in Relation to Dominant Discourses and Master Narratives

The third level of narrative practice deals with the question of “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” (Bamberg, 2020). Because the pending narrative is a story form that is used to outline future action, the analysis of this level answers the question “Who should we become?” (Törrönen, 2000). The examination of this level indicates what kind of values and moral order the pending narrative promotes. They become observable in how the narrator of the pending narrative appeals to the dominant discourses (Fairclough, 2003) and master narratives (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020).

Dominant discourses are usually created or reproduced by those who are in power and able to perform them repeatedly to wider audiences. They articulate particular ideological beliefs, justify specific institutional arrangements and seek universal
acceptance or hegemony (Fairclough, 2003). Likewise, master narratives reflect the values of the dominant classes and institutions (Harris et al., 2001). Pending narratives may be used so that they strengthen or oppose the dominance of hegemonic discourses and master narratives.

The UNDP sample text is a pending narrative that strengthens the hegemonic moral order. It urges the responsible actors to act in line with the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism against the right-wing populist, nativist and protectionist policies. The qualifying trajectory refers to a master narrative which describes globalization as a progress story of the free market. Its evolution also benefits underdeveloped countries and regions if they get the adequate skills and abilities to participate in it (Tellieria, 2017). The qualifying trajectory thus obligates each country to act together toward this goal.

When analyzing how the pending narratives appeal to or oppose dominant discourses and master narratives, we can pay attention to their intertextuality: how discourses and texts that are “external” to them are brought into them as other voices (Fairclough, 2003). Here a significant initial question is: which voices are highlighted in the pending narrative, which are undermined, and which are excluded? When other texts and voices are incorporated in the pending narrative, it is important to observe whether they are explicitly attributed to particular persons or whether their attribution remains vague (ibid.). How they are framed and ordered in relation to each other may give us meaningful clues about how the pending narrative appeals to dominant discourses and master narratives. The UNDP’s pending narrative highlights the texts and voices built around the Sustainable Development Goals. Its way of incorporating other texts and voices is vague. It excludes competing discourses of the global moral order or brackets their differences and focuses instead on their commonality. In this way it seeks to eliminate ambivalence that would complicate action.

Examples: Covid-19 as a Generator of Pending Narratives

It took a while for Covid-19 to become a pandemic crisis and an anti-subject threatening the global world order. In the Western countries, Covid-19 was first narrated as a local problem in China. Then, little by little the global actors, the governments and the media woke up to the fact that Covid-19 was a danger confronting the entire world. In this awakening, epidemiologists and virologists were given a crucial role. They were positioned as actors able to detect how the invisible Covid-19 virus was spreading; they could predict its expected trajectories. By taking the epidemiological and virological knowledge and predictions on board, the public health authorities started to instruct the institutions and citizens in how they should act to protect themselves and other people. Soon the public health actors’ action around Covid-19 became a globally traveling shared master narrative that provided resources to act against the virus. The hegemony of this master narrative grew to manifest itself in diverse kinds of restrictions on social proximity around the world, essentially drawing on similar techniques, albeit at different coercive levels.

So far, the Western governments have used this master narrative—which is constantly changing as a reflection of the fluctuating circumstances—as a resource to mobilize national or state-based action against Covid-19. The editorial in the New York Times (NYT) on April 13, 2020 sums up this development:

It is understandable that governments of rich nations have focused first and foremost on the crisis within their own borders. Nothing like the coronavirus has ever overwhelmed so much of the world in such short order, or with such cataclysmic force. (NYT, April 13, 2020)

However, as a pending narrative the editorial questions the fight against Covid-19 exclusively with a national focus and ponders why the pandemic has not evoked more global cooperation:

Yet it is dismaying that a danger that confronts the entire world, that is likely to hurt the entire global economy, has led to so little global cooperation and has been met with so little global leadership. (NYT, 13 April 2020)

The editorial explains the lack of global cooperation with three reasons: “the Trump administration has provided little inspiration,” and the EU and WHO show weakness in acting. Because of this passivity of big actors, there is a need for other actors to fill the vacuum. In particular, the narrator urges “the think tanks, news media, universities and nongovernmental organizations” to become stronger global subjects “in the struggle against the scourge of the coronavirus.” While the situation evokes fear and dismay, there is hope because

(m)any organizations have already begun to do so, recognizing that this may be the defining struggle of our era, and that if ever the world demanded a global response, this is it. (NYT, April 13, 2020)

What kinds of pending narratives, then, dominate the “rich” and “developing” countries’ responses to the Covid-19 epidemic? It seems that the “rich” countries’ narratives tend to emphasize the importance of saving and improving the existing liberal order. The “developing” countries’ pending narratives, in turn, imagine that the pandemic offers a possibility to replace the existing liberal order with more equal arrangements. For example, the Moroccan economist Fathallah Oualalou argues in an interview that “(t)he unprecedented crisis ushered in by the coronavirus pandemic should prompt actors in the globalized world to lay the foundations for a ‘new world order’” (Alaoui, May 22, 2020). According to him:

A new order implies not only change in the mode of global governance, but also and above all, the re-foundation and change to introduce new centers of interest: the preservation of life, better sharing of resources and the safeguarding of the environment. (Alaoui, May 22, 2020)
In the interview, by employing the story form of a pending narrative, Ouualalou urges Africa to form a new pole with Europe, which together with other countries would actively work for a new world of sharing, solidarity and balance. In this world, inequalities and injustices would not be tolerated (Alaoui, May 22, 2020).

Similarly, the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy finds that the coronavirus pandemic takes the shape of a pending narrative that provides us a possibility for a new beginning:

(\textit{Coronavirus (\ldots) offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.} (Roy, \textit{Financial Times}, April 3, 2020)

By arguing that the pandemic is a gateway between one world and the next and by warning that the choice to walk through it with current prejudices, hatred and avarice would destroy the globe, Roy produces an obligation to leave this world behind for the fight of a better one.

Thus, depending on what kinds of values the storytellers of the pending narratives support, the agency of the coronavirus varies and is mediated to different kinds of trajectories. In the right-wing imaginary, Covid-19 breeds conspiracy theories. For example, through social media, tabloid media, conservative media and some heads of states, the right-wing supporters have circulated pending narratives in which Covid-19 acts as a Chinese biological weapon purposely released in the West to crush it under Chinese power. These pending narratives tend to translate fear into hate (Wodak, 2015) and to encourage people to oppose or to be suspicious about the official Covid-19 strategies.

The following pending narrative by the US Senator Tom Cotton is an example of the right-wing trajectory. The narrator argues that we must hold the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “accountable for unleashing this plague on the world” (Fox News, April 10, 2020):

\textit{We shouldn’t allow the CCP to escape blame for causing this pandemic nor should we put ourselves in a position to be victimized by it (\ldots). (\ldots) we should treat this pandemic not just as a war with a deadly pathogen but as an information war with the CCP. (\ldots) We should move immediately to demote China from positions of prominence in international institutions like the United Nations (\ldots) / We must treat the CCP as we would any serious disease: immediately and aggressively.} (Fox News, April 10, 2020)

By recognizing the CCP as a real anti-subject to the emergence of the pandemic, the narrator of Cotton’s pending narrative encourages Americans to carry out an information and economic war against it.

In the leftist imaginary, in turn, Covid-19 is typically related to trajectories in which the pandemic is expected to shift the world from self-interest value orientations toward more civic virtues. For example, in the pending narrative published in the \textit{New York Times} as an opinion piece, Anne Case and Angus Deaton voice the possibility for a leftward shift in American health care (April 14, 2020). Their pending narrative makes room for a change by highlighting how American employer-oriented health care is expensive but nevertheless weak in the fight against pandemics. This is because it is not based on universal coverage and cost control but on “dividing practices” (Bacchi, 2009) that prioritize rich people’s health and wealth, and transfers generous revenues to executives at hospitals, medical device makers and pharmaceutical companies to the detriment of poor people and families with scarce resources.

While millions suffer, our health care system has turned into an inequality machine, taking from the poor and working class to generate wealth for the already wealthy. (Case & Deaton, NYT, April 14, 2020)

By pointing out how weak, incapable, exclusive and unequal the current practices are in dealing with the problems we are facing, this pending narrative underlines the necessity to act for a better system. The fact that the pandemic will threaten everyone, perhaps for a long time, makes the reforming task urgent. In the end, the narrators oblige Americans and decision-makers to develop a health care system with universal coverage and cost control:

\textit{America must stop financing health care through employer-based insurance, which encourages some people to work but eliminates jobs for less-skilled workers. Employer-based health care is a particular nightmare in this pandemic. In recent weeks, millions have lost their paychecks and their insurance and will have to face the virus without either. We are believers in free-market capitalism, but health care is not something it can deliver in a socially tolerable way.} (Case & Deaton, NYT, April 14, 2020)

\section*{Pending Narrative as a Tool for Empirical Analysis}

The preceding section shows some examples of what kinds of pending narratives the Covid-19 pandemic has so far generated but I have yet to provide a systematic empirical analysis. As I have emphasized above, such analysis benefits from paying analytical attention to how these pending narratives operate on three levels of narrative practice.

\section*{Analyzing the Elements of Story in the Pending Narratives}

In terms of analyzing the first level, we can ask: What is the nature of the threat? Whom does it menace? How does the threat as an anti-subject act and how does it form a trajectory that threatens us? Who is pointed out as a responsible actor (subject)? What kind of trajectory with a specific goal (object)

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does the story build for the subject? What kinds of competences and abilities (helpers) does the subject need in action, and which elements in the story world does the action make necessary, obligating and passionate?

First, in the pending narrative the trajectory of the anti-subject may be more or less explicitly articulated, depending on how well the audience knows the devastating threat it poses. For example, after Covid-19 became formulated as a global threat, and the master narrative of public health authorities received a hegemonic position in the fight against it, the narrators who aligned with it were able to invoke it by referring to it shortly as a starting point for their pending narratives.

Secondly, the nature of the threat caused by Covid-19 varies in the example pending narratives. Not only does the virus put people’s health in danger as an anti-subject, it may also act as a subject or a helper that reveals other kinds of urgent problems. In the NYT editorial, Covid-19 discloses an inability among the conventional big actors to promote worldwide cooperation (NYT, April 13, 2020). In Roy’s pending narrative, Covid-19 forces a “rupture” that offers a “gateway” for any person anywhere on the globe to walk to another world (Financial Times, April 3, 2020). Cotton’s pending narrative on the virus discloses the evil strategy of China’s Communist Party (Fox News, April 10, 2020), and the pending narrative by Case and Deaton unveils the weakness of the American health care system (NYT, April 14, 2020). The anti-subject’s position is thus not stable but mobile, changing and manifold. Our sample texts also show that when Covid-19’s position as an anti-subject becomes transformed and associated with the positions of the subject or the helper, then the trajectory of the anti-subject is converted further by new kinds of opponents.

Thirdly, as in the case of the trajectory of the anti-subject, the elements of the qualifying trajectories may also be more or less concretely articulated. On the basis of our example pending narratives we can deduce that among their qualifying trajectories the threat is usually well defined, the responsible actors (subject) are named and the object of action is pointed out. Furthermore, the qualifying trajectories clearly culminate in transferring the realization of the task to the responsible actors. What remains less obvious is the specification of the means (helpers) by which the object can be achieved. Perhaps this is because Covid-19 as a pandemic is changing the conditions and orienteering points of the surrounding reality so much that some narrators have a hard time imagining what the change could concretely mean.

When the narrators move within the structures of this world, they seem to be able to be more concrete in contrast to a situation in which they step out of these structures. Roy’s pending narrative is an example of a qualifying trajectory which makes us step beyond the structures of the current world and rebuild the world fundamentally on a new foundation. Her pending narrative does not much specify the means that can achieve this. Her simple advice for us is to take as little luggage as possible as we set out to fight for a new world. Case’s and Deaton’s pending narrative, again, is an example of a qualifying trajectory which moves within the structures of this world and where the means are more concretely articulated. It exhorts the American people and decision-makers to replace the employer-based health care system with a system that has universal coverage and cost control. As there are well-functioning universal health care systems elsewhere in the world, the responsible actors can take inspiration from them in accomplishing the task.

Overall, the sample texts and the Covid-19 pandemic show that many kinds of actors may be placed in the positions of anti-subject, subject, object and helper in the story (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). As in any other narrative (Latour, 2005), in Covid-19-related pending narratives multiple types of actors may participate in action, such as images, ideas, genes, normality, viruses, infrastructure, hydroxychloroquine, money, immune systems, emotions, data banks, X-ray machines, infrared thermometers, blood type, infusion pumps, protective suits, hand sanitizers, social distancing, nations, hospitals, health care system, global economy, technology, statistical curves, masks, underlying diseases, vaccine, social media platforms, and so on (Törrönen et al., 2020).

Analyzing the Elements of Interaction in the Pending Narratives

In the analysis of the second level of narrative practice, we can ask: In what kind of interactional context is the pending narrative performed? What kind of emotional landscape do the narrators metaphorically translate the qualifying trajectory into? What kinds of emotions do they send the responsible actors in the audience to fulfill the task? How do the narrators increase the responsible actors’ commitment to the task through epistemic and deontic modalities? Through what kinds of perspectives?

First, the examination of the genre context clarifies what kind of normative environment conditions the storytelling (Collin, 2012). Performing a similar kind of pending narrative as an editorial, as a political speech in a Parliament or as a future scenario in a private situation changes its shape and produces different effects, because the narrative enters into different kinds of interactive relations and is regulated by different kinds of genre-related rules and conventions. The UNDP’s pending narrative is a promotional institutional record, which therefore emphasizes the organization’s own role in world events. The other examples are performed as editorials, opinions, news or letters to the editor.

Secondly, it is important to pay attention to how the storytellers translate the elements of the story level into “emotional motives” that summon the responsible actors in the audience to identify with the qualitative trajectory, to take the position of the subject and to realize the task. In this, highlighting the disorder caused by the anti-subject, underlining the urgency of action, using metaphors and referring to obligating emotions provide powerful resources for the narrators.

For example, the narrator of Cotton’s pending narrative uses a war metaphor to emphasize antagonistic divisions between the US and China and to produce solidarity between “us” and
hate toward “them” (see Cox, 2020; Musu, 2020). Furthermore, by metaphorizing China’s Communist Party as a disease, the narrator represents it acting like a pathological pandemic. In the other sample pending narratives, Covid-19 is metaphorically framed and translated into more peaceful emotional landscapes. The narrator of the UNDP’s pending narrative frames the fight against Covid-19 as action that advances the ongoing global progress of the free-market economic system. In its emotional landscape, action is linked to emotions of compassion, trust and solidarity, and instead of producing divisions between us and them, it is inclusive and uniting. In Roy’s pending narrative, again, the narrator translates the fear, anxiety and concern that we feel in the face of the pandemic into hope, courage and obligation to build the world anew. This she does, among others, with the metaphors of rupture, doomsday machine, portal and gateway. She metaphorizes the current world as a doomsday machine of destructive lifestyles; to replace this with a more human world, Covid-19 offers a rupture, a portal and a gateway. In Case’s and Deaton’s pending narrative, in turn, the narrators frame Covid-19 in an emotional landscape of social justice. They approach Covid-19 as a helper that reveals the true character of the American health care system. By picturing the current system as an inequality machine and nightmare, which, as metaphors, concretize its unequal, inhuman and uncontrollable character, they create for the American people and decision-makers an obligating passion to fight against this institutionalized, internal anti-subject.

Thirdly, we may analyze how storytellers use epistemic and deontic modalities to strengthen responsible actors’ commitment to action (Fairclough, 2003). In our example pending narratives, the narrators mostly consolidate the responsible actors’ commitment to the task by reassuring the audience that their assessment of the seriousness of the threat is an undeniable truth. They also increase the urgency of action by a strategic use of deontic modalities and expressions. This is not just a recurring feature in the UNDP’s pending narrative. Also, in the pending narratives by Oualalou, Cotton, Case and Deaton, deontic expressions take a prominent role in motivating responsible actors to act, whereas Roy’s pending narrative makes the proposed action necessary not with explicit deontic expressions but rather indirectly through threatening metaphoric images.

Furthermore, we might examine the nature of focalizations which mediate knowledge of the threatening events and construct the need for action among the audience. As discussed above, the analysis of the focalizations in the UNDP’s pending narrative underlines that especially vulnerable identities in poor countries and identities related to global progress are considered as being in danger. The shifting focalizations also disclose that the achievement of the global identity is only possible with the help of multiple actors, such as the UNDP, individual countries and citizens. The focalizations in Roy’s pending narrative, again, make all people subjects of action. The repeated use of focalizers such as “our,” “us” and “we” makes us perceive Covid-19 as a crisis that threatens everyone and obligates us all to fight for a better world.

Analyzing the Elements that are Related to Values and Identifications, and Which Go Above and Beyond the Local Interactive Context

In terms of analyzing the third level of narrative practice, we can ask: What kind of field does the pending narrative participate in and what are the concerns it then aims to affect? Which discourses and narratives dominate that field and around that concern? How does the pending narrative use or oppose these discourses and narratives in justifying action? With what kinds of intertextual incorporations? Does the fulfillment of action imply stabilized identities or their change?

While specifying the scope and nature of the field and concern the pending narrative aims to affect, we can further ask: Is the pending narrative performed to strengthen, modify or replace the dominant values on the global scene, within a nation, on a local or an individual level? What kinds of relations of dominance does it aim to preserve or transform? International, ethnic, racial, gendered, sexual, generational, class-based, occupational, ethical, etc.? Does it intend to maintain, reshape or replace the governing moral order in the fields of politics, public health, work, leisure, science, environment, domesticity?

Answering these questions will help us map out the available discourses and narratives within the field and the topic that the pending narrative participates in. This provides us with competence to perform the second task, that of analyzing how the pending narrative reproduces or opposes those discursive meaning systems and story lines. As shown above, the narrator of the UNDP’s pending narrative addresses the global scene by aligning with the neoliberal discourse and a master narrative that outlines globalization as a progressive plot. Here, the development of free markets distributes prosperity to all if we are able to act in solidarity and include developing countries in its progress. It justifies the qualifying trajectory to overcome the threat posed by Covid-19 in reference to these discursive and narrative elements and obligates the responsible actors to accomplish the task in the name of global solidarity.

Similarly to the UNDP’s pending narrative, the sample texts by the New York Times (April 13, 2020), Oualalou, Cotton and Roy attend to the global scene. In the NYT editorial (April 13, 2020), the qualifying trajectory is justified in relation to the discourses of neoliberalism and civil society, as well as by arguing that it takes global leadership and global cooperation to overcome the threat Covid-19 causes the global economy. With these discursive incorporations, the editorial sends the responsible actors to restore and strengthen the dominance of current global relations, identities and moral order.

In contrast to the UNDP’s and the NYT’s pending narratives, the narratives by Oualalou, Cotton and Roy question or oppose the global neoliberal order, its discursive hegemony and narrative legitimacy. Therefore, their qualifying trajectories can be characterized as counter-narratives. The qualifying trajectory of Oualalou, as reported in quotation marks by a journalist, obligates Africa and Europe to form a new pole and to work for a new kind of world order which is based on
“preservation of life, better sharing of resources and the safeguarding of the environment.” In this way, Ouadalou’s pending narrative justifies the action in reference to discourses on the environment and equality.

The qualifying trajectory of Cotton’s pending narrative, again, is rationalized in relation to right-wing discourses of nationalistic conspiracy, from the perspective of which it opposes the current global relations, identities and moral order. The counter-narrative of Roy’s pending narrative, in turn, remains vague. Its qualifying trajectory is not explicitly justified in reference to certain discourses or narratives but is legitimized metaphorically. It simply sends us to fight—through the “portal” that Covid-19 provides for us—for a new global order that is the opposite of the current one, not based on prejudice, hatred, avarice, data banks, dead ideas and smoky skies.

The pending narrative by Case and Deaton attends to the national scene in the United States, incorporating elements from the liberal market discourse, universal health care discourse, equality discourse and left-wing discourse. It frames and orders them by prioritizing the discourses of the welfare state and equality over the liberal market discourse. This configuration of discourses justifies the qualifying trajectory and sends the subject to transform the current employer-based health care system into a universal format. In the fulfillment of this counter-narrative, Covid-19 helps American people and decision-makers stay determined.

Discussion

I have sought to clarify what constitutes as units for the analysis of pending narratives and to demonstrate the analytical procedures we can use to investigate these narratives. I have proposed that pending narratives are forms of stories that motivate and obligate the responsible actors in the audience to act for a given goal and which, as narrative practice, operate on three levels. On the first level, pending narratives highlight disorder and the menacing trajectory of the anti-subject, and outline a qualifying trajectory for the subject to overcome the threat. On the second level they persuade the responsible actors and the audience to identify with the qualifying trajectory and to take action or support it. And on the third level they articulate the kind of values, identities and moral order in aid of which the required action is taken.

The separation between the three levels is analytical and increases our competence to analyze pending narratives from different perspectives. In reality, each element in the pending narrative, as in other forms of stories, is multifunctional and has a bearing on all levels. How the storytellers position actors on the first level of the story creates a foundation that enables them on the second level of interaction to evoke specific kinds of emotions among the audience. Furthermore, the positioning of actors in the conflicting trajectories of the subject and anti-subject helps storytellers further concretize what kinds of values, identities and moral order in the pending narrative are at stake.

For the analysis of each level, I have suggested analytical tools which are preliminary rather than complete and exclusive. When our experience in analyzing pending narratives accumulates, many other methods may turn out to be productive.

What distinguishes pending narratives is their form of social action in which the storyteller aims to transfer the realization of the qualifying trajectory to the responsible actors in the audience. To increase the responsible actors’ willingness and obligation to take on the task and realize it, the storyteller, among others, may emphasize the frightening power of the threat, underline the urgency of action, outline the qualifying trajectory as the only possible course of action, metaphorize the action in an emotional landscape that makes the goal captivating, embed the action as driven by emotions the responsible actors share and appreciate, stress our duty to act as human beings, enable the threat and the action against it to be experienced and seen through a perspective that is respected and dear for the targeted audiences, and justify the action with values and identities that have a high standing as cultural and symbolic ideals.

Overall, a pandemic creates special conditions for narrating pending narratives. As a pandemic threatens the continuity of human life and its institutional basis around the globe, people, organizations, institutions, nations and global actors are forced to imagine how they can overcome the threat and move on (Davis & Lohm, 2020). Because the threat produced by the pandemic is so pervasive and comprehensive, it interrupts the habitual ways of acting in diverse fields of life and gives the actors a break to reflect the meaningfulness and functionality of their current practices. In this way, the pandemic makes the actors more reflective on their futures and creates room for possible changes in the global relations, structures of society, institutional arrangements, social traditions, cultural norms, domestic practices and individual lifestyles. All this provides fertile breeding grounds for the emergence of pending narratives, which help actors face the threat and engage with passion in specific kinds of restorative or transformative action.

My examples of pending narratives demonstrate expressively how Covid-19 as a pandemic has called for pending narratives that outline urgent tasks for the responsible actors. They further show that the pandemic has been treated not only as a health crisis: The pending narratives have also adjusted to reflect the fact that the pandemic has intruded in all main areas of life. In the pending narratives discussed here, Covid-19 has acted as an anti-subject against public health, and also as a subject and a helper. In these positions it has revealed diverse problems in present social, economic and political circumstances and practices.

I have focused on pending narratives that imagine how to proceed in global and national matters. However, while large-scale issues are common topics of pending narratives in pandemic conditions, global disasters also generate plenty of small-scale pending narratives that help actors imagine and construct their futures regarding local, organizational, leisure, familial and individual issues.

If pandemics place pending narratives at the heart of building the future, pending narratives also play an important role in “normal” circumstances. In normality, the structural, social and
contextual circumstances to perform pending narratives are more stable and the future appears less open and unpredictable. But crises are also common in stable conditions, on a smaller scale and in relation to specific matters. Moreover, whether we are living in crisis or in a stable period, the future is always more or less unknown, something to be concerned about and an object of competing imaginations and trajectories. Therefore, pending narratives are widely performed both in pandemic conditions and stabilized circumstances.

My previous studies show that pending narratives can be persuasively used, not only in the media or in the institutional promotional platforms, as in the examples above, but also in scientific texts (Törnönen, 2000, 2003a), governmental recommendations (Törnönen & Tryggvesson, 2014) and political speeches (Autto et al., 2021). Moreover, it is not hard for us to imagine that pending narratives may find powerful uses in advertising, brand promotion, business negotiations, self-help books, therapeutic gatherings, educational events, domestic disputes, advisory settings and in the upbringing of children, to name just a few obvious situations.

How narrative practices are used to persuade us to act toward specific futures has not received enough attention in earlier studies (Andrews, 2014; Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 127). I hope the examples and the analytical tools I have presented here provide opportune starting points for future research to take up this task and to remedy this lack.

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**Analyzed Material: Example Pending Narratives**

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