

Imagining Life Beyond a Crisis: A Four Quadrant Model to Conceptualize Possible Futures

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Séamus A Power  and **Merlin Schaeffer**

University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Jan P Heisig

WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany

Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

**Rebecca Udsen, Liisalotte Ordóñez-Bueso
and Thomas Morton**

University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

In this article we report evidence from a series of semi-structured interviews with a broad sample of people living in Denmark ($n = 21$), about their perspectives on the future during the first months of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The thematic and discursive analyses, based on an abductive ontology, illustrate imaginings of the future along two vectors: individual to collective and descriptive to moral. On a descriptive and individual level, people imagined getting through the pandemic on a myopic day-by-day basis; on a descriptive and collective level, people imagined changes to work and socializing. Their future was bound and curtailed by their immediate present. On a moral and individual level, respondents were less detailed in their reports, but some vowed to change their behaviors. On a moral and collective level, respondents reported what the world should be like and discussed changes to environmental behaviors such as traveling, commuting, and work. The model suggests the domain of individual moral imaginings is the most

Corresponding authors:

Séamus A Power, Department of Psychology, Øster Farimagsgade 2A, København K 1353, Denmark.

Email: seamus.power@psy.ku.dk

Jan P Heisig, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany. Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany.

Email: jan.heisig@wzb.eu

difficult domain for people to imagine beyond the practicalities of their everyday lives. The implications of this model for comprehending imaginations of the future are discussed.

Keywords

Covid-19, Denmark, imagining, future, morality, social change

Introduction

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic powerfully disrupted the everyday lives of billions of people across the world. This once in a lifetime event has raised many questions that researchers across the social sciences have responded to by documenting and describing individual and collective outcomes across societies. Such studies may quantify attitudes, opinions and (self-reported) behaviors with respect to regulatory policies, personal hygiene and health measures (e.g., vaccination), and model the personal, social, and cultural factors that shape these. Yet, when such large-scale disruptions to life occur, people – both individually and collectively – also engage in meaning-making processes to repair what has been ruptured, sooth ambiguities, tensions, and uncertainties; through this, they make the unfamiliar familiar again (Guenther, 2022; Moscovici, 2008; Zittoun, 2006). It is in the latter vein that the present research is situated.

Our aim was to explore qualitatively how people were understanding and experiencing the realities and consequences of the virus in their daily lives and how they made meaning during the first few months of the unfolding pandemic. To this end, here we present insights from a series of 21 semi-structured interviews with a sample of people living in Denmark. One focus of these interviews was how people imagined the future at a time when this future was particularly uncertain. Although other research has also explored people's experiences and meaning-making processes during Covid-19, to our knowledge none have focused on this question of individuals' imaginings of the future beyond the pandemic. Yet, it is important to comprehend the ways in which people imagine the future for several reasons. First, little is known about the content of people's imaginings beyond a global pandemic. Second, although imaginings are not concretely real, their consequences are. That is, how people conceptualize their future has direct consequences for how they live in the present. Third, how people imagine possible futures has impact on the types of possible worlds that can be created.

By understanding the reaches of people's imaginings, we can begin to theorize on the scopes and limits of future world-making (Power et al., 2023). Although our empirical work is located within a specific social and cultural context, we believe the insights we draw have implications beyond this unique context. To appreciate those wider implications, we first discuss prior theoretical work on the imagination of possible (moral) worlds.

Imagination

In recent years, the process of imagining has received notable attention within socio-cultural psychology (e.g., de Saint-Laurent et al., 2018; Wagoner et al., 2017; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018). One approach, the gap-filling model,

conceptualizes imagination as being anchored in the proximal ‘here and now’ where the form and content of our imaginations are restricted by biological and cultural constraints. From this perspective, based in a pragmatic ontology, imagining is viewed as a process that completes our fragmented experiences of the socio-cultural world (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011).

Another recent theorization of imagination is based on perspective-taking (Glăveanu, 2015; Glăveanu et al., 2018). The central idea is that every imagination is an imagination of an experience. From this constructivist ontological position, through a cycle of attempted perspective-taking and perspective-getting, imagination creates new possibilities. Within this view, imagination leads less to the ‘completion’ of experience (c.f., the ‘gap-filling model’), but instead transforms one’s own experience. Both these models are generative but leave open the question of how best to comprehend the dynamic psychological processes that lead to imagination completing, transforming, or expanding human experiences, and thus the future.

The looping model of imagination aims to comprehensively explain the sociocultural dynamics of imagining (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). The authors of this model argue that imagination involves “disengaging from the here and-now of a proximal experience, which is submitted to causality and temporal linearity, to explore, or engage with alternative, proximal and distal experiences, which are not submitted to linear or causal temporality. An imagination event thus begins with a decoupling of experience and usually concludes with a re-coupling. Thus, imagination is a loop” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, p. 40). This looping metaphor also typically alludes to the ways in which imagined futures reflect understandings of the past (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2018; Power, 2020; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; 2018) and guide thoughts and actions in the present (Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner et al., 2017; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). One recent advancement on the looping metaphor – the infinity theory – argues that people are always orientating themselves in the present by projecting both into imagined or constructed pasts and possible futures which is used to guide perceptions and actions in the present (Power, 2018; 2020). Thus, the de- and re-coupling of experience through imagination also reflects the de- and re-coupling of pasts, presents and futures.

The process of imagining can occur on individual, group, or societal levels. Imagining at all levels is shaped by a range of cultural and societal processes including how manifestations of imagination are recognized, and responded to, by others. Because imagining is related to others, either internally or externally, imagining is simultaneously private and public. Although the content of one’s imagination may not be real, the consequences of imagination are. This is because people decouple from the here and now, loop to imagined pasts, presents, or futures, and recouple in the actual present with new thoughts, feelings, or ideas that potentially impact the trajectory of the individual who is imagining (or the group or society to which they belong). Therefore, the process of imagining the future sits on the horizon of world-making. Imaginings of how the world is, what it could turn into, and how it ought to be, are central concerns for psychology because comprehending the scopes and limits of human imagination reveals the possibilities of world-making (Power et al., 2023).

But what is the form and content of people’s imaginations during a global pandemic, and what are the societal, cultural, and political consequences of the virus, for people’s

imaginings of the future? One meaningful way to conceptualize the social worlds people live in, or would like to live in, is along a moral dimension. Imagining moves us from *is* (i.e., a description of the current state of things) to what *could be* (i.e., a descriptive account of alternative possibilities to the current state of things) but also what *should be* (i.e., a moral account of how things ought to be). The move from *is* to *could be*, and from there to *should be*, requires an articulation of perspectives on morality. Accordingly, we now turn to different perspectives on morality, and how these might be revealed or implicated in the process of imagining.

Morality

Morality binds our causes together for imagining more fair, equitable, and just future worlds. It also blinds us to a plethora of infinite possible future worlds. Indeed, when people imagine what they might hope for (or fear) from the future, they often refer to moral progress (or decline, e.g., [Bain et al., 2013](#); [Bain et al., 2015](#)). Yet, beyond the general significance of morality for the future, from this research it is unclear which morals are of concern, and there is likely to be considerable divergence between people (perhaps also genders, [Gilligan, 1993](#); but see also [Ryan et al., 2004](#)) and across societies in the focus of moral imagining. Theoretical models of morality suggest some key points of divergence.

One perspective, “The Big Three of Morality” ([Shweder, 2003](#); [Shweder et al., 1997](#)), is located within cultural anthropology and was developed through comparative ethnographic research using thematic and discursive qualitative methods across the United States and India. This theory identifies a moral ethic of Autonomy – focusing on individual rights, justice, and the prevention of harm – as prevalent in Western liberal democracies. Outside Western liberal democracies, however, heavier emphasis is placed on both the ethics of Community and on the ethics of Divinity. Community focuses on themes of duty, hierarchy, and interdependence. Divinity focuses on a sacred order immanent in the world, and the structuring of individual thinking, feeling, and acting, around this sacred order (also see [Jensen, 2015](#)).

The Big Three of Morality has more recently been extended into “Moral Foundations Theory,” a perspective located more in social psychology and grounded in quantitative and experimental methods ([Haidt, 2012](#)). The crux of the theory is that individual’s reason intuitively (i.e., emotionally) about moral phenomena. Said simply, what people think of as moral is a “gut reaction” rather than something that is carefully thought through. This theory has mainly been applied to comprehend the culture wars within the United States ([Haidt, 2012](#)). For example, disagreements about what constitutes morally acceptable behavior tend not to stem from concrete arguments about the issues at stake. Instead, disagreements stem from the different frameworks through which they understand what it means to be moral in the first place, and how they instinctively *feel* when their moral priorities are violated. Moral emotions and moral reasoning underlie support for, and resistance to, different violations of moral expectations.

Beyond appraisals of what is considered good and bad in the present, perspectives like these are useful for conceptualizing the terms under which different individuals, and

which cultural groups, moralize about the way the world *is* and imagine how it *could* or *should be*.

The Current Research

In the current research – informed by the previous perspectives – we analyze discourse generated from interviewing a sample of people living in Denmark during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, along two intersecting vectors, creating quadrants. One dimension, derived from abductive analyses of our data, focuses on individual to collective imaginings. The second vector is descriptive to moral imaginings. The two vectors intersect, creating individual and collective descriptive imaginings and individual and collective moral imaginings. This model of imaginings of possible futures, elicited from the rupture caused by Covid-19 and the lockdown policies that accompanied it, both uniquely joins theorizing in moral psychology with theories of imagination, and through this combination, creates a framework for conceptualizing the scopes and limits of discursive articulation of possible future worlds. Before presenting the analysis, we detail our methodology.

Methods

Timing and Sampling

Data was obtained from interviews with citizens living in Denmark, during June and July 2020. These data are part of a larger project investigating responses to the pandemic over its initial months, including both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The interview data reported here have also been used in a parallel publication focusing on the meaning and importance of trust in understanding Covid-19 responses (Power et al., 2023). At the time interviews were conducted, vaccines against the virus were not yet available and Danish society had faced severe restrictions for several months, though a moderate re-opening of society had begun. As part of an interview schedule aimed at understanding people's experiences and meaning-making during Covid-19, interviewees were directly asked to imagine changes in their personal lives as well as broader societal consequences resulting from the largely unprecedented pandemic.

Interviewees ($n = 21$) were sampled from a corpus of respondents to a larger quantitative survey that used a weekly 'diary' method to document the everyday behaviors and experiences of respondents (see Kahneman, et al., 2004). This survey commenced during the lockdown on April 2, 2020, and continued until mid-July. In one iteration of the weekly diary survey, we asked respondents if they would be willing to be contacted by a member of the research team to partake in an interview, in English, on Skype or over the telephone. 642 people agreed. From this pool, we purposefully selected a sample of interviewees representing the whole range of the different levels of trust expressed by respondents in our sample and eventually conducted 21 in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interviews lasted about 20–60 minutes and were conducted by the first author. All interviews took place online. They were audio recorded and these

recordings were deleted after transcription, and anonymization of identities, and identifying information. Pseudonyms are used throughout. All participants gave informed consent. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen.

Overall, we interviewed a broad sample of people living in Denmark. Thirteen were Danish and six migrated as adults for higher education or work to Denmark having been born in Cyprus, Romania, Spain, Hungary, Northern Ireland, and Slovenia, and two from Italy. Eleven were women, 10 were men. Interviewees were of a broad adult age, ranging from late teens to late seventies. Some were young people who were completing university education, others had professional careers, and others were at retirement age. Several were unemployed, others were in secure professional jobs, and there were reported disparities in income and wealth. Some interviewees were single, others were in romantic relationships or married, others were divorced, and others bereaved. Despite the physical distance of interviewing people online, the first author felt connected to the interviewees who openly shared their honest experiences in relation to the questions.

The interview schedule took a narrative approach and followed a temporal format. That is, interviewees were asked questions about the past, present, and future. Questions about the past were used primarily to initiate the interview and participants recalled their experiences during the first days of Covid-19 and the sudden Danish lockdown in March 2020. Questions were then asked about the present, such as their opinions on current re-opening policies, trust in other stakeholders in Danish society, and how the pandemic was being dealt with in neighboring Sweden (a topical point of comparison at that time because Sweden, in contrast to many other nations in the Global North, were slow to introduce any pandemic restrictions). The final set of questions in the interview schedule were concerned with imagining the end of the pandemic and individual and social life beyond the end. No specific question was asked about morality (i.e., what an individual's life, or societal direction, *should* look like). Instead, interviewees were prompted to imagine how the pandemic would end and how life (for oneself and one's close relationships as well as for society) would be after Covid-19. For example, participants were asked "how do you imagine life after the pandemic?" and "what, if any, consequences do you imagine the pandemic will have in the future?" It is the data generated from these last semi-structured questions, informed by the narrative flow of the interviews, and understood within the broader cultural and situational context in which the interview was conducted, that are of particular interest in the forthcoming analysis.

Form of Analysis

Grounded in a pragmatist ontology (Peirce, 1955), we used a dynamic abductive approach to interpreting our data. That is, we combined inductive (bottom up) reading of transcribed interview material, with deductive (from theory) coding of passages concerned explicitly or implicitly with imagining beyond the pandemic. Abduction, an ontological pragmatic interpretative strategy, seeks explanation of psychological and social phenomena by taking a creative leap and generating theories – at the nexus of deduction and induction – to comprehend data and form new knowledge. As such, abduction entails

theorizing beyond observed data and prior expectations to form new theoretical frameworks to comprehend psychological and societal phenomena (Gillespie, *in press*). Specifically, the abductive approach allowed us to innovate a novel four quadrant model, by synthesizing and combining literature on socio-cultural psychology of imagination and the cultural psychology of morality. This allowed us to create a semi-flexible framework to theoretically comprehend the discourses and meanings of our transcribed interview data. We use two qualitative methods in conjunction to help understand the substance and forms of our transcribed interview data. Thematic analysis was used to broadly code the data and to identify interpretations of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discourse analysis was used to examine more finely the ways in which respondents discursively constructed their imaginings (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The model allows us to thematically sort the content of the interview data (whether emphasis is placed on individual or collective discourse or on descriptive or moral discourse). Discourse analysis allows us to analyze how participants talk about, position, and represent aspects of their imagined everyday lives beyond the nascent global pandemic. Triangulating the content and meaning of our interviewees discourse via multiple methods offers a more holistic approach towards understanding how participants imagined, and ultimately, attempt to manifest possible future selves.

Analysis

The analysis reports imaginings of the future on two planes individual and collective; descriptive and moral. On a descriptive and individual level, people imagined getting through the pandemic on a myopic day-by day basis; on a descriptive and collective level, people imagined changes to work and socializing. Their imagined future is directly shaped by their immediate present. On a moral and individual level, respondents were less detailed in their reports, but some vowed to change their behaviors. On a moral and collective level, respondents reported what their world should be like and discussed changes to environmental behaviors such as traveling, commuting, and work. Not all the discourse could be neatly sorted into one of four quadrants. Respondents slipped between descriptive, moral, individual, and collective, discourses. Yet overall meaningful thematic and discursive patterns could be analytically and theoretically interpreted. We chose illustrative extracts to exemplify each of the quadrants. The data suggests the domain of collective moral imaginings is the most expansive domain for people to imagine beyond the bounded practicalities of their everyday lives to generate social change. Yet, making these moral imaginings manifest – through individual behaviors based on their individual moral imaginings – was less obvious.

It can be difficult to imagine the future. This was particularly evident for some participants when they were asked to imagine what life would be like beyond the pandemic. Even the framing of the question itself located people's imaginings of the future in relation to the pandemic (discussing experiences during the pandemic also framed their responses). In this way, what can be imagined is bound to the past, and limited by immediate context, and the dialogical construction of knowledge, between interviewer and interviewee. For example, Søren was asked how he imagines the

pandemic will unfold in Denmark. He took time to think, and before formulating his answer, he said “Well...predicting the future is a hard job.” Although this is a seemingly mundane statement, it is revealing of the difficulty respondents have in imagining the future from an uncertain present. The same linguistic feature of delaying – with a view to decoupling from the here and now to project into the future and back again to give an answer in an interview setting - is omnipresent throughout the corpus of interview data.

Part 1: Individual Descriptive Discourse

Mette, who was an engaging conversationalist during the interview, delays when she was asked to imagine the future beyond the pandemic. She stated “That’s a good question. A very good question.” Here Mette repeats her compliment to create time and space to think about an answer to this question. By delaying in this way, she takes time to orientate her answer, which is also revealing of the limited reach of imagining. Mette proceeded to say the following:

“In a way I can just cope with the closest future (laughs). Also, because it’s impossible to know how it will be, but also, because it’s difficult to capture more in (...) one’s own mind. So (...) I think I have the perspective of (...) the next, or the two next months, the summer months. Then I can’t (...) tell or can’t foretell or (...) imagine how it will be. But, of course, I could believe that there will be a second wave of it in the (...) autumn time, but... Yeah, but right now I feel quite optimistic about everything. [...] I will just do (...) my own forholdsregler [precautions], my own rules still hoping to go to our home [to her childhood house, owned by her mother, in Norway].”

This form of response is representative of the first of four quadrants in the model which, following an abductive ontology, both emerged from, and informed, the structure of the overall analysis. The discourse is focused on the descriptive domain, as well as being largely focused on oneself. Reflecting her initial responses used to delay, she jokingly asserted “In a way I can just cope with the closest future.” Here the orientation is firmly placed on the individual “*I can just cope with.*” In this short extract, she repeated the word “I” seven times. She also used other individualizing words such as “*one’s own mind*” and “*my own rules.*” These further served to locate her imagining of the future within the ethics of autonomy, where the focus is less on community or divinity, and more on individual autonomy; a moral framework concerned with individual well-being.

The content of this extract reveals important processes used in imagining. Congruent with the earlier focus on the difficulty in articulating what is yet to become, the frequent pauses – far less evident within the flow of the entire interview until she was asked to speculate on the future beyond the pandemic – suggest further micro-delays used in the de-coupling and re-coupling processes of leaving the here and now to project into the future and articulate this projection. Delaying, and focusing on what is more certain (oneself over others), reveals the boundaries at the horizon of imagining.

Finally, the content of her imagining is local and expressly tied to the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, she stated ‘I can’t foretell or imagine how it will be’. Yet, when

she does create a framework to try and imagine, it is again tied to an overarching ethic of autonomy, with its focus on individual rights, and the prevention of harm, to guide her pathway through an uncertain future. This localized framework, orientated around description of an immediate future, stemmed from her personal feelings. She is ‘optimistic’ when she imagines the future, even if there will likely be a second wave of the pandemic. She followed her own *forholdsregler* [precautions] and her own rules and hopes to go home to her mother’s house in Norway. In this way, her own imagining of a future (that there might be a second wave of Covid-19 infections) allows her to loop back to the present and describe how she herself will act to ensure an ‘optimistic’ future. She intends to achieve this desired proximal future by following precautions and her own rules. In the context of the larger interview, it is clear these rules are informed by international and national government advice concerning physical distancing and handwashing.

Part 2: Collective Descriptive Discourse

People’s projections of the future were not only descriptions of their self. Other interviews drew on an ethics of community when imagining the future. As such, their orientations tended to focus on describing an imagined future on a group level. As such, this is the second of four quadrants in our model for imagining the future on descriptive and moral, and individual and collective domains.

When people imagine the future, within the context of talking about Covid-19, its societal impact, and its intersubjective consequences, those who spoke in descriptive terms in relation to groups discussed a variety of domains of consequence under the ethics of community. Julie, a Dane in her 30s, for example, throughout the interview spoke less about the human cost of Covid-19 and more about its financial consequences for people (in terms of unemployment) as well as - provocatively, from her point of view – an eventual downturn in the stock market. She stated:

“But the thing that most concerns me is economy because I don’t think we’ve seen the real consequences yet. I mean stock market is just increasing and I mean, at some point it’s going to blow up, right (laughs)? So, I’m more concerned how it affects our society in general, not me personally. If that many people lose jobs, then that affects everyone. So that’s my main concern.”

In this short extract, Julie was imagining the consequences of the Danish, and international, government response to the spread of Covid-19 in terms of locking down society and the impact this would have on the economy. She imagined the ‘real consequences’ of the pandemic are yet to come. These projected consequences were discussed within the financial realm and are clearly bounded to histories of turbulence in financial markets at times of crises. Julie ominously predicted the stock market will ‘blow up’ soon and this will have impact at the community level. She framed this imagining as a question, (‘right’?) coupled with laughter after the dramatic prediction of a stock market explosion, to concertize her imagining, making her extreme view more palatable and thus more believable for her audience (the interviewer, or, later, the reader).

Beyond this discursive positioning of her imagining of the future, in this extract, she does not loop back to discuss the implications of this descriptive imagining on herself. Rather, reflecting from this imagining of future financial downturn, Julie drew on an ethics of community, as she describes how she is ‘concerned [about] how it affects our society in general, not me personally.’ The phrase ‘our society’ clearly evokes an ethic of community both by thinking beyond the individual, and also by purposefully stating the implication of her future imagining is not concerned about ‘me personally.’

Having constructed her position, the content of her imagining was to state that if the financial market blew up, and many people lose their jobs, this ‘affects everyone.’ Implicit in the concept of ‘everyone’ is that she, too, is included. When one thinks of an ethics of community, at least in this case, an ethics of individual autonomy can be interpreted as being included. Yet, given this interpretation, it is also clear from her repetition of the word “concern” that she explicitly wants to focus the consequence of her imagining on concern for those people who might be affected negatively by an economic collapse resulting from the Danish government decisions to lockdown society and financially support businesses who were unable to trade.

A second extract further illustrated the phenomenon of imagining within a descriptive realm with a focus on group or collective level, rather than on oneself. In contrast to the previous extract from Julie, who focused on the imagined financial consequences of government restrictions on business and society to curb the deadly spread of Covid-19, Peter spoke more broadly about the imagined consequences of this societal rupture on a community level. He told us:

P: I think we will have some new things in our daily life to take care of. I think there will come many workplaces, where you can work from home. It is not necessary to be effective in a factory if you’re only an office worker. I also think that it will happen that all the travelling, all business travelling, that there will be more or less of that, because they found out that they can hold the meetings over Skype or something else. So, and also, I think that there will be benefits for all the environment that we will change our behavior, travelling. I also think that at holiday we will find new destinations and we will maybe be looking more into how the healthcare in a country is, instead of how good the hotels are.

Interviewer: Interesting

P: So, the idea of protecting yourself is more than has done in the past. I also was just travelling, and who cares. Now we had Corona to show us that only a small virus can knock out the whole world and millions of people are going to die and something like that. The sudden denial to say: okay, if there’s only this small thing that can manage or destroy so much, then that will come again, if it is not Covid-19, it will be Covid-20 or Covid-21. So, I think we will have to live with this situation. If we get, what do you call it, medicine for Covid-19.

Interviewer: Vaccine.

P: Yes, vaccine. Then it will probably, in some years there will come a new one and have the same effect on us and we have again no vaccine. So, I think we will be thinking about it and about correcting our daily living.

In this longer extract, punctuated by input from the interviewer to help clarify linguistic impasses as a native Danish speaker was interviewed in English, Peter discussed three domains of imagining when he is asked to imagine the consequences of Covid-19: work, travelling and environment, and vaccines and limited immunity to future viruses or strains of coronavirus.

Peter fluidly imagined and described societal consequences of the pandemic. He decoupled from the here and now, articulated three societal domains that are themselves informed by societal discussions at that time, and re-coupled in the present to narrate his concerns to the interviewer. The language and examples he gave are concrete. This helped to effectively communicate the content of his imaginings. To help familiarize the inherently unfamiliar form of possible futures, he discussed “daily life.” First, the government-enforced lockdown of many institutions and workplaces led to working from home. According to Peter, the forced practicalities of this policy will lead to a future where there is a realization that there will be less need for ‘business travel.’ Instead, meetings can be held ‘over Skype or something else’ [the interview was conducted before Zoom meetings became very popular in the Danish, and international, context]. This imagining is congruent with many vibrant discussions at the time about changing the ‘9–5’ office work culture both in Denmark and many other industrialized societies.

Interestingly, flowing from Peter’s point regarding reduced business travel, he almost seamlessly transitioned into talk about the environment. He said “*So, and also, I think that there will be benefits for all the environment that we will change our behavior, travelling.*” The move between ‘so, and also’ is reflective of a transition in his imagining of possible proximal futures following from the Covid-19 pandemic, with ‘so’ indicating a direct consequence of his previous point about changing workplace norms. The ‘and also’ utterance then diverged from the consequential flow from one point to the next, but rather showed how speaking about one domain of imagining directly adds to the next. The content of this imagining “that there will be benefits for all the environment” is a descriptive sentiment located within an ethics of community.

Unlike Mette earlier, who positioned her discourse within a descriptive and individual domain, Peter described imaginings on a collective or group level. References to “*all the environment,*” “*we will change,*” and “*our behavior*” suggest a personal imagining concerned at a collective level. Maintaining an emphasis of making unfamiliar possible consequences familiar through concrete use of examples, he simply added ‘traveling’ to the end of the sentence. This suggests one possible consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic is reduced travelling which has a collective benefit on the environment. Moreover, as a direct consequence of travelers getting infected with Covid-19 in different international contexts, he imagined that in the future people will care more about “healthcare in a country, instead of how good the hotels are.”

Finally, Peter imagined the creation of a vaccine against Covid-19, and its limited utility against possible future iterations of a mutated virus, or a novel form of the virus, that he referred to as “Covid-20” or “Covid-21.” Again, his imagining was in the descriptive and collective domain. Both possible viruses, he imagined, will be destructive to humanity in the same way Covid-19 has killed millions of people. Peter was drawing on contemporary discourse during a time frame when people did not know whether an

effective vaccine could be created to effectively immunize people against Covid-19 and related discourse about a potential vaccine efficacy against new, or mutated, strains of the virus. He ended his response to the question concerning his imaginings of the consequences beyond the pandemic by again concretizing the impact it has on the creation of possible futures by opining that “*I think we will be thinking about it and about correcting our daily living.*”

In the first two parts of the analysis, we suggested that discourse about imagining life beyond the pandemic could be conceptualized in a vector from individual and collective. Describing individual imaginings was difficult for participants, as illustrated from the analysis of Mette’s extract. In contrast, participants such as Julie and Peter were able to describe imaginings beyond the pandemic on a community and societal level. As such, there was a shift in ease when we frame their descriptive discourse from an ethics of autonomy with its focus on the individual to an ethics of community with its focus on groups and society more broadly.

In the forthcoming two sections we shift focus from individual and collective descriptive talk in the moral realm. Part three will focus on individual moral discourse. Part four will focus on collective moral discourse.

Part 3: Individual Moral Discourse

When it comes to imagining the future, not only was it difficult for interviewees to articulate possibilities beyond the pandemic (see part 1), but it was also particularly difficult to discuss individual moral imaginings of possible futures. Although there were some instances where interviewees discussed their imaginings, as a domain of discussion, the scant utterances in this domain prove illustrating. Drawing on the ‘big three of morality’ as a framework for thinking through overarching domains of moral discourse, reveals a limitation of moral discourse around the topic of imagining beyond the pandemic.

When Melissa, a woman from Northern Ireland, living in Denmark with her husband for several years, was asked how she imagines life after the pandemic, she started by recalling debates about this topic she had with her partner before briefly discussing the individual moral lessons that she will engage with from this imagining. She stated:

“I mean my husband and I have this argument quite a lot and I’m like: “Oh, I think things will change quite a lot,” and he’s like: “Aah I think it’ll just go back to normal,” but I would be like: “Sure...” and then, you know, or, [...] vaccine, and [...] the optimist in me wants to say that, like, we might look a bit more locally, you know, too... And, kind of, it was one thing we noticed, like we... in lockdown, you know, all like [...] sort of our streets around us became... we started to notice them more what was there and it was quite nice in a way to kind of look very locally and also realize that, okay, you don’t need to have a summer holiday all the time and think about the amount that you travel. And obviously in terms of how that has impacted on the environment, like [...]. But I don’t know I’m in two minds as to whether this will happen or whether things will be normal as usual, you know.”

The expression “in two minds” is revealing, as Melissa was discussing her imagining of the future – in internal dialogue during the interview with her non-present husband – beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. The debate centers around whether “things will change.” Melissa stated that her husband will return to the status quo. In contrast, Melissa, “the optimist,” imagined changes that might occur due to the consequences of the pandemic. Her projections of future consequences existed within the framework of thinking through the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, her de-coupling and immersion into the future, before re-coupling in the present, revealed two related ideas. First, Melissa imagined one possibility where people realize the positivity of local community and that “you don’t need to have a summer holiday all the time.” Second, she suggested the “obvious” consequence of this imagining is that one thinks “how that has impacted the environment.” It is in relation to this question that she shifted from descriptive to moral talk, based on internal dialogues of possibilities, to moral discourse focused on herself. This leap from thinking through descriptive and societal discourse, as evidenced in the previous section, was rare in the interview data. This limitation, however, is revealing of a shift from descriptive to moral domains particularly when focusing on oneself and one’s own moral responsibilities. Melissa followed her extract above by then saying:

I think the travel thing is definitely... you know, obviously aside from the like, coming-going home, I think this perhaps just thinking about how many trips do I really need to take each year and just think of how often I was going to the airports. You can survive without that.... Yeah, so for me it’s more about looking a little bit more locally and trying to appreciate that. It’s a big take-away from that.

In the opening and closing sentences of this extract, Melissa articulated her moral position when discussing the impact of the lockdown and lack of travel on her relationship with her local community. Her views are located within an individual based, harm reduction, framework of an ethics of autonomy. The use of “*I*” and “*me*” in these sentences focuses discourse on oneself and the content of her discourse is moral. She projected into the future, because of thinking about the lockdown, and its consequences, and suggested traveling is, and will be, deprioritized for her, given the realization that it is not always necessary for living a meaningful life. Instead, knowing the value of her local community, and realizing the negative impact leisure travel has on the environment, she made the moral choice – steeped here in an individual ethics of individual autonomy as well as relating to the environment and as such, a global ethics of community – to reduce leisure travel for the greater good of individually helping to save the environment. Melissa will look ‘more locally’ and ‘try to appreciate that’ as an individual reorientation to her position within a broader global moral issue.

Despite some evidence of implicit and explicit moral discourse concerning individuals stemming from imagining beyond the pandemic throughout the interview corpus, it was much more common across interviews for moral discourse to exist on a community, group, or society level, rather than an individual level. This is the focus of part four the analysis.

Part 4: Collective Moral Discourse

In contrast to infrequent individual-based moral discourse as outlined in part three, there were frequent discussions of collective moral lessons emerging from imagining beyond the pandemic. These orientated around three themes: work, health, and environment.

Regarding work, the discourse is morally loaded, operating within an ethic of community, and focused on a group, community, and societal level. This discourse is saturated with prescriptions for future action resulting from a decoupling from the present, projection into the future, and return to the present. In this way, imagining is a process of world-making. For example, when Josef, a Dane, was asked to imagine the impact of the pandemic, he first denied it will affect him, but then quickly stated his moral position about healthcare workers:

“No, not in my life. Not for my life. I don’t think it will have an impact, a lasting impact in my life. Maybe in the society will be even more aware of our, what do you call it - sundhedsvæsenet [health care]- [...] how it’s working, you know. So, hopefully we will be a bit more cautious next time we’re talking about taking money from (...) the hospital staff and be like: “Oh, remember, we have to have money for the next pandemic.” So, hopefully a positive (laughs) effects, lasting effects, yeah.”

Although Josef downplayed any lasting impact the pandemic will have on this own life, he shifted focus to appreciation of healthcare. Implicit in this statement was the view that healthcare workers have endured the potential for pay reductions. Given the importance of hospital staff during the Covid-19 pandemic, he suggested that “we” (referring to the public) “will be a bit more cautious next time we’re talking about taking money from the hospital staff.” This is a clear moral statement steeped in an ethics of community. It is also informed by his imagining of the future. He implied we will have another pandemic “the next pandemic” and in this projected scenario, we should have learned from our recent past, that it is a moral principle to financially support these key workers.

Relatedly, moral discourse, positioned with the ethics of community, and produced through imagining the future, tended to orientate around health care with a particular focus on protecting the vulnerable in society. Christina, a young Italian woman living in Denmark, when asked about life after the pandemic, stated:

“I think that we have to be more conscious about our behaviors. We have to still do a lot of attention of hand sanitizing or distance, or also being a little bit more afraid of meeting elderly. For me that I have more young people around me than elderly, it is going to be a bit easier, but for people that have to stay in contact with people that are in older age and also more than old age, they have still to apply a lot of things, like distance and care and action like this, until we maybe can get the vaccine. I hope they can develop the vaccine, because I miss in some ways my old life, like the normal life. But now I’m getting acquainted with the new measures, and I think that until the vaccine is going to be our new normality.... We need to be strong in some ways, to keep doing, to keep being cautious. And if they are saying that we

need to do the lockdown again, let's follow the rules as well, not just say: "Okay but I know that it's something that's going to be passed after some months, no, just keep on with this."

Her response is clearly located within the ethics of community as it was directly concerned with protecting other people by using "hand sanitizer" and maintaining physical "distancing." Interestingly, she used the word "we" at the beginning of her sentence to encompass the collective when making her moral statement. Her ethical focus is based on concern for protecting the elderly. Although she said that for her, personally, her main network does not contain many older people, she still expressed concern for older people and focuses attention of the government-endorsed protective measures that people living in Denmark can do to protect the vulnerable. This moral imperative is to be continued, according to Christina, until "we maybe can get a vaccine."

Imaginations of possible futures are always filled with hopes and anxieties. Christina hoped that in the future there will be a vaccine, with its promised immunity, and imagined return to "normal life." This is a specific and practical imagination with a dual function. First, she uses it "to be strong, to keep going." And second, looping back to the present from this imagining of increased immunity from vaccination, allowed her to familiarize the unfamiliar, to become "acquainted with the new normal." Consequently, this allows her to advocate a firm moral position that she voiced to imagined others within her extended community "let's follow the rules...just keep on with this." This proscriptive moral statement was motivated by a communal ethic of protecting the vulnerable.

Extending from societal based moral discourse located within the ethic of community, and focused on collective, rather than individual responsibility, the third specific content area as well as work, and health, was environment. Anders noted:

"I think you ought to reflect on how different you actually make the society if you decide to do so. And I think that the idea that the political system cannot steer the economy more intensely, is... we have falsified that hypothesis, because we saw that it is indeed possible. Of course, it will have huge consequences for, for example, the airline industries. But I mean if you're willing to make an effort, then you can solve the climate crisis quite easily, I think. Of course, we need to change a lot of things, and I know that I speak from a more privileged position, because my job could continue and there are a lot of people who are able to do so. But I think that that's a very interesting thing to think more seriously about. And I think that, I mean, Coronavirus is deadly but it's not like it's going to kill the whole population of the world, but the climate crisis could potentially kill all of humanity. So, I think that we need even more strong measures for the climate crisis, and I think that this should be the impetus to the politicians to show that we could actually change quite a lot if we decided to do so."

Anders' opening phrase is loaded morally. The word "*ought*" is a key gateway word to move from everyday description to moral proscription. Anders imagined the rupture caused by the pandemic creates space to rethink society if there is a decision to do so. To support this point, he refers to the involvement of the Danish government in the economy. He was referring to the government enforced lockdown of businesses, financial support of

business and individuals unable to work, and sensible financial and social protections concerning workers and the unemployed.

Anders imagined the same logic can be applied to mitigate the disastrous consequences of anthropogenic climate change “if you’re willing to make the effort.” By drawing on political involvement in the local Danish economic system, he imagined a near-future scenario where similar government-led interventions can solve “the climate crisis quite easily.” In contrast to the examples in part one and part three of the analysis, where it was difficult for participants to formulate (descriptive or moral) individualistic accounts, it is easier to articulate grander imaginings of solving a problem like climate change that “could potentially kill all of humanity,” without giving specific details of how this might be achieved or how he, as an individual, might contribute towards this effort. Yet, he reaffirmed his moral position, acknowledging the self-identified privileged position from which it comes, that the pandemic “should be the impetus” to help combat climate change. Similar to the use of the word ‘ought’ at the beginning of the extract, the word ‘should’ also shifts his statement from the descriptive to the moral realm of discourse. In contrast to part three, the focus of this moral discourse is on communal ethics and the moral imagining is discussed at the level of humanity.

Conclusion

The societal, cultural, and economic rupture caused by the novel Covid-19 virus opened space for people to imagine possible futures. This imagining occurred from a liminal position: the lockdown of Danish society was an extraordinary policy, and yet it involved deep familiarity. Against this conflicting and unfamiliar yet familiar backdrop, participants were prompted to imagine life beyond the pandemic. The four-quadrant model presented in this study with individual and collective on one vector, and descriptive and moral on the next vector, offers a novel way to categorize this future-oriented discourse along four inter-related quadrants.

One theoretical novelty of the model is to introduce the moral domain into research, and theorizing, regarding the psychology of imagination, which has been largely focused on descriptive forms of imagination (e.g., [Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015](#)). When people decouple from the here and now, project into the future, and loop back to the present and articulate possible futures, the communicated content of their imaginings can be both descriptive and proscriptive. The application of “The Big Three of Morality” to this developmental looping process offers one empirically based cultural psychological theory to think through various ethical domains (autonomy, community, divinity) that work as schemas sculpting the scopes and limits of descriptive and moral imagining and the consequences these imaginings have for thought, talk, and action in the present. Future research might examine imagining across cultural contexts and how different ethical frameworks offer, and curb, the articulation of possible individual and collective futures. For example, recent research with children in New York examined their utopian representation of ideal future societies from the point of view of an ethics of autonomy ([Jost, et al., 2022](#)). The content of these representations focused on economic prosperity and cultural sensitivity. Yet future research with participants who are less secular, and more

religious, might draw on an ethics of divinity, to a greater degree than was evident in our respondents' discourse, to guide imaginations of possible futures through culturally and religiously relative moral narratives, symbols, and frameworks.

We argue that categorizing the form and meaning of our interviewees' imaginings beyond the pandemic is theoretically generative. Specifically, we argue that the importance of the positioning of this discourse and its demarcation into quadrants, offers a framework to think through the possibilities and limitations of human imagining. This is because imagining is a central psychological process – at once individual and cultural – that lies at the basis of world-making. That is, engaging with people's expressions about the future, whether on individual or collective levels, about what the world could or should be like, offers a scaffold to comprehend expansions of human thought and potential action concerning the subjective worlds which are to be formed (or maintained) first by imagining (or not imagining differently), and then acting (or failing to act) on these imaginations. Our modest framework – at the nexus of morality and imagination – holds promise for both comprehending how societies can, and should, change and how the status quo is maintained.

The empirical evidence presented here suggests a disconnect between the ability to imagine possible futures on an individual and collective level. People can readily articulate possible futures on a broad, communal, and global level. Yet, the evidence presented here suggests it is more difficult to descriptively imagine one's personal future but also to normatively imagine how oneself might contribute towards realizing a better possible future, if there is a desire to do so. Practically, with regard to addressing pressing social issues – as discussed by the participants (health systems; work environments; climate change) – it is important to realize the gaps between collective and individualistic solutions, and between descriptive and moral frameworks. These gaps entail limitations for taking actions to realize (moral) imaginings and to engage with 'good' or 'bad' world-making. It is unclear whether the gap between collective moral imaginings and individual actions to realize more ethical future societies is particular to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic or is a more general phenomenon.

The global pandemic caused by the spread of the Covid-19 virus involved unequal vaccination rates, different lockdown protocols, the emergence of new variants, and changing perspectives on safety and risk within and between citizens in different countries. Despite these changing circumstances, and the likelihood of changing meaning-making of the pandemic, future research would benefit from interviewing people about their imaginings of the future at different points during future (global) crises. Indeed, one implication of the looping metaphor used to analyze these data implies that being asked to articulate their projections of the future informs participants' actions (or inactions) towards making manifest their particular version of the future. Longitudinal interviews could delve deeper into this implication by revealing stable or changing patterns of imagining and resulting behaviors across time. Naturally occurring textual data – in the form of blogs, diaries, social media posts – could overcome the limitation of co-constructing data in the form of interviews that direct participants to think explicitly about the future by examining the ways people are imagining the future at different points

in the pandemic without the intrusion of the interviewer (see Power & Velez, 2022; Webb et al., 1999).

Imagining, describing, and moralizing are three ways humans construct possible worlds and the actual world in which we live. Understanding the reaches and contours of human imagination offers the potential to overcome present challenges and create fairer, more just and sustainable, future societies.

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ORCID iD

Séamus A Power  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6770-4756>

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Author Biographies

Séamus A Power is an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen

Merlin Schaeffer is a Professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Copenhagen

Jan P Heisig is a Professor of Sociology at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and at the Freie Universität Berlin

Rebecca Udsen, M.A., is a researcher at the Department of Sociology at the University of Copenhagen

Liisalotte Ordóñez-Bueso, M.A., is a researcher at the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen

Thomas Morton is a Professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen.