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# Cultural story models in making sense of a desired post-corona world

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## ABSTRACT

The corona pandemic has been a disruptive event that calls for individual and collective efforts to make sense of the future. This paper aims to delineate the ways in which people from Greece (N = 41) and Finland (N = 18) draw on cultural story models (narrative schemas for organizing knowledge and experiences) to anticipate and make sense of a post-corona future. Personal anticipations of what their own post-corona future lives and the world should look like were collected using the Letters from the Future method. Using structural narrative analysis, five main storylines were discerned: (1) back to normal through human efforts; (2) back to normal through natural course; (3) persisting problems; (4) safety through technology; (5) transformation through profound value change. We argue that the first, return to normal narrative, functions as a master narrative that is countered in nuanced ways by the other four storylines. At a decisive moment in history, we argue that space for counter narratives is required for democratic engagement in shaping our futures.

## 1. Introduction

This paper belongs to a larger project, to which this Special Issue ‘*Will the World Never Be the Same? Everyday Imaginaries of Post-Corona Futures*’ is dedicated. The special issue has a unique focus on everyday imaginaries, which is distinct from other foresight and vision exercises currently undertaken by professional futurist scholars. It offers a collection of papers, to illuminate methodological and substantive gains in understanding everyday imaginaries of post-pandemic futures from a deep interdisciplinary approach on the same dataset. The focus of this paper is on the cultural story models that participants draw on when making sense of what a desired post-corona future world and personal life should look like.

The corona pandemic has been a disruptive situation which calls upon narrative projection of what the future will, could, and should hold. The pandemic as a global phenomenon directly and discernibly affects people’s personal life. Thus, the personal future must be anticipated with societal change as its backdrop. This “hyperprojective” (Mische, 2009) epoch has inspired many different ideas about the feared-for and hoped-for future, that manifest in different media (Páez & Pérez, 2020). Individuals locate themselves in relation to the maelstrom of public narratives. In so doing, they adapt cultural narrative models. Drawing on narrative psychology (e.g. Hänninen, 2004; Murray & Sools, 2015), narrative futuring (Sools, 2020), and narrative foresight (Jarva, 2004; Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015), this article explores how people narratively construct a desirable postcorona future amidst the “narrative wreckage” (Frank, 2013) brought about by the pandemic.

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The future dimension of narrative meaning-making has recently gained prominence in psychology, sociology, and other social science disciplines (Sools, 2020). In futures studies, the narrative approach, which is often implicit in much scenario work, has received more explicit theoretical and methodological attention. Accordingly, Milojevic and Inayatullah (2015: 151) propose that futures studies should study *narrative foresight*. That is, it should explore the “worldviews and myths that underlie possible, probable and preferred futures”. Narrative foresight links the “personal and cultural, individual and archetypal, psychological and social, inner and outer. It looks at our deep stories – often unconscious and archetypal – about the future which give meaning to our actions in the present. It proposes processes and methodologies by which this dance between inner and outer, individual and collective, reality and possibility can become more conscious. It brings story for transformation from the background to the foreground, making it more explicit.” Narrative foresight aims to go beyond mere description of underlying myths to challenging powerful master narratives.

Narrative psychology is a rich research tradition which has been developed since the 1980’s (e.g., Bruner, 1987, Sarbin, 1986). Its main focus has been on how people employ narrative to make sense of their current situation or construct their past. Like studies of narrative foresight, it contains the idea that people anticipate their future by imagining it as a narrative. Narrative organizes time in sequences (e.g., Carr, 1986, 51–52), provides events with an evaluative perspective (ups and downs, happy ends) (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and explains events by presenting them as chains wherein one thing leads to another (Abbott, 2002, 37–40). Narrative thus makes the past understandable, the present meaningful, and the future anticipated. In this view, people guide their actions in relation to the goals defined, adapting these actions to the ideas of causality and the moral principles inherent to their chosen narrative (Hänninen, 2004). This narrative structuring of reality concerns not only individuals, but communities and societies as well.

An idea common to narrative psychology and narrative foresight alike is that, in creating their own narratives, people draw inspiration or follow models drawn from the cultural stock of stories – be that age-old myths or current stories presented in the media. The old and new stories form a living continuum of “sedimentation and innovation” (Ricoeur, 1991): new stories always build partly on the older ones, and traces of the oldest stories can be found in the newest ones. In some actual stories, innovation is more prominent, in some, sedimentation can be observed. A romance is an adventure in which the hero wins a battle with a threatening enemy, in a tragedy, the hero is defeated by more powerful forces; in a comedy, the problem (tension between love and the old social order) is circumvented by a creative solution, and a new social harmony is established, and in irony/satire the value of the hero’s aims or heroism is questioned. In sociology, Arthur Frank (2013) has famously delineated three kinds of illness narratives: restitution story, or a story in which the protagonist returns to their previous state by the help of medical science; a chaos story, wherein chaos prevails, and a coherent story cannot be constructed; and a quest story, in which illness gives life new meaning. These story types reflect more general ways of making sense of adversity that are potentially relevant to pandemic storytelling.

In futures studies, the counterparts to cultural story models can be found in the concept of generic alternative futures (Dator, 2009), future archetypes (MacDonald, 2012) or future myths (Boschetti et al., 2016). These schemas are often based on findings from scenario exercises created in planning workshops. Dator (2009) has proposed four generic alternative futures that recur in planning sessions: continuous growth, collapse, discipline (sustainability), and transformation. MacDonald (2012) found among a vast array of scenarios from different countries and fields the archetypes of social progress, catastrophe, reversion, and transformation. Surveying a large community sample, Boschetti et al. (2016) tested the idea of future myths. Using factor analysis, they found five such myths: ‘social crisis’, ‘eco-crisis’, ‘techno-optimism’, ‘power and economic inequality’, and ‘social transformation’. The similarity of these categorizations suggests that there indeed are certain recurring generic futures, stemming from a shared stock of cultural story models, among both professional futurists and lay people, i.e. people who are not trained in foresight.

The available cultural story models can be restrictive or inspiring, repressing or empowering. Those narratives that are especially powerful and strongly present in public discourse, or taken-for-granted, are called master narratives. This concept was originally coined by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) to denote the ideas of progress and science underlying the conception of societal history, but later it has been used to refer to all “legitimization strategies for the preservation of the status quo with regard to power relations and difference” (Bamberg, 2005: 287). Master narratives in this sense are abstract, structural categories, which are quite distant from everyday narration. According to Hyvärinen et al. (2021), master narratives often take the shape of “allusions to previously told and heard narratives and allude to prevailing expectations of event sequences rather than articulated narratives”.

Narratives that challenge or subvert master narratives are called counter narratives (Andrews, 2004; Lueg et al., 2021). Whether a story functions as a master or counter narrative depends on the social and historical context in which it is told, as counter narratives of today may become a master narrative in the course of time. It is essential to note that the master and counter narratives are not inherently “good” or “bad” – their ethical quality is to be judged on other grounds (Meretoja, 2021). It is, however, problematic if a master narrative becomes so taken for granted that it restricts other interpretations of events. Futures studies also acknowledges the productive power of stories by pointing out how the disappearance or neglect of people’s visions of the future results in their visions without a future (Sand, 2019). The implication is that when investigating how people envision a post-corona future, it is vital to include a wide array of stories, including marginalized ones.

All in all, both narrative foresight and narrative approaches in psychology and the social sciences start from the idea that people conceive of time in terms of narrative, that narratives are both personal and cultural, and that narratives reflect, reproduce, and challenge societal power relations. This article starts from these premises and seeks to explore everyday narratives of the future after a specific crisis. We focus our analysis on Greece and Finland, because despite sharing a common European cultural background and being members of the EU, they are also different in important ways. Aside from lying at the opposite ends on North-South dimension, Greece is a country that has in recent years survived deep crises whereas Finland is both politically and economically a relatively stable welfare state. According to sociological questionnaire studies, Greece (low trust) and Finland (high trust) are on opposite ends of a scale measuring people’s trust in societal institutions (Ervasti et al., 2019; Kouvo, 2011). Our research question is, “What kinds of stories do people in Finland and Greece construct to make sense of desirable personal and societal changes that emerge from the corona

pandemic, and how do these stories relate to culturally salient story models?”.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Background of the study

This article is based on a part of the data set collected in an international comparative study. The larger study investigates how a global, disruptive event can impact our perception of what is possible and what is desirable, and the way we make sense of the world (community, society, humanity, the planet) and ourselves. The research consortium conducting the study was an ad hoc collaboration of researchers across Europe with a common interest in collecting and investigating desired future perspectives during the early stage of the covid-19 pandemic. The participating researchers came from different disciplinary backgrounds (cultural psychology, sociology, philosophy, futures studies, anthropology, narratology, education sciences) and countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, UK). The study received approval (number 200500) from the ethics committee at the University of Twente, where the project leaders were based. More information can be found on the project website <add hyperlink in final version> and in a short, animated video describing the project <add hyperlink>.

### 2.2. Procedure

Data collection took place between April and July 2020 using the online Survey tool Qualtrics. This means that data were collected during the pandemic's first wave when both Finland and Greece were in lockdown. A combination of recruitment strategies was employed, combining convenience sampling via the networks of the researchers in the consortium with snowball sampling through participants who were asked at the end of the Survey to further distribute the call for participants. Additionally, calls in newsletters were aimed at recruiting specific groups (Dutch Catholic Association for Elderly people, KBO; a professional network of psychologists in the Netherlands). People were eligible to participate in the study if they were over the age of 16 years. There were no further formal eligibility criteria, but literacy (including e-literacy) and computer access were implicitly required.

The survey was made available in 9 languages (Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Spanish) to enable as many people as possible to contribute. The survey consisted of two parts: 1) The Letter from the Future creative writing exercise (Sools, 2020); 2) a questionnaire with ten questions (open and closed) about how the coronavirus outbreak has affected participant's life as well as demographics and participant's attitude to the future (hope and uncertainty attitude). For more detailed information on the methodology, see the method supplement to this article. Participants could access the study via a link and were able to select the language in which they wanted to fill out the survey. At the start of the survey, participants were asked to read the consent form and to give active consent to take part in the study. Participants could log out of the study at any time and continue writing at a later time. Completion of the survey typically took between 20 and 60 min, depending on how elaborate they decided to write. Participants received no compensation. Participant letters not originally written in English were translated into English by bilingual researchers of the consortium and professional translators. All data were pseudonymized, encrypted and stored according to the Data Management Policy of the lead University.

### 2.3. Participants

The recruitment efforts resulted in 277 participants residing in 33 countries that are affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and associated consequences, but most are from Southern Europe ( $n = 80$ , notably Greece), continental Europe ( $n = 69$ , notably from the Netherlands) and South America ( $n = 53$ , notably Ecuador). See method supplement for detailed tables of participant characteristics. In the total sample 67% were women, with a more equal gender balance in North America, Eastern Europe, UK and Australia. The age range of the sample was between 16 and 81 years with a mean age of 42. Participants predominantly had a higher educational background (63% with a college or university degree or equivalent). Participants with paid employment (65%) outweighed those not working or retired. Over 60% of the participants reported no change in their employment situation due to the covid19 outbreak.

The analysis presented in this article is based on letters from Greece and Finland. From Greece, 67 letters were obtained and from Finland, 18 letters. From the Greek letters, we decided to limit the sample to letters containing at least 300 words (41 letters, length of which varied from 300 to 1324 words). Because the amount of Finnish letters was smaller, we decided to include them all in the analysis. The length of the Finnish letters varied from 179 to 757 words.

### 2.4. Letter from the Future

The *Letter from the Future* exercise was used to elicit participant's ways of envisioning their desired post-Corona life and world. Taking a narrative approach, this creative writing exercise aims to elicit a personal narrative in which a possible and desirable future is imagined as if realized (Sools, 2020). Originating in health promotion, this exercise has been used in creative writing groups consisting of older people with mild depressive symptoms (Bohlmeijer, 2007). The idea is to imagine traveling to a desired future in a time machine and write a letter from that future retrospectively back to the present. The Letter from the Future exercise has been adapted for research purposes (Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools et al., 2015; Sools, 2020) and used in various contexts, e.g., liminal employment experiences (Sools et al., 2017; Triliva et al., 2020), intimate partner violence (Kilgore et al., 2018), voting (Sools et al., 2018), the future of travel (Tussyadiah & Miller, 2020).

For the study at hand, the original instruction was partly adapted. First, the topical domain of the desired future was specified as a *moment in time when the current coronavirus outbreak had ended*. Second, participants were encouraged to use their imagination and focus on possibilities by asking to *Remember that it is about a future which has not occurred yet. Consider it an opportunity to think about possibilities to transform your own life and the world around you for the better*. Third, similar to the original instruction, the chosen time and place in which the desired future took place were not predetermined but left open for participants themselves to imagine. This openness allowed insight into the way participants themselves situate a post-pandemic future temporally and spatially. Fourth, participants were encouraged to engage in a sensory exploration of their immediate surrounding of their future world *What do you see, feel, hear and smell?* Then their attention was turned to the future world at large (community, society, humanity, the planet) by asking *Do you notice anything about how society or nature are functioning now that the corona outbreak is over?* Fifth, attention was brought to the future self with prompts such as *What are you feeling, thinking, and doing? How are you dealing with opportunities and setbacks on a specific day, moment or event?* Sixth, participants were asked about the pathway that led to the future just described with an openness to the agency involved in creating that future *How did this future come into being, who or what has contributed to making those changes possible?* And allowing for participant's own evaluation about the pathway *How do you look back on this path to the future?* Finally, the participant was asked to send a message to an audience of their own choice in the present.

Overall, two design criteria played a role in this elaborate description: (a) the dual focus of the study on future self *and* world, and (b) the challenge of providing sufficient guidance towards narrative (experiential, detailed) writing in an online environment. The disadvantage of the elaborate instruction is its difficulty and length, which likely has contributed to the high drop-out rate.

## 2.5. Analysis and interpretation

For this article, a narrative analysis of the letters was performed in four steps. They varied in the degree to which we took a "formulaic" (step 1 the most formulaic) or "playful" (step 3 the most playful) approach to analysis (Smith, 2007). According to Smith, playful approaches may be systematic, but "plausible interpretations are generated in a highly flexible way".

First, we performed an initial classification of letters based on various aspects of the ending: (1) the valence of the end point (positive or negative); (2) the (dis)continuity of the outcome in comparison with the previous (present) state; (3) what kind of causal agent the letters implied in the movement to the end state (change agent). The letters were not, however, all pure in the sense that they could contain features of other story types too. To streamline the assignment of letters into a pragmatically useful set of story types, we only considered their main point.

Second, we conducted storyline analysis (Burke, 1969; Murray & Sools, 2015) to gain a deeper understanding of the initial letter categories. Storyline analysis assumes that a story consists of five storyline elements: When and where the story takes place (Setting), who is the main acting entity in the story (Agent), What is happening to and done by the agent (Acts/Events), What is the (implied) outcome or purpose of the story? (Purpose/Result). The driving force behind a story is an imbalance between storyline elements, a breach. The breach is about a disruption of the story logic. In our study, we analyzed how the corona pandemic as a disrupting force took on different meanings in different storylines.

Third, we identified an array of cultural story types reflected in the stories, and compared them with four classifications of narratives: Frye's (1957) classification of western literary narratives, Frank's (2013) classification of illness narratives, various narratives of historical change, and myths of the future (Boschetti et al., 2016). The similarities between the story types in our letters and the story types in other classifications are not exact but can intuitively be seen to represent more or less similar ideas.

Fourth, looking at the full set of identified story types, we contemplated whether these functioned as *master or counter narratives*, placing them in the context of societal power dynamics. It was not always possible to discern the letter writer's explicit positioning of their story as countering an implied master narrative. Therefore, our interpretation focused on the landscape of all letters in each story type, not individual letters, to identify the interrelationship between the story logic presented across these types.

## 2.6. Strengths and limitations

This study's main strength lies in its access to lay people's views of the post corona future, while they themselves were amid the pandemic. They do not represent professional scenarists or social scientific views. It has been interesting to see that letter writers clearly situate their personal future in the broad social context.

When assessing the study's external validity, above all two things must be considered. First, data was collected in the first months of the pandemic when the duration and course of the pandemic was highly uncertain. There could not be grounded scenarios of the developments to give frames for envisioning the future. Also, the different views on the pandemic's societal effects were only beginning to develop. It is possible, then, that old, known narratives were instinctively resorted to. It would be interesting to see whether new kinds of stories are emerging in the current phase of the pandemic. Moreover, following Boschetti et al.'s (2016: 82) remark that "carrying out a survey of the type described here at regular time intervals may clarify what components of the myths of the future are robust to change and which are affected by global events", it would be relevant to investigate whether for example discontinuity stories would wax or wane across phases of the pandemic.

Second, it is worth noting that our data collection relied on convenience sampling in the networks accessible to the consortium members and their research assistants. This may have led to certain type of person preferentially participating in the study – well-educated and ready to engage in a thinking experiment. It is possible that some other groups of people "out there" would have written other kinds of stories. Furthermore, different groups of people may have participated in different countries, which holds implications for the country comparisons. Nevertheless, the data are adequate for showing that different visions of the post-corona

world exist, and these visions can plausibly be interpreted as reflecting different cultural story types or archetypes.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Story types

In the first stage of analysis, five story types were discerned in the data corpus. Table 1 shows how these five types differ based on their main plot structure, e.g., the ending of the story and the depicted (dis)continuity between present and future. There are three continuous plots, two of which hope for life to return to “normal” or back on the previous track, either by the help of science (story type 1) or through a natural course (story type 2). In story type 3, the continuation concerns an increase in already existing persisting problems, the development of which the pandemic can even accelerate. In the fourth story type, the pandemic is seen to spark a profound, positively evaluated, change in values and awareness of what matters in life. The fifth story type envisions a discontinuity in the sense of a highly evolved technological society, in which technology provides safety. Some of these stories are quite futuristic and estranged from our present world. Because most (but not all, as some are more neutral or ironic in tone) of these technology stories reflected on the dehumanizing effects of technology, we classified these as having a ‘negative ending’.

The distribution of letters to the story types over countries (Table 2) shows that, overall, the continuity story types prevail in both Finnish and Greek datasets. Among the Finnish letters, a positive ending is more common than in the Greek letters. This difference in valence becomes even more pronounced when looking at the kind of discontinuity envisioned, with the Greek writers more often foreseeing safety through technology and the Finnish writers more often depicting transformation through value change.

Table 3 presents the main characteristics of the story types according to the Burkean scheme for analyzing storylines, each of which we will then describe in more detail.

#### 3.2. Story type 1: Back to normal through human efforts

The first story type imagines a world that quickly returns to almost the “old normal,” and sees that “normal” as positive. The return to normal is usually described as gradual – “everyday life continues to get back to normal and things settle little by little (F, w, 22 yrs.). *It is strange that life goes on as if there never was a quarantine time*”. (F, w, 61 yrs.) *“The home and I look as we did before, everything around is generally the same. Society seems the same as before the restrictive measures. Looking out the window and people on the street, they also look the same.”* (G, w, 28 yrs.) In these narratives the corona crisis is neither an enduring nor overly difficult problem. They describe either little to no change in the future, “*Here in the future the world is in its good old shape again*” (F, m, 42). Returning to the old ways was sometimes imagined vividly and pleasurably: “*As soon as I move back to the city (...) I start to book trips again. (...) First I’ll probably head to the coast of the Mediterranean, it’s still warm there, and then perhaps I’ll take a city vacation, and in the winter I want to travel to a distant country like Jamaica or Bali.*” (F, w, 61 yrs.).

Not all back to normal stories depict a straightforward return to the old ways. In some, the pandemic leaves permanent traces, some of them neutral, others positive or negative. One of the negative traces of the corona crisis is that people remain wary of each other. “*I notice that outdoors people still avoid close contact in fear of a new contagion.*” (F, w, 74 yrs.) Generally, the awareness that another pandemic is possible makes life less carefree. The social changes described are not equally positive for everyone, e.g., the ubiquitous digitalization is seen to exclude some people: “*some are able to move fluently in the digi world, some are not or don’t want to*” (F, w 74 yrs.). These traces are, however, minor, and the post-corona society resembles what it had been before.

The positively evaluated changes depicted in the back to normal stories are perceived as a by-product of an expected societal adaptation and adjustment (probable futures) propelled by the pandemic, rather than as intended and valued changes (desirable futures). The changes could result from new habits adopted during the lockdown, or incremental yet permanent societal changes typically concerning increased distant working and digitalized educational practices. Excessive traveling by plane is also expected to be permanently reduced. Moreover, life during the lockdown has taught people to value close human relationships and spending time in nature. These changes are expected to persist in the post corona world. Some stories describe actions that help re-establish a sense of control during a period of tremendous upheaval. Other actions allow for temporary escape and self-care: “*Nature walks,*” “*bike rides,*” “*close range tourism*”, “*books,*” and “*movies*” are among the strategies described in the letters.

Distant working, together with the heightened value of the nature-close living environment is predicted to lead to new regional structures, as people are able and willing to move from big cities to smaller towns. “*Small regional towns changed into lively growth centers, in which opportunities for human-close life had increased.*” (F, m, 42 yrs.) At least in Finland, some writers expect economic progress to be positive. New business possibilities are imagined, for example, in the tourism sector. “*Traveling to Finland has increased, people come to see the nature and void, it has been marketed better than before*” (F, w, 44 yrs.). Another positive change is that public policy favors environment-friendly companies, and “*actors that are harmful to the environment have met creative destruction*” (F, m, 42 yrs.).

**Table 1**

Categorization of story types according to the ending (positive or negative) and the (dis)continuity between present and future outcome.

|                        | Continuity  | Discontinuity                                    |
|------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Positive ending</b> | (1) Back to normal through human efforts<br>(2) Back to normal through natural course | (4) Transformation through profound value change |
| <b>Negative ending</b> | (3) Persisting problems   | (5) Safety through technology                    |



**Table 2**  
Distributions of the letters according to story type in absolute numbers.

| Story type                 | Back to normal through human efforts | Back to normal through natural course | Persisting problems | Transformation through value change | Safety through technology |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Greece</b><br>(n = 41)  | 11 letters                           | 5 letters                             | 12 letters          | 5 letters                           | 8 letters                 |
| <b>Finland</b><br>(n = 18) | 6 letters                            | 1 letter                              | 4 letters           | 6 letters                           | 1 letter                  |
| <b>Total</b><br>(n = 59)   | 17 letters                           | 6 letters                             | 16 letters          | 11 letters                          | 9 letters                 |

*“Some of the companies have died but new opportunities have emerged instead.”* (F, w, 44 yrs.).

While the means by which the pandemic is conquered is not always made explicit, in some narratives medicine-related measures (restrictions, vaccination, health habits) are explicitly described as a vessel for restitution. *“Luckily the medical science has found several ways to slow down the spreading of this serious disease”* (F, m, 42 yrs.). A writer describes the vaccine as a *“saving grace,” “Our catastrophe did not materialize. ... Vaccines were developed to protect us.”* (G, w, 41 yrs.). The government measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 were described as essential: *“Strict measures were taken quickly, schools and almost all shops were closed... Fortunately, our country mourned a relatively small number of dead..”* (G, m, 31 yrs.) But while institutional action (strict measures or vaccines) is envisioned as critical for a desired return to normality, letter writers also explain that the gains from these interventions must be facilitated or reinforced by changes in personal behaviors. *“Hygiene habits are a priority for all people. Everyone is vigilant regarding handwashing, and sneezing in your elbow, they have become habits for everyone.”* (G, w, 28 yrs.) Embracing the new preventative practices is just one compromise adopted to reach restitution.

To sum up, in the back to normal through human efforts stories the corona outbreak remains, thanks to medical innovations, restrictive measures, and public obedience, a soon to be forgotten disruption which leaves only minor, mostly positive yet unintended traces to people's lifestyle.

### 3.3. Story type 2: Back to normal through natural course

The second story type also depicts a return to normal but follows a distinctly different logic. Here, life is described as a natural cycle in which individuals have no choice but to flow with, in both good and bad times. They reconcile the pandemic with their story of self by treating it as inevitable and part of the cyclical nature of life. One writer describes it in terms of seasons of feast versus famine, *“winter has come. Let's go hunting and be content with much smaller prey until spring arrives. Spring will come. I am sure of this. I don't know what really went wrong and how we got here, the coronavirus, the financial crisis, the conspiracy theories. I don't care. This is life, there is nothing given. The only fact I could say is that man is doomed by nature to continually evolve”* (G, m 52 yrs.). And another participant writes: *“I've always believed very strongly that after each decline, we return to the peak again.”* (G, w, 18 yrs.) Indeed, Greek letter writers seem to draw comfort, inspiration, and certainty from their previous experience with adversity. In the only Finnish letter of this category, Covid 19 is seen as similar to previous pandemics that *“have lasted their time (1–3 years) and then vanished”* (F, m, age not disclosed). All in all, the back to normal through natural course story tells that the pandemic is just a phase in an eternal roller coaster, that the receding of the pandemic is just a matter of time and has little to do with human efforts to control it.

### 3.4. Story type 3: Persisting problems

Although the instruction was to write a letter from a desirable future, some writers depicted the post-corona world in mostly (albeit not always solely) negative terms, emphasizing that negative developments – such as materialism or injustice – persist and are even aggravated because of mankind's inability to learn. The depicted worsening could take the shape of just mentioning one persisting problem (like climate change), a listing of multiple separate problems, or in some cases show awareness of a complex entanglement of problems.

One type of entanglement concerns how global population growth is aggravated by climate migration, which in turn increases the risk of new pandemics. *“In this planet there just is not enough food now that the population has grown so big and climate change has dried up the regions that were both most cultivated and most populated.”* (F, w, 34 yrs.). The global tensions are seen by one writer to have increased, because the *“Green revolution has lifted the interests of nations and nation states above the whole”*, and the *“arms race continues similarly to before”*. (F, m, 74 yrs.).

While climate concerns are prevalent in this category, some writers show concern about the increase of social and psychological problems: *“There are diseases, poverty, unemployment”*, as well as *“loneliness and isolation”* (F, w, 69 yrs.). Examples of feared emotional or mental trauma left by the pandemic are domestic abuse, mental illness such as depression and anorexia, and a worry that lingers long after the pandemic dissipates. As observers of the future world, writers report back on how the pandemic has imprinted on their lives and on that of the community. For example, a Greek school psychologist describes the teachers in the school she works in, *“the teachers. they are anxious and worried, but they are trying to get into the swing of everyday life now. They are afraid of whether there will be any*

**Table 3**  
 Characterization of story types according to the storyline elements (Burke, 1969; Murray & Sools, 2015).

| Story type         | Back to normal through human efforts                                     | Back to normal through natural course  | Persisting problems  | Transformation through value change                         | Safety through technology   |
|--------------------|--|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Setting</b>     | Deadly virus overcome  | Pandemic as mere phase in a natural cycle                                    | Persisting human-made problems   | Social quality, sustainable economy                         | High-tech world in which technology has pervaded all spheres of life                          |
| <b>Main agent</b>  | Medical science  | Humans as part of the ecosystem and not its driving force                    | Humans as greedy and self-interested   | Humans as creative and loving                               | Humans as shaped by technology  |
| <b>Acts/events</b> | Vaccinations, social distancing measures, lockdowns, preventive behavior | Accepting the cycles of nature, with the virus as part of the natural course | Inequality increases<br>Tensions between states increase<br>Climate change not stopped | Reorganizing social life on the basis of sustainable values | Dehumanizing acts performed by people who become complicit in becoming a robot                |
| <b>Means</b>       | Medical science, adhering to norms                                       | Patience, resolve (/religious) faith, and living in the moment               | Competing over resources   | Creativity, openness to change                              | Digitalization of work and human interaction<br>People retreat to their homes<br>Surveillance |
| <b>Purpose</b>     | Continuation of business-as-usual  | Surviving the natural ups and downs  | Continuing the business as usual   | A world that is good for humans and nature                  | A safe and sanitized world  |
| <b>Breach</b>      | Covid 19 as a disruption of steady progress                              | Covid19 as a low phase in a natural cycle                                    | Covid 19 as booster of problems  | Covid 19 as a game changer                                  | Covid 19 as boosting the need of safety   |

**Table 4**  
 Cultural story models underlying the story types, and their positioning as master and counter narratives.

|                             | Back to normal through human efforts                  | Back to normal through natural course | Persisting problems  | Transformation through profound value change          | Safety through technology                      |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>Classical archetypes</b> | Romance   | Fundamental                           | Tragedy  | Comedy  | Satire/Irony                                   |
| <b>Illness narratives</b>   | Restitution   | Restitution                           | Chaos  | Growth/quest story                                    | N/A  |
| <b>Historical narrative</b> | Enlightenment narrative                               | Eternal return myth                   | Criticism of modernity                                       | Romanticist narrative                                 | Trans-humanism                                 |
| <b>Myths of the future</b>  | Techno-optimism                                       | N/A                                   | Eco-crisis + Power & economic inequality                     | Social transformation + traditional environmental ism | Social crisis + science fiction                |
| <b>Positioning</b>          | Master (not presented as countering other narratives) | Countering drivers of change          | Countering the simplicity of proposed solutions and outcomes | Countering short-term focus and undesir outcomes      | Countering undesirable and unintended outcomes |

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chance that they will go through the confinement again, and some are worried about their health and the health of their loved ones.” (G, w, 30 yrs.).

The most severe criticism, to be found only in Greek letters, is focused on fellow human beings who have lost touch with their human-ness: “I’m sad as I slowly realize that covid19 may not have been the real virus on earth. The earth sent a virus to function as an immune system and set the brakes on the actual illness, which is nothing but human beings themselves. Now I see that most people are just robots. Driven robots return to their original function, the one for which they are programmed. Profit and simple survival are driving them, and they are incapable of realizing anything beyond that.” (G, m, 33 yrs.) Humans in these stories lack, or fail to practice, agency. They submit to government, to society, and to other influences, to their own detriment. “More and more authoritarian policies are being implemented and the people are not reacting, because they consider it a measure to prevent the spread of a new virus that may be reappearing” (G, w, 19 yrs.). These letters describe people as weak, perverse, and even foolish or regressive: “Trade continues as usual in a model of Western state capitalism. Propaganda culminates and is centralized. Social movements are digitally exploring ways to act and overthrow the status quo. Social change is more difficult to bring forth than ever before. Individualism has never been more robust.” (G, m, 37 yrs.).

Some Greek stories describe people rebounding into their most base selves. Many describe the destructive tendencies in man and society, particularly as it concerns nature. Humans are described as parasites. One story telling type in this vein describes the pandemic as a missed opportunity to restore balance in man’s relationship with the natural world: “Nature has not recovered much. People seem to have forgotten that a year ago, they were enjoying walking in the countryside secretly. They were hiding from the government where they were, albeit following the measures by posting on social media an outing. Large industries continue to work. I heard that in some cases, working hours have been increased to meet needs.” (G, w, 24 yrs.).

Some of the persisting problems stories border on the dystopic, others simply accentuate some features and tendencies the letter writer observes in their everyday life. Across these stories, however, resistance can be perceived in unexpected places. For example, a writer describes how they find hope in this dark place, “Yet concomitantly, I feel lucky, that amid the hustle and bustle that man causes again, with quarrels, honking, abrupt braking, talking on the phone about a bunch of artificial and insane problems. Luckily, I can still remember the quiet gift given to us so that we can sit down to think, reflect, and see life more clearly. We had time to realize that nothing around us is given. Yet, almost everyone forgot this truism so quickly.” (G, m, 33 yrs.).

The persisting problems story type depicts a world in which economic growth is pursued and attained but at the cost of such serious problems as climate change, inequality, and international tensions. This may even lead to a global catastrophe.

### 3.5. Story type 4: Transformation through value change

In the fourth story type, the most profound transformation is not of the physical world but a shift in values. “It made us ponder about what is essential, appreciate what has real value in life, and redefine our values. The world was shaken, and things changed for the better.” (G, w, 47 yrs.) The post-corona future is seen as happier and at the same time more sustainable than the pre-corona world.

First, there is a discourse on a transition away from capitalism, materialism, and neo-liberal value systems. For example, one Greek writer describes an improvement driven by a shift in people’s values: “Industries have shrunk, the air has cleared a lot, and transportation has changed since we are sharing rides in groups to get to work.” (G, w, 53 yrs.) A Finnish writer writes along similar lines: “Amidst the chaos, the movement called “Moderation” was born. (...) People just started to think that (...) people don’t need more money but connection with other people”. (F, w, 57 yrs.) “The society is not dependent on consuming and neo-liberalism, but the companies are responsible and thriving”. (F, w, 23 yrs.).

Second, a change in relationships between people in the post-corona world is described. For example, one Finnish writer tells that “believe me or not, but in this time the old people are respected and listened to”, and that in the new world people are not respected on the basis of their wealth but “those who used to receive the least attention became the most important” (F, w, 57 yrs.). One Greek letter describes the things that have been abandoned or overcome in the post-corona world: “At that time, then there was the concept of “racism.” I imagine you know its meaning and history.” (G, w, 47 yrs.).

Third, a new way of organizing production and working life brings forth a new kind of relation to work and to other people. “In food production, small family and cooperative farms were favored” (F, w, age not disclosed) “My country is self-sufficient and secure. Everything is made here. With respect to nature, the environment, people.” (G, w, 48 yrs.) “Everybody does some work. Machines do the heaviest and most monotonous tasks. Working in teams is more favored than ever.” (F, w, 64 yrs.) In contrast to the technology stories where humans become like robots, here machines free people to do creative work. Therefore, they regain and strengthen their well-being and their human strengths: “The positive changes pertain to people’s well-being and that they are relaxed when the achievement society is not pressurizing all the time, but people are given the opportunity to find their abilities and to realize them.” (F, w, 23 yrs.). Everyday life is depicted as pleasurable in many ways. One writer tells how “people had to learn the sleeping skills again” (F, w, age not disclosed), and that due to regaining those skills, psychological and physical symptoms started to diminish. The desirable post-corona world is reached partly by returning to traditional ways of life without abandoning technology. For example, a Greek letter tells, “We are now autonomous when it comes to energy. Tesla had taken care of this a long time ago.” Another Greek writer focuses on advances in health care: “Diseases have been eliminated to a significant extent. Those who come are treated immediately with natural preparations and herbal vaccines. Yes, it sounds unreal, and yet it is happening! Medicine has made leaps!” A Finnish letter writer summarizes: “The development was influenced by the enormous amount of knowledge people have obtained by developed technology and traveling (F, w, age not disclosed). It is essential, however, that the achievements of technology in the utopic post-corona world are applied to support the new way of life for “advancing the good things and inclusively so that everybody can benefit from them” (F, w, 23 yrs.).

Fourth, most of the Greek transformation stories describe an upheaval and change in systems of governance. Some of the changes are both radical and welcome. One writer claims: “I don’t miss the fact that governments don’t exist anymore. Things are working differently

now. Humans have reached higher levels of consciousness, so there is no "stupid crowd" to be deceived by anyone." (G, other, 31 yrs.). Similarly, another writer describes, "There are no longer any directorates from elsewhere to enforce unjust laws and rules that violate every law by imposing "prisons" on innocent people. On nations. Respect. There is respect. We humans respect each other and all together with the planet." (G, w, 48 yrs.).

Finally, the changes are envisioned as unfolding on a global (macro) rather than individual (micro) level. A fundamental change depicted in several Finnish letters is the development of global consciousness of the necessity of acting together and agreeing upon how to use the globe's resources. This idea of an overarching community is captured by the concepts of "We (including all people)" or *Moderation* (F, w, 57 yrs.), and "Pangaea" or "the idea of a shared globe" (F, m, 37 yrs.). In a clearly utopian and science fiction-like story written from the year 3000, a Finnish writer tells that "We people have had to change our ways of acting drastically. We were forced to decide together what was useful to produce on the earth and what to consume" (F, w, 64 yrs.). As a result, the existential threat posed by climate change is solved in a post-corona world, as the nature is respected, and the environment is considered in every way. For example, the restrictions of tourism, decrease of consumerism, as well as innovations in food production, lead to a gradual healing of the nature of the planet. "By the way, the glaciers of Iceland are frozen again" and the "South American rainforests are recovering". (F, m, 37 yrs.).

In the transformed post-corona world, people have learned from the pandemic to return to "traditional" or pre-capitalist values, modes of production, consumption, and ways of relating to others, while deploying the developments of technology to humane purposes. From this angle, the pandemic can be seen as a game changer, a rescuer from a trajectory leading to destruction. At the core of the change is the transformation of values.

### 3.6. Story type 5: Safety through technology

In these letters, the pandemic is conquered with the help of technology that has the primary function to provide safety. However, as many writers point out or imply, this comes with a price to humanity. Technology, while sometimes presented in neutral or detached, cold ways, is in many cases presented as a dehumanizing tool, to be used against people or in ways that strip from everyday life its human qualities.

Technology dehumanizes through oppression. For example: "There were no people around, except for four guards (police, army, I don't know, I had never seen such uniforms before!). They were armed like lobsters, with some automatic weapons and masks. Anti-asphyxiation masks, which do not leave anything uncovered and filter everything." (G, w, 40 yrs.).

Second, technology is seen as having replaced practices, rituals and interactions that were, once upon a time, essentially human. In replacing these interactions, technology takes on an overbearing and invasive quality. One participant writes: "All I see are screens and human holograms. It seems that people have learned to live their lives at home. Judging by the holograms, I see in front of me that some people are working, having fun, exercising, drinking coffee, etc. Everything is accomplished with the help of technology and from a distance." (G, w, 49 yrs.). A Greek writer depicts the future world as profoundly virtual. "I see virtual reality starting slowly and taking on flesh and blood, benefiting financially, and being safe. Travel, games, acquaintances, movies all accomplished virtually. Young people today live their lives through film, fall in love, have sex, build houses, buy cars all through their identification with the protagonists, and by daydreaming." (G, m, 52 yrs.).

The only technology story in the Finnish corpus tells about life on another planet where "I recognize all the plants, there are three kinds. (.) [The food] is sterile, refined, even, and looks the same. There is no touch. I know there are other people, perhaps, but meeting them is not needed." (F, w, 38 yrs.). While not overtly negative, alienation is an undercurrent in this letter. Reality is devoid of the qualities that are important to current humans, like taste, smell, and diversity.

In sum, the safety through technology story type explores the world in which the technological development is carried to the extreme. At least implicitly it tells that the pandemic has lifted the concern for safety as the main driver of technological change.

### 3.7. Cultural story models, master and counter narratives

Table 4 presents the story types found in our data in relation to different classifications of cultural story models, followed by a discussion of whether these models function as master or counter narrative.

After having developed these storylines from the analysis of the data, we examined them through Frye (1957) classical typology of western literature. Seen through that lens, the *back to normal through human action* story type can be seen to echo the cultural story model of romance (which could also be called a hero story): it presents human institutions heroically overcoming the pandemic and returning to the harmony that prevailed before it. The *back to normal through natural course* story type corresponds to Frye's idea that cyclic development is the fundamental process of which each myth represents a part (Frye, 1957, 158). The *persisting problems* story type, in its turn, represents the tragic story model, similar to the ancient myth of Icarus who flies too close to the sun and then burns his wings (Hamilton, 2017): the humans have built a world in which economic growth is pursued and attained but at the cost of persisting problems. The transformation *through profound value change* story type bears some resemblance with Frye's comedy in the sense that in both, cutting free of old social structures and achieving a new social harmony is at the core of the story. The *safety through technology* story type represents an irony or satire, which questions or attacks the achievements of the romance (hero story). In this narrative, the ultimate end point is seen as something that comes across to current readers as alien.

When departing from Arthur Frank (2013) classification of illness narratives, the most obvious connection is that between the *back to normal through human effort* story and Frank's restitution narrative. In both, the illness (in our study, pandemic, and in Frank's study, illness of an individual) is overcome with the help of medical science, and the "patient" returns to at least almost the same state in

which they were before the illness. The *back to normal through natural course* is like Frank's restitution story in that the illness does not leave a permanent trace. The *persisting problems story*, on the other hand, bears resemblance with Frank's chaos narrative. In Frank's chaos story, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the illness, whereas in our *persisting problems story*, humans live under a web of problems that is bigger than the pandemic. The *transformation through value change* in our data bears resemblance with the quest story discerned by Frank, which "tells self-consciously of being transformed" (Frank, 2013, 118). Finally, the *safety through technology* story finds no counterpart in Frank's typology, but it is easy to imagine a type of illness narrative where the meaning of technologically extended life is pondered.

The story types of our data also bear similarity to different narratives of historical change. The *back to normal through human action* story type, with its emphasis on medicine, government actions, health care systems and health habits, reflects enlightenment narrative (a strongly simplified version of the rich tradition of enlightenment philosophy) emphasizing the value of human reason and often aligned with the ideas of progress, continuous economic growth and improvement of human well-being (as recently advocated by, e.g., Pinker, 2019). The basic plot of this narrative is a progressive one: even when humans encounter problems, they are able to solve them and regain control by using their reason. In the narratives of *back to normal through natural course*, the underlying story seems to be that of cyclical time or eternal return. This kind of idea recurs in several pre-Christian mythologies, such as Indian mythology (Pattanaik, 2003), Old Testament (Ecclesiastes 1) as well as the Sisyphus and Demeter myths (Hamilton, 2017). The *persisting problems story* reflects the pessimistic historical narrative criticizing modernity (see Bennett, 2001), which depicts how humans have built a world in which economic growth is pursued and attained but at the cost of such unsurmountable problems as climate change, inequality and international tensions. The *transformation through value change* story type can be seen to be couched in the romanticist story model which is critical towards the prevailing conception of modernity (Kompridis, 2006). In depicting a new world, some letters clearly owe to Thomas More's Utopia (More, 2003), a classic sketch of a better society, and even, though more distantly, to young Karl Marx's thoughts (Marx, 2007). The *safety through technology* stories, in turn, can be seen as couched in a cultural story model exploring the possibilities and limits of being human. They are mostly dystopic when showing the trajectory on which technological development aiming at maximizing safety can lead. In that sense they are in line with the cautionary classic dystopias like those of Huxley (2020), and Bradbury (2013).

From the futures studies tradition, a possible point of comparison is that of Boschetti et al. (2016), who discerned seven myths of the future held by the general population (i.e. not professional futurists) in Australia. Of these myths, the techno-optimist myth is similar to our *back to normal through human efforts* narrative. While the myth of techno-optimism includes a wider variety of optimistic vistas for technological advancements, the basic idea that techno-scientific progress will help conquer human problems is similar in both. The *persisting problems story* depicts the entanglement of the eco-crisis and power and economic inequality myth. The *transformation through value change* narrative displayed in our data cover the transformation and traditional environmentalist myths, emphasizing the need to organize society around human needs instead of economic growth. Moreover, the *safety through technology* narrative is somewhat akin to the social crisis myth in subscribing to the idea "that traditional values, social order, and human competence are likely to decline in the future" (Boschetti et al., 2016). In their most distant and futuristic form, letters in this category align with the science fiction myth.

The last point in our interpretive process was to assess how the different story types found in our data are positioned as master or counter narrative. The *back to normal through human efforts* story type's wish to get back to the trajectory of the pre-corona life represents a response to a disruption similar to an ill person's wish to get well again (restitution). This story type is by writers not positioned as resisting, negotiating or otherwise countering another narrative. Rather, this type is presented as the taken-for-granted way of dealing with the pandemic, which is an important marker of a master narrative. The other four story types either implicitly or explicitly counter specific aspects of the back to normal narrative. The *back to normal through natural course* questions the idea that it is human efforts that lead to the receding of the pandemic, thus dethroning humans as the heroes of the battle. The *persisting problems story* counters the optimism inherent in the master narrative by reminding that while overcoming one problem others can persist and even increase. The *transformation through value change* story proposes that the pandemic is an opportunity to reach something more sustainable and human instead of just returning to the pre pandemic "normal". And finally, the *safety through technology* story warns against the unintended and undesirable consequences of technological development that may be the result of the uncritical pursuit of the narrow, short-term solutions presented by the back to normal narrative. Taken together then, these various countering movements across the types, suggest that the back to normal narrative functions as the background for the other story types, thus reinforcing the idea that this is indeed for many writers the implied master narrative. This is in line with Lyotard's (1984) original idea of progress and science as the pervasive master narrative of modernity.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

### 4.1. Summary and discussion of the findings

In answering our research question about the cultural story models used by lay people in Finland and Greece to make sense of desirable personal and societal changes in light of the corona pandemic, we identified five story types with underlying cultural story models.

While being about the future, the story types serve different functions for present course and action (Sools et al., 2015), each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Some letter writers find comfort in man's ingenuity (story type 1) or the idea that the pendulum always swings back (story type 2), which helps bring a sense of control over the present yet offers no incentive to take responsibility for distant future consequences of short-term action (which is according to Boschetti et al. one of the main critiques of the techno-optimism myth). A mirror of these first two story types can be found in the cautionary tales told about the serious problems that

persist if not increase as a result of the pandemic and the measures taken (story type 3) and about the loss of human values and the threat of losing our humanity due to over-reliance on high tech solutions (story type 5). These latter (negative ending) stories seem at first glance counterintuitive as a response to a task about desired futures. However, their hope lies in their cautionary function. Why warn of the unintended and undesirable outcomes of uncritically adopting the master narrative, if no hope for an alternative course of action would exist? These cautionary tales help us to acknowledge the reality of problems and the importance of historical consciousness to avoid naively embarking on alternative courses of action. Finally, story type 4 is most clear on what such an alternative course of action could and should look like. It is believed that a collective shift in consciousness is required to enable a radical transformation.

When looking at differences and commonalities between Finnish and Greek letters, we see a predominance of continuity stories. Presuming that writers were faithful to the task of imagining desirable futures, this means that writers do not *hope* or *wish* for big personal and societal changes. However, it could also reflect (over-)reliance on *probable* and *plausible* futures, as a discursive analysis of focus groups about letters from the future by unemployed Greek young people suggests (Sools et al., 2017). Further evidence that the instruction was not followed to the letter, comes from the observation of the relatively large proportion of letters depicting a negative ending among the Greek writers. This may reflect how acutely Greece has experienced other crises pre-dating the pandemic, which may have made them pessimistic and wary of anything that comes “from above.” More generally, the Greek letters reveal a resistance to prevailing institutional structures which compromise people’s abilities to live a good life, such as capitalism, corrupt or unjust ideologies, and neo-liberalism. The relatively large presence of transformation through value change story types among the Finnish letters could indicate that these Finnish people prefer to express their criticism towards contemporary consumer society through envisioning a more sustainable alternative. Comparison between countries must be taken with caution, however, as the sample size is small.

Our study shows some similarity between the five types of envisioned post-corona futures and the seven future archetypes identified in futures studies (e.g. Boschetti et al., 2016). These sets of future visions are not identical, however. First, two of our story types are mixtures of two myths identified by Boschetti & al. are This may partly stem from the small size of our sample, which doesn’t allow for identifying as fine-grained variety. Our story type “return to normal through natural course” is not present in the study by Boschetti & al. or in future studies in general. However, a similar story type (“If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”) has been mentioned by Dator (1978) as one of the future images he had encountered in his Anticipatory Democracy workshops. However, in Dator’s view this kind of story is not widely shared in modern societies.

One might ask whether we, in identifying the age-old roots of the current post corona narratives, neglect people’s creativity in forming their future visions. This is by no means our intention, nor is it what we do. As we hope we have shown, using the old, sedimented story models to make sense of a new situation is a creative act, because there are a variety of available story models to choose from and these merely serve as skeletons for the new stories. Moreover, the application of an old story type to a new (unknown) future context is a creative endeavor, in the same way as using familiar ingredients when creating a new dish can be. We acknowledge that it is also possible that in the stories there are innovations that have escaped our eyes because our focus was on the presence of the sedimented narrative tradition in these stories. Lastly, it is possible that in certain situations, like in the beginning of a devastating pandemic, people tend to resort to sedimented stories.

Finally, a methodological note on the mapping of our story types to cultural story types and among them to master and counter narratives is in order. As we stated in the introduction, narrative psychology asserts that in forming their narratives people draw on socio-cultural resources. This does not mean they do it consciously (although that may happen) or that they express the “source” of their own story. The idea of “drawing on” is thus not possible to prove as true. The farthest we can get is to point out the similarities to other stories. This point turned out to be even more difficult concerning the identification of master and counter narratives, as this type of analysis relies heavily on positioning by the writers. In the relative absence of such explicit positioning (due to the nature of letters as opposed to interview data), we introduced the strategy of comparison of story logic across the types, thereby adding etic analysis to an initial emic analysis of countering movements. As Hyvärinen et al. (2021, p. 103) note, “master narratives seem to be difficult to find as articulations, and they are therefore often inferred by the researcher and rely on their cultural competence”.

#### 4.2. Conclusions

The *Letters from the Future* approach asks letter writers to look beyond their current situation and to imagine a world which is not yet in existence today. Thus, it asks them to take the cultural story models that are currently in use to their limits. The resulting letters help further our understanding of how far the existing cultural story models can take us, and the extent to which they may have become outdated as a result of a disruption, like the corona pandemic.

Common tropes in media discourses like “we are all on the same boat” and “leave no one behind” call on a collective consciousness and shared understanding of a problem. These discourses are meant to encourage our compliance in service of “the greater good.” However, they can homogenize the human experience and mask critical inequalities and contextual factors that determine how we experience a disruption like a pandemic within our own life course. Moments like the ones that participants were living when writing their letters provoke a re-imagining of the human experience in this time and place. The analysis here, in revealing the diversity of storylines, remind us that not everyone endorses the master narrative of back to normal through human efforts. However, this does not mean that people outright reject the master narrative when trying on for size alternative courses of action and contemplate feared and valued endings. For a democratic society, it is imperative to create a critical-dialogical space for all voices, and not silence dissenting voices, so that we can learn from what they have to offer. A future controlled by one master narrative at the expense of counter voices may be the scariest one of all.

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## Declarations of interest

None.

## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.futures.2022.102989](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102989).

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