



CHAPTER 3

The Challenges of Narrating the Welfare State in the Age of Social Media: A Narrative-Theoretical Approach

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INTRODUCTION

The television miniseries “Indoor Air” (*Sisäilmaa*)¹ by YLE, the Finnish National Broadcast Company, received its airing and an enthusiastic reception at the beginning of 2021. The show’s heroes are public employment service officials struggling with dystopian bureaucratic reforms that increase the already ridiculous workload of both officials and jobseekers, with negligible results that massage the statistics at most. The emotions of extreme helplessness and frustration shared by the office staff are voiced

¹ *Sisäilmaa*, aired on January 4–6, 2021 on YLE TV1 and was released on the *Yle Areena* streaming service on January 1, 2021. Director Tiina Lymi, screenplay by Tiina Lymi & Juha Lehtola. All translations from the series are mine.

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with a sudden pang of rage by service manager Anneli Tiainen, who is being interviewed on a live talk show. The host lets the audience know that Anneli has something to say about “society” and asks her to “crystallize” her message. The push to be clear and concise about the matter is a trigger:

Listen, for fuck’s sake, my apologies if this is a bit difficult to follow, but you see, these are difficult issues, and we should all try to be interested in this stuff even if it’s a little bit boring!

Indeed, how to “crystallize” *society*? Or *welfare*? Independence Day orations in the Nordic Countries frequently celebrate the “success story of the welfare society,” but in the light of contemporary narrative theory, the story of the well-functioning welfare machinery humming in the background of one’s everyday life is all but *untellable*.² This untellability can be traced back to the prototype elements of narrative as outlined by the first-wave cognitive narratologists at the turn of the millennium: A representation most readily recognized as a narrative by the receiver’s cognition conveys a causal succession of events with storyworld particulars and, most importantly, an experiencing individual at the center. One of the most pivotal theoretical innovations at the crux of the paradigm shift from classical to postclassical narratology was the recognition of the centrality of *mediated human experientiality*³ for narrative form; moreover, today cognitive narratologists, sociolinguists and researchers in narrative psychology agree that *storyworld disruption*⁴ or *breach*⁵ experienced by the protagonist enhances significantly narrativity and tellability as well as empathetic engagement.

In sum, business as usual, supra-individual issues lacking relatable detail, and complex phenomena possessing non-individual agency and indirect causality pose a challenge to storytellers. A prototypical narrative, highlighting “what it’s like” (*qualia*)⁶ from an individualized and embodied

² Mäkelä, M. (2020). Through the cracks in the safety net: Narratives of personal experience countering the welfare system in social media and human interest journalism. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge, 389–401.

³ Fludernik, M. (1996). *Towards a “natural” narratology*. Routledge, 26.

⁴ Herman, D. (2009). *Basic elements of narrative*. Wiley, 14.

⁵ Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry* 18(1), 1–21.

⁶ Herman (2009), 143–147.

perspective to live through a transformative experience, is thus poorly suited to representing societal structures—their supra-individual logic and manifestations, their complexity, and in the case of welfare mechanisms, their essential task of *alleviating* breaches and world disruptions in citizens' lives. Then again, as the television series “Indoor Air” as a bureaucratic dystopia suggests, also the downfall of the welfare state is beyond narrative sense. Arguably one of the reasons for Anneli's outburst is her not being situated within the storytelling industry where consultants teach influencers and executives how to “crystallize” their message. While unable to deliver an easily digestible sound bite that would encapsulate the complexity of governmental employment policies, Anneli is however able to convey an *emotion* that turns out to be shareable: Her tirade goes viral on social media, and she becomes a national hero, channeling the collective feelings of frustration and resistance of hundreds of thousands of the unemployed. In twenty-first-century social media-fueled narrative environments, if one wishes to become the ultimate storyteller, going viral is the way to go. As I will argue in the following, this story logic only very rarely serves the preservation of governmental welfare mechanisms.

This chapter presents narrative-theoretical methods for the analysis of the narrativization of the welfare state in the narrative environments of the digital era, particularly in the written forms of social media, journalism, institutional communication and fiction. I argue that attention paid to the forms of narrativizing the welfare state by different actors—institutions, politicians, artists, journalists, social welfare officials, healthcare professionals and citizens—provides us with an elaborate qualitative research perspective on the *experience of society and the welfare state*. Narrative theories of the twenty-first century that highlight the experiential facet in all storytelling provide the interdisciplinary research community with a conceptual framework with which to tackle both personal and collective experience, and their sometimes problematic relation. The methods used in this chapter are derived from theories of narrative complexity and viral social media storytelling, cognitive and rhetorical narratology, narrative hermeneutics, and the sociolinguistic and sociological study of narrative.

My main hypothesis, tentatively probed in previous qualitative analyses,⁷ is that the contemporary *masterplots* (as cultural blueprints for shareable

⁷ Mäkelä (2020); Mäkelä, M., Björninen, S., Karttunen, L., Nurminen, M., Raipola, J. & Rantanen T. (2021). Dangers of narrative: A critical approach to narratives of personal experience in contemporary story economy. *Narrative* 28(2), 139–159.

stories) favored by social media tend to challenge rather than support the established mechanisms of the welfare state. Viral stories of withheld welfare checks or indifferent officials emerge as compelling *counter-narratives* that challenge the alleged *master narrative* of a well-functioning welfare system. The *affordances* of narrative form are shown to support stories of disruptive individual experience, and therefore stereotypically compelling narratives gaining visibility in social media may even threaten the future of the welfare state. I demonstrate the applicability of the presented concepts and methods with short analyses of stories of Finnish welfare: (1) a social media campaign with the hashtag #IWouldntBeHere (*#EnOlisiTässä*) celebrating the Finnish welfare state and anticipating Finland's centenary year in 2017; (2) journalistic stories of personal experience concerning welfare benefits and the functioning of the social insurance institution published on the news website of the national broadcasting company, YLE; (3) a viral Facebook post by an outraged citizen condemning the entire child welfare system based on her personal experience; (4) and finally, a closer look at the "Indoor Air" series as an innovative example of narrativizing welfare with the help of fictionality. The main reason for delimiting my examples to Finnish material is that they are derived from the corpus of the *Dangers of Narrative* research project (2017–2020), where we crowdsourced from Finnish social media examples of instrumental storytelling emblematic of the contemporary storytelling boom that forces everyone—from individuals to corporations—to transform themselves into goal-directed storytellers.⁸ It is precisely the early twenty-first-century cultural dominance of instrumental storytelling that renders the critical analysis of the narrative(s) of the welfare society so topical.

THE WEAK NARRATIVITY OF BUSINESS AS USUAL: THE #IWOULDNTBEHERE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Anticipating the 2017 centennial of Finland's independence, novelist and theatrical director Aino Kivi launched a social media campaign with a hashtag #IWouldntBeHere (*#EnOlisiTässä*) in 2016, prompting users to share their stories of how the welfare state had made them who they are. The point was to highlight the importance of government safety nets for different life situations and histories, but the project partly backfired and partly just failed to go viral, and in the following I will use

⁸ See Mäkelä et al. (2021).

narrative-theoretical concepts and ideas to explain why this was the case. The key concepts introduced here are (weak) narrativity, tellability, narrative agency and complexity vis-à-vis narrative form.

The campaign prompt was straightforward in giving guidelines for telling:

The point of the campaign is to tell about the support that you have received from society. About support without which you wouldn't be here. You may tell as much or as little as you want: about free education, library, swimming halls, child benefit, student allowance, unemployment benefit, health care, anything you want.⁹

Not surprisingly, #IWouldntBeHere stories tended to be poor in experientiality and particularity, mostly listing infrastructures and benefits the updaters had used in the course of their lives. Most importantly, they didn't introduce any experiential rupture or other form of complication that would give rise to narrative qualia—the vicarious, immersive experience that could moreover generate feelings of empathy for the story's protagonist: “The government has warranted my student loan and I have received a tax deduction for the interest I paid. My salary is paid from public funds. Thank you, welfare state.”¹⁰ As such, the stories posted with the campaign hashtag present us with perfect examples of *weak narrativity*. Contemporary narrative theory does not usually categorize representations as straightforwardly narrative or non-narrative, but rather treats narrativity as a scalar quality;¹¹ albeit a whole different ball game, the #IWouldntBeHere stories chime with Brian McHale's description of weak narrativity as he analyses its manifestations in avant-garde narrative poems: “We intuit that we are in the presence of narrativity. But at the same time that our sense of narrative is being solicited, it is also being frustrated.”¹² Twitter as the favored platform for #IWouldntBeHere stories is curiously

⁹The web sources for the campaign had ceased to exist at the time of writing this chapter, but the campaign prompt can be found, for example, in the critical response by Heikki Pursiainen. See Pursiainen, H. (2016). Ilman valtiota en olisi mitään. Blog post on *libera.fi*, Dec 11. All translations from Pursiainen's text are mine.

¹⁰Pursiainen (2016).

¹¹Schmid, W. (2003). Narrativity and eventfulness. In T. Kindt & H.-H. Müller (Eds.), *What Is narratology? Questions and answers regarding the status of a theory*. De Gruyter, 17–34.

¹²McHale, B. (2001). Weak narrativity: The case of avant-garde narrative poetry. *Narrative* 9(2), 164.

both a symptom and a cause: the formulaic and repetitive nature of the stories is conditioned by the radically limited form of 280 characters, whereas viral stories of the *malfunctioning* of welfare institutions typically take full advantage of the unlimited writing space of Facebook or the 2200-character limit of Instagram captions.

Depending on the paradigm, narrativity can be defined in myriad ways. The same is the case with *tellability*, an overlapping concept originating from sociolinguistic research and primarily pointing to the social, situated relevance and appeal of the told (*Why are you telling me this here and now?*), while narrativity refers primarily to the qualities of narrative representation (i.e., which discursive features prompt a narrative interpretation).¹³ However, the narrative environment created by social media supports a very particular understanding of both narrativity and tellability, one coinciding with the cognitive narrative prototype briefly described in the Introduction to this chapter. Our previous research shows that the most likeable and shareable stories of social media are precisely stories of personal, disruptive experience that have immersive storyworld details. In order to fully capture the essence of the shareable and likeable story, this purely cognitive definition should, we argue, be supplemented by sociolinguistic theories of oral storytelling that highlight the importance of moral positioning and exemplarity in narrative communication.¹⁴ Such densely experiential narratives conveying a moral in an immersive form are most likely to go viral, and as such, represent the type of “compelling story” touted as a miracle cure to any communicational challenge by today’s storytelling consultants and coaches. The social media storytelling affordances of liking and sharing support the affordances of the cognitive narrative prototype in ways that I will analyze below in the subchapter entitled “The Viral Exemplum.”

The stories prompted by the #IWouldntBeHere are the opposite of compelling. Surely, they are shared “stories” in the sense trademarked by social media giants Facebook and Instagram, but in their iterativity and lack of rupture and detail they fall short of experiential resonance—which, of course, is paradoxical as the listed benefits and institutions belong more

¹³ See, e.g., Baroni, R. (2011). Tellability. In *Living Handbook of Narratology*, retrieved January 27, 2022 from <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/30.html>.

¹⁴ E.g., De Fina, A. & Georgakopoulou, A. (2012). *Analyzing narrative: Discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, 97–98. On positioning, see, e.g., Hyvärinen, M., Hatavara, M. & Rautajoki, H. (2021). Positioning with master and counter-narratives. *Narrative Inquiry* 31(1), 97–125.

or less to the experiential framework and cultural memory shared by all Finns. From the perspective of research on oral storytelling in sociolinguistics, they would also be weak in tellability. One can, of course, imagine a casual conversation where acquaintances would praise the service they received in public health care, but these are not rhetorically powerful narratives that you could imagine retelling to the next person. For the sake of comparison, in the eminent classic of sociolinguistic narrative studies, William Labov collected “close to death” narratives from the streets of a black neighborhood in the USA in order to model the structure of oral narratives.¹⁵ In Labov’s influential research, the “evaluation” phase toward the end of the narrative, highlighting the point of the story and reflecting the personal meaning of the story for the teller, proved crucial; in the #IWouldntBeHere stories, evaluation is both implied (*welfare society is a good thing*) and banal, shrinking to a feeble “thank you” in the narrative proper.

Arguably resulting from weak narrativity, the campaign was only moderately covered by the mainstream media, while at the same time being sarcastically attacked by right-wing liberals on social media and blogs. The shared “stories” ended up reinforcing the stereotype of social democratic naiveté—citizens expressing their gratitude toward the state while appearing ignorant about the sources of government income. The former head of the right-wing think tank Libera Heikki Pursiainen writes on Libera’s blog:

We the members of society ultimately pay for all. [...] the state doesn’t pay for anything but simply transfers funds from one person to another. [...] The administrators and storytellers of the #IWouldntBeHere campaign are however not at all interested from where these lovely “free of charge” things originate. The writers praise the state for providing healthcare services, income redistribution, swimming halls, free degrees, child allowances, doctoral schools, television series and culture. [...] All those things the writers have received have been paid for by another human being, not the state.¹⁶

From a less politicized perspective, we can easily see that the logic of taxation and income distribution is an element that the storytellers probably just had difficulties with factoring in, when social media prompts the

¹⁵ Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the black English vernacular*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹⁶ Pursiainen (2016).

user to foreground personal experience,¹⁷ not an economic-structural analysis. A key problem is that the represented governmental structure does not provide the teller with relevant narrative agency: There is no available role for an active, experiencing protagonist whose choices and actions define the course of events. Instead, the state is constructed as the “helper” (cf. Greimas’ classical model of narrative actants¹⁸), which gives the opportunity for Pursiainen and those like-minded to reconstruct the proverbial “taxpayer” as the hero of the counter-narrative, albeit in an equally passive role as the ultimate, and yet non-individualized, faceless enabler of transfer payments.

From an economic-political perspective, in their urge to create moral positioning and project narrative agency onto individuals, both narratives have it wrong. State economics and public welfare are *complex systems* that can only give rise to *emergent* causality and agency. Roughly, the concept of *emergence* in complexity theories refers to action that is a bottom-up result of various local interactions but cannot be simply reverse-engineered back into those basic actions. Emergent action is thus always more than the sum of its identifiable parts, and it lacks what narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott calls centralized control or authority, such as an author.¹⁹ Typical examples of complex systems are biological evolution, climate change and structural injustice or hereditary disadvantage—they all manifest non-linear causality that cannot be reduced to any one clear-cut cause or agent. Understanding agency in terms of emergence however does not exclude human action, nor does it even foreground non-human action; as recently summarized by Marie-Laure Ryan, “[e]mergence, in its strongest form, is a property of phenomena that we do not fully understand: how the individual elements of a system organize themselves into larger functional patterns without the top-down guidance of a controlling authority.”²⁰

While complex systems theory has been applied in the study of welfare systems,²¹ perhaps welfare does not represent the “strongest form” of

¹⁷ Mäkelä, M. (2019). Literary Facebook narratology: Experientiality, simultaneity, tellability. *Partial Answers* 17(1), 159–182.

¹⁸ Greimas, A. J. (1966). *Sémantique structurale: Recherche de méthode*. Ducrot.

¹⁹ Abbott, H. P. (2008). Narrative and emergent behavior. *Poetics Today* 29(2), 227–244.

²⁰ Ryan, M.-L. (2019). Narrative as/and complex system/s. In M. Grishakova & M. Poulaki (Eds.), *Narrative complexity: Cognition, embodiment, evolution*. University of Nebraska Press, 42.

²¹ Garnsey, E. W. & McGlade, J. (2006). *Complexity and co-evolution: Continuity and change in socio-economic systems*. Edward Elgar.

complexity—examples of that can be found within the natural sciences. Yet emergence and complexity and their proven resistance to narrativization²² to some degree explain the weak narrativity of #IWouldntBeHere and other attempts to storify welfare society. It also explains why the campaign was such an easy target for the proponents of liberal economics. Welfare as a system lacks discernible and personified human interaction and agency, and its consequences for, for example, social equality—and even more pressingly, for national wellbeing and wealth at large—are not explained through simple causal chains.

The case of #IWouldntBeHere raises the question of the ultimate relationship between life as lived and stories as narrated, a problem most thoroughly theorized by narrative hermeneutics. Hermeneutic approaches to storytelling, much favored in historical research, have long argued for the inseparability of experience and its interpretation or articulation as narratives; for a narrative hermeneutist, all experiencing is always already an interpretation, and these interpretations have a strong tendency to be further permeated with cultural story models and cognitive structures of narrative sense making. Hanna Meretoja calls this the “double hermeneutic” of narrative: “It is an *interpretative continuum* that ranges from the basic interpretative structure of sense perception to more complex forms of interpretation, such as narrative (re)interpretations. When we acknowledge that experience itself has an interpretative structure, narrative interpretations can be conceptualized as interpretations of interpretations.”²³

No doubt the welfare society is deeply ingrained in the narrative identity of those who have spent their entire life in Finland. Some of us have the experience of having been supported by this socio-economic structure. Yet, as argued by narrative hermeneutics, storytelling cultures and narrative formulae affect and structure the way we experience things in the first place. This chapter does not provide a diachronic analysis of the *changes* in narrating Finnish welfare, starting from its formation in the early twentieth century. Yet we may rather safely assume that the first private and most certainly collective experiences of welfare services as a *new*

²²Abbott (2008); Walsh, R. & Stepney, S. (Eds.) (2018). *Narrating Complexity*. Springer; Grishakova, M. & Poulaki, M. (Eds.) (2019). *Narrative complexity: Cognition, embodiment, evolution*. University of Nebraska Press.

²³Meretoja, H. (2020). Life and narrative. In P. Dawson & M. Mäkelä (Eds.), *Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*. Routledge.

aspect of the everyday²⁴ were much more tellable than the experience of early twenty-first-century welfare customers, for whom the safety net has been there all along—at least for three generations. Today the question of *experiencing welfare society* needs to be asked in the context of information overflow and the consequent instrumentalization of storytelling. In the contemporary story economy, the greatest currency proves to be the personal story of disruptive experience. This development has a neoliberal origin in the celebration of the upwardly mobile individual,²⁵ yet much of the damage it currently does to people’s trust in democratic welfare societies is unsolicited. Again, there are no recognizable narrative agents behind the new cultural dominant of storification, but an emergent logic of action, that of social media.

COUNTERING MASTERPLOTS THAT SURVIVE
THE INFORMATION OVERLOAD: HUMAN INTEREST
JOURNALISM AND THE “INDIVIDUAL VS.
SYSTEM” MASTERPLOT

Now I will move on to journalistic stories of the failure of welfare mechanisms as experienced by individual citizens. My aim is to describe the logic of master and counter-narratives directing the production and reception of stories on welfare, and to introduce the concept of the masterplot in order to capture the essence of the easy shareability and rhetorical dominance of personal stories that, societally speaking, appear to come from the margin and give voice to those silenced by authorities.

One can easily imagine how different the volume, visibility and general compellingness of the #IWouldntBeHere campaign would have been if the prompt were to share experiences of how the welfare society—or as Pursinainen reminds us, more accurately the welfare *state*—has *failed* the storyteller. Stories of citizens “falling through the holes of the safety net” abound in contemporary human-interest journalism, which does its utmost to piggyback on the appeal of the “true stories” of social media. Paradoxically, while such stories rely strongly on particularity, they nevertheless form an easily recognizable and even clichéd story genre that many

²⁴ See, e.g. Harjula, M. (2015). *Hoitoonpääsyn hierarkiat: Terveyskansalaisuus ja terveyspalvelut Suomessa 1900-luvulla*. Tampere University Press, 366.

²⁵ Fernandes, S. (2017). *Curated stories: The uses and misuses of storytelling*. Oxford University Press, 18.

of our followers, prompted by the critical perspective introduced by our project, found both annoying and misleading. In the *Dangers of Narrative* research project, we asked our followers on social media to report to us funny, irritating or troubling examples of instrumental storytelling; from a corpus of approximately one thousand reports and with a clear majority being related to human interest journalism and individuals’ “true stories” going viral, we were able to extract five recurrent *masterplots*: The Good Samaritan, The Deserving Poor, Individual vs. System, Illness as the Hero’s Journey and The Conversion Story of the Wellness Entrepreneur. All are somehow related to societal structures, but the one most clearly related to welfare is the Individual vs. System masterplot.

We took the concept and definition of masterplot from H. Porter Abbott: “recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life.”²⁶ A typical masterplot would be the Cinderella Story—or From Rags to Riches—a portable blueprint for storytelling that travels through ages and cultures yet reflects the dominant values and power structures of each culture and society in which it is appropriated. I have argued elsewhere that the untellability of the welfare state and its mechanisms vis-à-vis the rhetorical valuations of social media-fuelled narrative environments has significantly reinforced the Individual vs. System masterplot that through viral sharing constitutes a considerable counter-narrative to the alleged “story” of the well-functioning welfare state.²⁷ Representatives of this category are easily recognizable already by their proneness to clickbait journalism—a workable overall method of detecting twenty-first-century masterplots is indeed to look at the headlines that take the form of a narrative synopsis:

The Social Insurance Institution gave conflicting advice—without welfare, 18-year-old girl was forced to cancel her graduation party²⁸

Employment agency urged a dead woman to get a job²⁹

²⁶ Abbott, H. P. (2008). *Cambridge introduction to narrative. Second edition*. Cambridge University Press, 236.

²⁷ Mäkelä (2020), 389–401.

²⁸ News webpage of the national broadcasting company *Yle Uutiset* June 6, 2017, retrieved January 28, 2022 from <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9650476>. My translation.

²⁹ Tabloid *Iltalehti* November 16, 2017, retrieved January 28, 2022 from <https://www.iltalehti.fi/kotimaa/a/201711152200534052>. My translation.

Wrong medicine drove a boy to a psychiatric ward for years—at the age of 16, he managed to expose the nationwide oppression and humiliation of children in institutions³⁰

These examples taken from the *Dangers of Narrative* corpus were reported to our project anonymously by welfare and healthcare professionals who pointed out the severe misrepresentation of bureaucratic processes and criticized the straightforward generalizations drawn from stories of personal experience, as such typically resistant to fact-checking.

The discredited professionals in these stories have no narrative way of their own to counter such confrontational representations of their work. Doctors and social workers are not allowed to share stories that would provide an affective ground for social media users and material for “case” and feature journalism. What is more, they are not even able to comment on individual cases in public. These are pragmatic concerns, emblematic of the difficult position where the storytelling boom often puts professionals at a disadvantage due to confidentiality rules. As such, they also reflect a deeper story logic of master and counter-narratives. François Lyotard’s well-known theory of postmodernity as a deconstruction of *les grands récits* of modernity such as religion, or the enlightenment idea of the constant progress of modern societies, is currently being challenged by the celebration of the return of stories in the form of personal storytelling across platforms. The relationship between grand (cultural, collective, norm-setting, omnipresent) narratives and small (local, personal, shared, situated) stories has been reconceptualized as a dialectic or struggle between master and counter-narratives in sociologically inclined narrative research. Originally master narratives were understood as culturally dominant ways of telling about, for example, motherhood or illness, and counter-narratives as coming from the experiential margin and challenging the dominant story formulae by telling differently and introducing a diverging narrative identity.³¹ Recent research has challenged this view by asking whether master narratives need to be told in the first place or if they

³⁰ *Yle Uutiset* September 15, 2018, retrieved January 28, 2022 from <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10400366#:~:text=L%C3%A4%C3%A4k%C3%A4rit%20kertoivat%20Katjalle%2C%20ett%C3%A4%20Jeren,koko%20perheelle%20vuosien%20pituinen%20paina-jainen>. My translation.

³¹ See Bamberg, M. & Andrews, M. (Eds.) (2004). *Considering counter-narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*. John Benjamins.

are rather script-like norms taken for granted,³² and whether counter-narratives are always genuinely emancipatory voices from the margin.³³ I have proposed that the master narrative of the well-functioning welfare state that may indeed still dominate in the Nordic countries is precisely such an implicit script that typically materializes only when *countered* with personal stories of its failure. These narratives efficiently position themselves as countering, yet they have a great potential to become easily shareable and replicable masterplots, particularly when boosted by the story logic of social media.³⁴

The relationship of the previously defined masterplot to master and counter-narrative requires further elaboration. While master narratives are indeed more-script like, prescriptive and general carriers of norms and values that are rarely actually uttered or situated (“Finland is a welfare society where the safety net will catch all who fall”), masterplots are instead much more concrete recipes for plot, characters and moral positioning, and their “skeletal” structure can be reverse-engineered from individual narratives. From this follows that also counter-narratives, if successful in becoming replicable, can begin to form a recognizable masterplot that nevertheless preserves the gesture of *countering* (“I fell through the holes in the welfare safety net”). The rhetorical gesture of countering, in turn, requires the erection of a master narrative, even if it were a narrative straw man; a case in point would be the contemporary radical antifeminist online communities who aggressively tell a counter-narrative to challenge the alleged master narrative of feminism as a dominant power structure in western societies.³⁵ The rhetorical force of these counter-narratives, typically taking the form of stories of personal emancipation or trauma, hinges on their positioning as coming from the margin and voicing the previously unsaid, even if the teller is a white Caucasian heterosexual male propagating a return to patriarchal order.

³²Hyvärinen, M. (2020). Toward a theory of counter-narratives: Narrative contestation, cultural canonicity, and tellability. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge 17–29.

³³Nurminen, M. (2020). “The big bang of chaotic masculine disruption”: A critical narrative analysis of the radical masculinity movement’s counter-narrative strategies. In K. Lueg, K. & M Wolff Lundholt, (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge, 351–362.

³⁴Mäkelä (2020).

³⁵Nurminen (2020).

Popular and viral stories of cracks in the safety net or the corrupted welfare system derive their rhetorical power from the narrative gesture of countering, by projecting an allegedly “authorized” master narrative of the foolproof welfare system. Yet one hardly ever hears this story told. Rhetorically, it lives most vibrantly even if reversely in stories of personal experience countering it.

Yet another illustrative case reported to us via crowdsourcing—in fact by several followers—is a web column with a fair amount of social media shares entitled “My ill friend” and written by a celebrity journalist of the national broadcasting company, YLE. The story consists of a long quotation from the anonymous “friend”, recounting her ample and in every way horrendous experience with public healthcare. The editorial framing by the journalist consists merely of informing the readers about the friend’s condition (type one diabetes) and the given consent to publish the story. The justification to tell the story on the website of the national broadcasting company is by no means journalistic but can be tracked down to the narrative affordances of social media that support a representative and normative reading of an unverified story of personal, disruptive experience. In fact, it is even likely that the text had originally been a Facebook post.

[...] Doctors at the public health-care center are somehow more scatter-brained, not focusing on the patient at all. They don’t have a clue who I am and what’s wrong with me. [...] The same evening, the same physician can be much more competent at the private clinic. Value for money. [...]

I gave my blanket to this old lady, when she was praying for a warmer. I was scolded for doing this because it was forbidden. [...] An angry glare at me, angry yelling at the granny. That’s quite embarrassing, no matter how old or demented you are. [...]³⁶

The crushing critique of the public welfare system is from time to time interrupted by intensely emotional passages focusing on the teller’s loneliness and fear of death as a person who suffers from several grave illnesses and has no family to support her. The masterplot of Individual vs. System mixes with the masterplot of the Good Samaritan, a story genre that recounts the heroic efforts of a sole individual (the protagonist) saving the day in an exemplary manner while both the “system” and other

³⁶ *Yle Uutiset* June 15, 2015, retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8074238>. My translation.

individuals (nurses) turn their backs on the one in need (“the old lady”). The whole is a disturbing mixture of strong normativity, sweeping generalizations and intense subjectivity, yet this is precisely why it evades criticism and falsification. It is difficult to imagine a readerly position from which the teller’s experience could be outright disproved. Details of embodied experience, prompting an affective response in the audience, mix with iterative narration and normative claims, resulting in a story that suggests every visit to public healthcare is a traumatic experience, and not just for the teller but others as well.

THE VIRAL EXEMPLUM: THE FACEBOOK STORY ABOUT THE DECLINE OF THE WELFARE STATE

As Matti Hyvärinen points out, the mere narrative act of countering an alleged master narrative itself introduces a breach in the story and thus renders it more tellable than an established master narrative could ever be.³⁷ In political contexts, this story logic translates into a situation where placing oneself on the margin is in itself a narrative gesture that invites narrative responses.³⁸ When we add the narrative affordances of social media to the equation, we can see their appropriateness in reinforcing the dynamic between situated, “small” counter-narratives and the projected, ultimately intangible master narratives. The countering masterplots that go viral and succeed in questioning entire institutions benefit from the narrative situation of isolated and yet connected users who reach out for a shared affect. It is no coincidence that the masterplots questioning the welfare state in social media typically feature a sole hero-protagonist struggling against the system alone while all else fails around her. As such, the narrative situation is starkly opposed to the ethos of welfare society, encapsulated in recurring slogans such as “leave no man behind” (with this particular trope drawing from the Second World War narrative repertoire that still resonates strongly in the Finnish cultural memory).

An illustrative example is provided by a public Facebook post that received 6300 shares, which by Finnish standards means considerable virality. Already the title of the post, “This is how the Finnish welfare state

³⁷ Hyvärinen (2020).

³⁸ Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. The University of Chicago Press.

cares for its youth in Anno Domini 2019”,³⁹ explicitly marks the master narrative to be countered by the personal story. The “evaluation” part of the story⁴⁰ is thus foregrounded, while at the same time the narrative is framed as best fits the genre of a personal Facebook post: It conveys an immediate experience, its “what it’s like” quality. This happens in the very first sentence after the title: “I’m just so confused about the officials’ actions concerning a minor that I really need to tell this to you as well.” The narrative recounts in a detailed manner a one-night episode during which the teller ends up accommodating two teenagers returning from a party, the one having allegedly been kicked out of his/her parents’ house and being a frequent resident in a Red Cross reformatory. First, the teller recounts in a poignantly sarcastic manner her experiences with a Red Cross worker who refuses the teenager shelter due to a curfew. Then the teller moves on to describe in length the interaction with a social services emergency duty officer over the phone:

The duty officer said that all children and youths have a home to go to in Finland. We drifted into a discussion on how this in fact is not the case. This took a long time and really started to stretch my patience. That was after all a social worker on the line, shouldn’t every officer know people have problems? [...]

I asked if the duty officer really didn’t know what to do in this situation. I asked the officer how it was possible not to have a protocol for this and not having experience of similar situations. The duty officer replied, that [s/he] didn’t know how to proceed and had never encountered anything like this.

The phone conversation resulted in the conclusion that the only option was for me to take the youth to stay over. I was wondering how can it go like this? [...]

Just when the teens had gotten into bed, the officer calls me back to inform me that child welfare is working on this. So they are actually calling me at 1 am to let me know that child welfare will be calling me back the same night. I told them that here’s where I’m drawing the line. [...] The duty officer sounded surprised after hearing I wasn’t willing to stay up all night.

³⁹ I will not provide a link to this Facebook post in order to anonymize and protect the writer as she is not a public figure. The analysis of the post is however justified, as the writer is manifestly aware of the publicity of her post, and the story was also noted in one media outlet. Translations from the post are mine.

⁴⁰ Labov (1972).

One more time, to be clear, I tell the officer that I'm just a random innocent aunt, not working a night shift, unlike you guys at the other end of the line. [...]

Anyway, I just wanted to sleep, and now I'm alone responsible for this teen, a stranger, abandoned by the world, in Finland, and it's 2019.

How abandoned can the youth be in this country? [...]

The reader learns that the post has been written on the very night of the narrated events. It ends with an intensely emotional paragraph, switching from a moral register to an experiential one: "I'm so tired I'm crying. [...] If I'm the only adult who a youth can ask help from, I just can't turn my back and sleep. That's for sure." The dramatized narrative situation thus supports the theme of the story: We are ultimately alone in this world, and the safety net we were once promised that would catch us all does not exist; the bureaucrats responsible for the system are inhumane and detached from reality.

The reception of the story was overwhelmingly positive: it received more than 1600 thank you notes in the comments and resulted in a journalistic piece questioning the state of child welfare services in the teller's home city. Moreover, the story prompted other users to recount their own similar experiences, one concluding that the situation is "precisely the same" in eldercare across Finland. In the social media responses to the story, no generalization seemed to be too sweeping as the sharers and commentators took part in the affective chain reaction ignited by this one unverifiable story of personal experience. I tracked down only a couple of shares that were critical, mostly concentrating on the problematic issues of verifiability, caricaturization, misrepresentation of protocols, moral self-positioning, and the case's representativeness vis-à-vis the general state of Finnish child welfare services.

In previous research, we have labeled this story logic the *viral exemplum*: not unlike the premodern exemplum, which did not differentiate factual and fictional narratives but instead foregrounded the "deep truth" and the moral lesson underneath storyworld particulars, a viral social media story of personal experience is prone to claims of representativeness and normativity authorized by likes and shares.⁴¹ An emergent social

⁴¹Mäkelä et al. (2021); Katajala-Peltomaa, S. & Mäkelä, M. (2022). Conversion as an exemplary experience in the 14th century and today: Narrative-comparative approaches to the exemplum. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 47(1), 16–38.

media authority thus arises from the contribution of individual users—tellers and retellers—to whom no rhetorical or ethical responsibility can be delegated.⁴² “Truths” about the decline of the welfare society generated by this chain reaction from experientiality to representativeness and normativity cannot be countered with statistics or structural analysis, as the nature of such shared truths is experiential at heart. These amplified experiences-cum-countering masterplots constitute a rhetorically powerful challenge to any attempt at telling the “story” of the welfare society.

NARRATING COMPLEXITY WITH THE HELP OF FICTIONALITY: THE TELEVISION SERIES “INDOOR AIR” (*SISÄILMAA*)

A recent example from televised fiction, the miniseries “Indoor Air” discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter, may however give us some hope of narrative means for representing the welfare state—not in its inherent flawedness or foolproofness, but in its complexity. The series is a probable near-future dystopia where privatization and the late-capitalist business logic of individual reward through competition gradually invade the Finnish public sector. Yet peculiarly, the “realism” of the welfare machinery and its looming doom is *amplified* by fantastic elements that recurrently penetrate the bureaucratic universe. As the nightmarish reformations proceed in the public employment agency where almost all the events of the story are situated, Seppo, a senior member of the staff, develops a severe mold allergy in response to something; it might be mold spreading in the structures of the office building, or it might just as well be the reformations that cause both physical and mental illness among the employment officers.

Black and dripping mold stains on the office walls also start to haunt Anneli, together with the ghost of Eelis, an employee who commits suicide by jumping off the office roof in the first episode. The literary-critical term to describe such narration would be *uncanny*; the interpretation wavers between realism and fantasy, not resolving into either unless at the end of the story, at most. This is what happens in “Indoor Air”, as the ultimate collapse of the welfare state translates metaphorically into the office of the employment agency tumbling down and mold taking over. Yet the analogy between horror, paranoia, mental illness and the invisible

⁴²Dawson, P. & Mäkelä, M. (2020). The story logic of social media: Co-construction and emergent narrative authority. *Style* 54(1), 21–35.

mechanisms (of political and bureaucratic power) causing the downfall of the welfare state prevails.

Metaphoricity and artistic analogies—instead of straightforward and prototypical narrativity—are key to the success of “Indoor Air”; the series succeeds in representing a *structure* instead of mere individuals, as well as the ultimate intangibility and emergent nature of agency and action in a complex societal structure. The building and the mold represent the structure, the haunting and the horror thematize the difficulty of understanding and controlling those forces that threaten the welfare state. During the notorious talk show interview scene, Anneli rages against these invisible hands choking the system for which she herself has sacrificed her life and her mental health:

Is helping some sort of business? I’m serious! Whose shitty idea was this? Now I get it: There is no one! There’s fucking no one. There is no single person, there’s just some shapeless lump somewhere coming up with these shitty ideas that we idiots put into action, like these were some fucking divine messages from God above!

The narrative ethos of “Indoor Air” thus constitutes a remarkable exception in our time of instrumental stories of disruptive personal experience: it does not attempt to invoke empathy in the audience for the unemployed by constructing Victorian tear-jerker stories of the Deserving Poor and Good Samaritans. Individual customers are not treated as individuals but tangibly presented as a mass that is being subjected to various political and bureaucratic measures. The rare glimpses provided into private miseries rather satirically evoke only stereotypes that seem to suggest that the evaluation of individual stories and their compellingness, unlike in social media, is not relevant in the context of welfare:

- You have two minutes.
- Oh, ok. So, um... I’m a qualified elementary teacher but I can only work as a substitute and basically you can’t take those jobs if you’re a single parent and an alcoholic.

That personal stories of disruptive experience are downplayed and any empathetic relating to the stories of the unemployed frustrated does not however result in non-empathetic storytelling derived from emotions. Anneli and her colleagues feel for the structure and the system; the

corruption of that system by the neoliberal logic of competition and privatization makes them both physically and mentally ill. Sometimes this agony intermingles with the difficulty of narrativizing welfare—that is, of identifying the relevant agents and causality. This intermingling happens when Eelis tries to explain his “not feeling well” to Anneli just before his suicide:

- Anneli, it’s like, I can’t do this anymore. I—like, it’s not like we’re helping anyone here. What’s the point in making all these people attend courses, they’ll never get a job. We’re just maintaining these structures here, you and me and all of us, and, and, people going back and forth and and I and—no, and not you, and not, not I and not, not my superior, not your superior, not the Ministry of Employment and Economy, so... And everything’s just getting worse!
- Right... You know, Eelis. Like I’m not exactly following you.

After Eelis kills himself, Anneli becomes obsessed with his last words: “Help me.” Who are the true helpers, and who are the helped, in a faceless system that turns a blind eye to individual suffering? And why is this system worth saving? In the fictional world of “Indoor Air,” the salvation amidst corruption presents itself through the soul and body of Anneli, whom social media now embraces as “Society Anneli”. In the final scene, the ghost of Eelis walks Anneli amongst the crowd of queuing unemployed; Anneli spreads her hands like Christ on the cross, and the crowd of nameless jobseekers wander through her now transparent body. The unquestionably fantastical closing scene highlights the most crucial narrative analogy developed throughout the series, that between protestant Christianity and the well-functioning welfare system placed under threat. Individual deeds or stories do not count, as salvation—unemployment benefit and other services—is possible only through mercy in the form of the non-individuating welfare system.

By way of an analogy between welfare as a structure, the office building and finally Anneli’s living body, the series succeeds in providing the audience with its own artistic definition of the welfare system. At moments this definition is explicitly voiced by a burnt-out middle manager, who keeps referring to the welfare system as “Little Anneli’s window.” From this window—from within the functioning structure—Anneli is able to foresee the looming “desertedness of the soul” that would—*Sisäilmaa* suggests—follow from the downfall of the welfare state.

CONCLUSION

Discussions about the welfare society will always be about emotions, too; no criticism of the popular masterplots of disruptive personal experience will ever change that. Social media may be the most fertile breeding ground for collective affects generated by storytelling, but even the most bureaucratic, technocratic and expressionless political discourse is rooted to affects that guide our action as individual citizens, voters and members of various collectives. The Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin attempted to stonify the welfare state in a televised speech during the latest municipal elections in 2021 by simply recounting the predictable life course of a prototypical Finnish citizen from maternity and child healthcare to elder-care. Might this kind of weak, script-like narrative go viral in the future, as storytelling cultures and environments are in constant flux and tear-jerker stories of individual suffering are doubtless bound to lose their charm? As such, the Prime Minister's story-script at least reflects the social democratic ideal of the welfare state truthfully. The structure of this narrative reflects perhaps the most essential experiential element of the welfare state: the predictability of life course.⁴³ Yet in early twenty-first-century storytelling environments, the complexity, boredom and impersonality of societal structures still issue a challenge to anyone wishing to engage audiences. Similar problems have been discovered concerning the European Union; research shows that the lack of experiential point of contact weakens EU citizens' identification with the Union, which in turn may offer a breeding ground for populist nationalism.⁴⁴

On the other side of the coin, research also shows that emotional stories of personal experience, once the most forceful weapon of the Civil Rights movements, rarely change the audiences' political opinions. This is particularly true with structural political issues; as sociologists Francesca Polletta and Nathan Redman argue, it depends on the "background stories and stereotypes" (we could call these master narratives and masterplots) embraced by the audience whether a particular personal story is

⁴³ See Haapala's Chap. 16.

⁴⁴ Carr, N., Dennison, J. & Evans, G. (2018). European but not European enough: An explanation for Brexit. *European Union Politics* 20(2), 282–304; Chopin, T. (2018). Europe and the identity challenge: Who are "we"? *European Issues* no. 466. Foundation Robert Schuman. Retrieved May 22, 2022, from <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0466-europe-and-the-identity-challenge-who-are-we>.

heard “as emotionally touching or as manipulative and inauthentic.”⁴⁵ My reason for concluding this chapter with a brief analysis of narrative experimentation in fiction is to point toward new, innovative means for narrativizing the welfare society that would, in their *narrative* structure, reflect the *represented* societal structure and render it sharable, if not tellable.

This chapter has been an attempt to demonstrate the cruciality of social media in transforming personal stories of disruptive experience into a currency amidst the twenty-first-century information overflow. From the perspective of welfare politics, the twenty-first-century story economy has introduced an unwelcome epistemic and rhetorical bias toward the experiencing individual, while all relevant action remains parliamentary and bureaucratic in essence. Slow, supra-individual structural change is the loser in this contest for citizens’ attention; if one’s political imagination becomes saturated by compelling stories of heroism, survival and victimhood, the ability to comprehend and influence the structures of power and solidarity suffer. Moreover, the more governmental institutions themselves seek out compelling stories in their social media communication with the public, the more they foreground the immediate, individual encounter and consequent easy affective resonance, instead of trying to communicate the collective experiences embedded in welfare structures. My analysis hopefully serves as a reminder for scholars of experience to study not only easily shareable stories of disruptive personal experience, but their contrapuntal and sometimes even antagonistic relationship with the everyday experience of business as usual, or the less verbalized and more implied role of societal structures in shaping experience. This may mean a partial abandoning of narratives (in a prototypical sense) as a primary corpus: Societal structures are complex systems with emergent agency, and therefore they defy narrativization. Nevertheless, they structure our experience, the presence of which, in turn, is the sole prerequisite for something to be worth telling.

⁴⁵ Polletta, F. & Redman, N. (2020). When do stories change our minds? Narrative persuasion about social problems. *Sociology Compass* 14(4), 8.

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