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Applying the approach of narrative agency: A dialogue between theory, reading group practices, and analysis of participants' experiences

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss a dialogue between narrative theory, reading group practices, and analysis of reading group participants' experiences. Hanna Meretoja's theory of narrative agency has informed us in developing a new reading group model that aims to enhance the participants' narrative agency, and, in turn, the analysis of the reading group experiences provides us with new knowledge on the reading group model, as well as on the theoretical approach. We explore narrative agency analysis as a tool to analyze interviews, and our analysis of three participants' experiences illustrates how narrative agency can manifest itself in various forms. It also demonstrates that the enhanced ability to navigate narrative environments can be highly meaningful on a personal level. The article suggests that, despite its challenges, this kind of research approach, combining theory and practice, enriches and expands the possibilities of literary studies.

Keywords: narrative agency, narrative hermeneutics, reading groups, metanarrative reading group model, narrative agency reading group model, narrative awareness, narrative imagination, narrative dialogicality, applied narrative theory, empirical literary studies

Introduction

We live our lives entangled in narrative environments. These environments consist of cultural narrative models of sense-making that surround us and shape our space of experience and possibilities. The complexity of contemporary narrative environments calls for new ways of applying narrative theory to practice so that it might help us navigate these environments. In our research, we have explored the potential of applying narrative theory to developing and studying reading group practices.¹ Drawing on Hanna Meretoja's (2018a, 2022, 2023a) research, we have designed a reading group model that aims to enhance the participants' narrative agency.

Our starting point has been the theoretical–methodological approach of narrative hermeneutics, which Meretoja (2014, 2018a, 2023b) has developed in collaboration with other narrative scholars (see Brockmeier & Meretoja, 2014, Brockmeier, 2015, 2016, Meretoja & Freeman, 2023).² In narrative hermeneutics, narrative is defined as an interpretative activity of cultural sense-making in which experiences are presented to someone from a certain perspective (or perspectives) as part of a meaningful, connected account; it has a dialogical and a performative dimension and is relevant for our understanding of different possibilities of being in the world (Meretoja, 2018a, p. 48). This hermeneutical approach emphasizes the existential significance of narratives—that is, their relevance for how we understand our possibilities in the world. It suggests that our agency is narratively mediated: we practice our agency by following or challenging culturally available narratives that function as models of sense-making. Such narrative models are implicit narratives in the sense that they may not be anywhere available in concrete textual form but are recognizable as patterns that underlie explicit textual narratives

¹ Our research has been funded by the Academy of Finland / Research Council of Finland (project: “Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory,” grant no. 314769; we finalized the article during the project “Counter-Narratives of Cancer: Shaping Narrative Agency,” grant no. 354789) and the Emil Aaltonen Foundation.

² Narrative hermeneutics draws on and further develops the Ricoeurian line of narrative studies (see Ricoeur, 1983–1985). See also Freeman (2015) and Korthals Altes & Meretoja (2018).

and can be abstracted from them.³ They exert their normative power on us largely without our awareness.

Meretoja (2023a, p. 296) defines narrative agency as “our ability to navigate our narrative environments: to use, (re)interpret, and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narrate our lives, relationships, and the world around us.”⁴ As narrative agency is shaped in dialogical relations with narratives that we read, tell, and share, reading groups are a productive setting for both enhancing and studying narrative agency in practice. The theoretical approach of narrative agency lends itself productively to practical applications that focus on the relevance of narratives to individuals who are making sense of their experiences and identities. Narrative hermeneutics foregrounds the existential relevance of narratives more firmly than any other approach to narrative. It articulates the significance of narratives for how we understand the world and our place in it. We suggest that crucial to the issue of applying narrative theory is how specific theoretical approaches to narrative conceive of the narrative–world relationship. Applying narrative hermeneutics to practice follows naturally from the theory as it conceptualizes narratives as practices situated in the world: it is interested in how our being in the world is narratively mediated and how narratives shape our understanding of our possibilities of action, thought, and affect in different cultural and social situations.

We study narrative agency through a dialogue between the theoretical approach, the reading group model, and the analysis of participants’ reading group experiences. The dialogue between theory and practice has been integral to our project from the beginning. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1997, p. 314) argues, the human sciences are “moral sciences” in the sense that their object is human reality and human self-understanding and the type of knowledge they produce is hence closer to what Aristotle called moral knowledge (*phronesis*) than theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) or technical knowledge (*techne*). *Phronetic* knowledge “is always related to practical application” (p. 315). Application in the hermeneutic sense does not consist “in relating some pre-given universal to the particular situation” but rather “codetermines” the process of understanding “as a whole from the beginning” (p. 324). Such an interplay of theory, research, and practice characterizes the way we have applied the approach of narrative agency to practice in developing a reading group model and methods to study participants’ narrative

³ On the concept of implicit narrative, see Meretoja (2021, 2023a).

⁴ On previous uses of the concept of narrative agency, see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022, p. 391) and Meretoja (2023b, pp. 67–68).

agency. While the theory of narrative agency provides a ground for reading group practices, empirical findings can help to further develop the reading group model and fine-tune the theory.

In this article, we reflect on the dialogical process of applying theory to practice: How can the theory of narrative agency be applied in reading group practices and reading group studies? How can we study possible enhancement of participants' narrative agency through interviews? And how could this analysis contribute to the further development of the reading group model and theory? First, we briefly discuss how we have used the theory of narrative agency as a background approach to develop *a metanarrative reading group model*. While we have presented the model more comprehensively in our previous article (see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen, 2022), here, we focus the discussion on applying narrative theory to developing the reading group model. Second, we introduce the research design, methods, and narrative agency analysis as a tool to analyze research interviews. Third, we analyze three interviews—Juha's, Oskari's, and Milla's experiences of metanarrative reading groups.⁵ These cases are explored as examples of how narrative agency and its different manifestations can be studied and as examples of the potential of individual experiences to contribute to the further development of the reading group model and the theory of narrative agency.

Applying the theory of narrative agency and metanarrativity in reading group practices

In Meretoja's (2022, 2023a) theory, *narrative agency* has three central dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality.⁶

(1) *Narrative awareness* means awareness of culturally available narratives that shape people's lives by functioning as models of sense-making. Cultural narrative models affect us whether we like it or not, and bringing them to the level of conscious reflection allows us to evaluate those narratives critically. Narrative awareness includes *narrative self-understanding* (Meretoja, 2018a, pp. 98–107) regarding the kinds of narratives we use in making sense of our lives and *narrative perspective awareness*, which entails awareness of how each narrative is

⁵ The participants' names have been changed.

⁶ Meretoja has developed this theory on the basis of her earlier work on the six evaluative continua of the ethically relevant aspects of narratives (see Meretoja 2018a, 2021). The three dimensions of narrative agency are also presented in Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022).

told from a certain perspective and involves interpretation, selectivity, and meaning-giving. It is awareness of how each story can be told differently—from someone else’s perspective, interpreted by someone else (pp. 125–132).

(2) *Narrative imagination* refers to our ability to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present, to creatively and critically engage with cultural narrative models, and to imagine different narrative trajectories for oneself, one’s community, humankind, and the planet more broadly.⁷ For us, a central aspect of narrative imagination is our ability to cultivate our *sense of the possible* (pp. 90–97)—that is, our sense of how things could be otherwise, as well as our sense of how different worlds function as spaces of possibility in which certain experiences, affects, thoughts, and actions are possible and others impossible or unlikely. Narrative imagination also involves the ability to engage in explorative *ethical inquiry* (pp. 133–142) about basic existential issues (e.g., of what a “good” or “meaningful” life might mean), issues that lack definitive answers but are crucial to how we orient ourselves in the world.

(3) *Narrative dialogicality* refers to the narratively mediated process of how we become who we are in relation to other agents in the world—in a fundamentally dialogical and relational way. It points to our ability to enter into a narratively mediated dialogue with others and their stories. Critical engagement with normative cultural narratives of relationships and communities, which often draw problematic lines of division between “us” and “them,” can open up new possibilities of relationality. Some narratives are particularly dialogical in that they invite us to understand the singularity of others’ experiences by functioning *non-subsumptively* (pp. 107–116): instead of subsuming the other under a pre-given mold, they function in an explorative mode to foster openness to what is unfamiliar, new, and unique in the experience of the other. Narrative dialogicality also involves the ability to participate in creating new *narrative in-betweens* (pp. 117–125), intersubjective spaces that make it possible for us to imagine new relationships and communities and thus to create conditions for solidarity and social change.

When Meretoja started to flesh out the theory of narrative agency, she envisaged as its three dimensions narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative competence. As we began our research on reading groups, however, she felt that these three did not sufficiently articulate

⁷ For a discussion of earlier uses of the notion of narrative imagination (e.g., Brockmeier, 2009, Andrews, 2014, Freeman, 2014), see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022, pp. 392–393).

the dialogical and relational aspects of agency that have long been central to her thinking (see Meretoja, 2014, 2018a), and our work on reading groups made it even more salient how narrative agency is constituted in interactional processes of dialogue. Therefore, she ended up changing narrative competence to narrative dialogicality, which explicitly fleshes out the relational aspects of narrative agency. Moreover, all three aspects of narrative agency can be seen as competences.⁸

In the project, we started to explore the possibilities of applying the theory of narrative agency in reading group practices by first developing a metanarrative reading group model. In these groups, the participants read metanarrative fiction, by which we mean narrative fiction that self-reflexively makes narrative its theme by reflecting not only on its own nature as a narrative but also on narrativity as a cultural phenomenon, on the roles of narratives in our lives and in social reality, and on the nature and conditions of narrative agency (see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen, 2022, p. 394).⁹ Metanarrative fiction can strengthen narrative agency by, for example, drawing attention to problematic cultural narrative models that dominate in society, by opening up new ways of imagining personal or collective futures, or by providing resources for the construction of new intersubjective narrative in-betweens that make possible a new sense of connection and solidarity across differences. Instead of directly using the concepts of narrative agency or metanarrativity in the reading group discussions, the theory functioned as a background approach for facilitators by informing them on which aspects of texts to focus on in group discussions and writing exercises. In particular, the theory of narrative agency encourages towards an exploration of the texts from the point of view of cultural narratives. The starting point was that metanarrative fiction has potential to provide insights into cultural narratives and ways of narrating, the facilitator may gently draw attention to them, and thereby the reading group process may enhance the participants' narrative agency.

In five out of seven meetings of the metanarrative reading groups that we organized, short stories or excerpts were read together aloud, and for the other two meetings, participants read a novel beforehand. Some of the texts were the same in all groups, and some were chosen by the facilitators. The metanarrative novels that we selected to be read in all metanarrative groups

⁸ Narrative agency has both similarities with and differences from Rita Charon's (2006) concept of narrative competence, which is one of the key concepts of narrative medicine. Relationality and dialogical aspects of human interaction have become increasingly important to narrative medicine, too, and its key figures have recently acknowledged its affinities with narrative hermeneutics (Charon et al., 2017, Spencer, 2023).

⁹ For a discussion of earlier uses of the term metanarrative and on the reasons behind our definition of the term, see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022, pp. 393–394).

were Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* (2011), which deals, for example, with different perspectives from which individuals narrate their stories, and Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), which explores the significance of different forms of narrating, foregrounding fragmented stories that provide a momentary shape to the world akin to the flash of a lighthouse. The metanarrative short stories and excerpts included an excerpt from Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (1993), which discusses the differences between diminishing, pressing stories and enriching ones that expand one's horizons, and Lucia Berlin's "Point of View" (from *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, 2015), which reflects on the significance of changing the narrative perspective.¹⁰

The transformative potential of metanarrative fiction is not automatically actualized, but certain reading group practices can facilitate its actualization. Recent studies show that reading groups have significant potential in cultivating meaningful reading experiences (Hodge, Robinson & Davis, 2007, Longden et al., 2015, Gray et al., 2016, Pettersson, 2018, Billington, 2019). While applying the approach of narrative agency in reading group practices, we have also applied creative group practices (see e.g., Bolton, 1999, Hunt, 2013) and creative and interactive bibliotherapeutic practices (see e.g., Mazza, 2017, Kosonen, 2019) in order to provide creative reading group settings for metanarrative fiction to be read, discussed, and experienced in potentially meaningful and fulfilling ways. The meetings followed a specific structure: At the beginning of the meeting, with the guidance of the facilitator, the participants tuned into the creative space, for example through a writing exercise. The meeting focused on working around the text. Creative reading lays emphasis on experiential reading, and the focus is on fiction, which functions as a mediator for sharing reading experiences. When the metanarrative text dealt with different cultural narratives, the facilitator often drew attention to these aspects of the text.¹¹ In addition to reading and discussions, participants engaged in creative writing exercises related to the themes discussed in the session—for instance, writing about a person who is defined by a limiting narrative but who breaks free from that story. At the end of the meetings, in the round of final reflection, participants articulated in a few words their personal

¹⁰ On the dialogical, non-subsumptive aspects of Winterson's novel, see Meretoja (2018b). For our analysis of reading the excerpt from *The Stone Diaries* in a reading group meeting, see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022). For other examples of the potential of metanarrative fiction to cultivate readers' narrative agency, see Meretoja (2022).

¹¹ In this regard, the reading groups organized in the project slightly differ from one another in facilitation styles: in some groups, the facilitator mostly asked questions about the text, whereas in other groups, the facilitator directed and deepened the interpretations of the texts toward reflections on cultural narratives in everyday life.

“meaningful moments” from the session. (See Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen, 2022, pp. 399–401.)

We have discovered that reading together in the creative space of the reading group may contribute to the participants’ narrative agency, but this is a complex, multidimensional process (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen, 2022). When narrative theories are applied, they manifest themselves differently in each real reading group situation, and the singularity of each participant’s experience challenges the extent to which we can draw general conclusions. There is always something unique in the encounter between texts, readers, and reading situations. Though the metanarrative reading group model is promising, it still requires further development. Now that we are in the analysis phase of the collected research data, we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that in addition to the metanarrative texts and creative reading practices, the facilitation and the group process play an even more crucial role than we anticipated. Indeed, the following analysis of the participants’ experiences provides useful insights into how to further develop the model from focusing mainly on the potential of metanarrative texts to focusing more broadly on the potential of the metanarrative groups as comprehensive group processes, which also include elements other than the texts. Such insights have given impetus to the transition from a metanarrative reading group model to a further developed version we call *narrative agency reading group model*.

Research design, methods, and narrative agency analysis

In addition to developing the reading group model, one important goal of the project has been to explore different possibilities for studying and analyzing narrative agency. Our data collection was theory-driven, and we have examined the potential of applying the theory of narrative agency in qualitative analysis of the research data. Our aim has been to explore how possible changes in narrative agency may become visible, and hence we interviewed the participants before and after the reading group process. We organized ten reading groups, from which we collected the research data.¹² The data consists of audio recordings of reading group

¹² Our research design also includes a comparison between metanarrative and basic creative reading groups, as half of the groups were metanarrative and half of them basic creative reading groups. This comparison is beyond the scope of this article, and in our forthcoming publications, we will offer a comprehensive analysis of the

sessions, interviews, questionnaires, and texts written by the participants. In this article, we focus on the analysis of three participants' interviews.¹³

We started the project by organizing a university course for students of literary studies and psychology. After the course, ten of the students facilitated reading groups and interviewed the participants of their groups, collected the questionnaires, and carried out the recordings.¹⁴ Out of ten groups, seven were facilitated by the students and three by the researchers. The groups met during 2019–2020, mostly in autumn 2019. Principally, each group convened biweekly seven times for two-hour meetings. One group was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each group had three to nine, most of them four to six, participants. Altogether, the reading groups included 54 participants, aged between 20 and 73. The participants were asked to complete the “gender” section in their preferred terms on the background information form, and 41 identified as female, 12 as male, and one as other. The participants were volunteers who wanted to participate in a reading group, and the groups took place in different settings (see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen, 2022, pp. 401–402, note 19).

All the participants were interviewed in individual interviews before and after the reading group process. Usually, the group facilitator(s) acted as an interviewer. One of the participants whose interview is analyzed in this article, Milla, had to change group after the initial interview, and she was therefore interviewed by different interviewers in the initial and final interviews. Moreover, in some cases, such as Juha's, the participants knew the facilitator already before participating in the group, which might have affected the process. In our experience, the use of facilitators as interviewers is a complex issue. On the one hand, it may decrease the reliability of the answers if, for instance, the participants want to please the interviewer and are not as critical towards facilitators or the group as they would otherwise be. On the other hand, in our project, this double role contributed to a productive and dialogical sense of participatory research where facilitators and participants explored the possibilities of reading groups together.

research data. We acknowledge that the lack of comparison between two group types is a limitation in this article but nevertheless believe the analysis of three participants' interviews from metanarrative reading groups already offers important insights both into how to study narrative agency through interviews and into how to use those interviews to further develop the reading group model.

¹³ In addition to the interviews, participants also filled in the Ryff well-being scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and a questionnaire on narrative agency designed by us. These questionnaires will be analyzed in our forthcoming publication.

¹⁴ We also interviewed the students during the course, which yielded useful information for slight modification of the interview questions.

We formulated a list of 36 interview questions based on the theory of narrative agency (see Appendix). This theory-driven set of questions was employed in semi-structured interviews. Principally, all the questions were asked, but in some cases, the interviewer chose to omit a couple of questions if the interview had already lasted for around an hour. The interviews included general questions related to reading and the reading group experience and more specific questions related to narratives and the potential of literature. In the initial interviews, participants were asked about their hopes and expectations for the reading groups, and in the final interviews, they were asked about their reading group experience. Moreover, both in the initial and in the final interviews, the theory of narrative agency informed specific questions related to narratives and their multiple meanings (Appendix: questions 16–34). The questions related to narrative awareness (questions 16–24) concerned, for example, what kinds of stories or narrative models the participants notice around them, what kinds of narratives are told in the media or in their families, and how they define the narrative of “a happy life.” Questions related to narrative imagination (25–30) enquired about the potential of literature to open up new possibilities and how the participants feel they can affect their own life story. Questions related to narrative dialogicality (31–34) revolved around understanding the perspectives of others in relation to both literature and the reading group. The interviews were transcribed by the group facilitators.

To analyze the interviews, we use *narrative agency analysis* as a method of qualitative analysis.¹⁵ We thereby explore the idea that the theoretical–analytic framework of narrative agency provides analytic concepts that can be used as the basis for a method of analyzing narrative agency. Narrative agency analysis identifies ways in which the interviewees reflect on narratives, and in this process, it uses the analytical categories provided by the three dimensions of narrative agency. It makes visible the ways in which the interviewees use and negotiate different narratives in their processes of making sense of their life experiences. This approach brings together elements of positioning analysis (Meretoja 2018a, pp. 78–79, 2021, Hyvärinen, Hatavara & Rautajoki, 2021), especially in analyzing how interviewees position themselves in relation to different cultural narratives, and elements of discourse analysis (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015) by analyzing narrative discourse that takes shape in a dialogue with cultural narrative models. Similarly to interpretative phenomenological analysis (Gray & Kiemle, 2019), it focuses on the complexity of lived experience, although in a more theory-

¹⁵ On different qualitative research methods in reading group studies, see e.g. Robinson et al. (2019).

driven way. It also has connections to narrative analysis, particularly from a narratives-as-practices perspective (De Fina, 2021), but while narrative analysis typically focuses on analyzing the stories interviewees tell in interviews, narrative agency analysis focuses on interviewees' reflections on narratives and their meanings.

During the analysis, as suggested above, we have noticed that interpreting whether the reading group has affected the participants' narrative agency is a complex issue. Sometimes, it is challenging to identify if there is any strengthening of narrative agency between the initial and final interviews or if the answer is merely somewhat different without manifesting enhancement, and sometimes, if an enhancement of narrative agency is visible, it is not evident whether it is actually an effect of the reading group process. In the interviews regarding the whole research data set, participants relate their answers to the reading group process on different levels: some of them connect their answers to that specific process, whereas others discuss the role of reading in more general terms. We have here selected three cases—Juha's, Oskari's, and Milla's interviews—for this article on the grounds that the experienced effects of the reading group emerge in their interviews as they articulate their answers explicitly in relation to their reading group experience.¹⁶ The selected three participants had a meaningful reading group experience that seems to have contributed to their narrative agency. Even though they are not representative of all the participants of the metanarrative groups, since the transformative potential of the reading groups is more visible in their answers compared to those of many other participants, they provide us with valuable information on how to further develop the group model precisely because they experienced the reading groups as highly meaningful.

The selected three cases also lend themselves productively to narrative agency analysis. During the process of analysis, we noticed that in each interview one of the dimensions emerges somewhat more clearly than the others: in Juha's case, narrative awareness; in Oskari's case, narrative imagination; and in Milla's case, narrative dialogicality. Hence, the three cases manifest in a multifaceted way the different dimensions of narrative agency. This analysis identifies ways in which the participants navigate their narrative environments and verbalize the meanings they attach to the reading group process, literature, and narratives in their lives.

¹⁶ All three participants participated in groups facilitated by one or two student facilitators, and each of them took part in a different group. By choosing cases from different groups, we aim to explore the potential of the reading group model instead of one precise group.

Juha's reading group experience: The critical potential of narrative awareness

In Juha's interview, particularly prominently emerges the potential of metanarrative reading groups to cultivate *narrative awareness*. His comments show awareness of the role of different narratives in sense-making practices, and he connects this augmented awareness to the reading group experience. He explicitly singles out, from the beginning of his final interview, "narrativity" as a key insight of his experience. Even though participants in the metanarrative reading groups were not explicitly informed about the groups' specific focus on narrative agency, Juha seems to be aware of narratives as a focus in the group. For example, he says that due to the reading group he "sees and reads literature in general with fresh eyes. Precisely from the perspective of this kind of narrativity."¹⁷

While talking about the meaning of the reading group process, he refers to the writing exercise in the last group meeting, in which participants were asked to write freely about the significance of the reading group. Juha wrote:

What was the significance of the reading group for me?

- new perspectives on literature—seeing and reading everything from a new perspective
- the intertwinement of narrativity with the surrounding society and everyday life
- the significance of narrative, the emergence of stories, affecting narratives, the transformation of narratives and transforming narratives, resisting narratives
- great, enriching as a group experience!

Hence, the reading group process appears to have been a meaningful experience for him, and the awareness of the focus on "narrativity" seems to be integral to that experience of meaningfulness. Reflecting on this has made us think that perhaps an explicit spelling out of the reading group's focus on issues of narrative agency could be a productive way of framing the group process.

¹⁷ The quotations from the participants were originally in Finnish. The translations are our own.

In Juha's case, the understanding of narrativity as an influential aspect of his own life and enhanced critical narrative awareness have offered transformative insights on a personal level. His interview manifests *narrative self-understanding* in terms of his reflections on the narratives he uses in making sense of his life. Critical awareness and agential choices over narratives he privileges have been relevant to his self-understanding and experience of well-being. He explicitly connects the reading group experience with well-being: "it's affected my well-being in the sense that I also try to push these narratives away—I've noticed that some narratives try to overwhelm me." Participating in the group has offered critical distancing from some stories, and thus increased possibilities to affect his ways of narrating his life. When asked about the stories told in his family, he says, "I've been quite aware of some of them, and I've become more aware of some." To the question about different narrative models, he responds:

I mean, what has become quite clear is how narratives are created—I mean senseless narratives, groundless narratives. I've had to live in the middle of them, unfortunately, [...] several years ago, and I didn't understand at the time. I'm sure it would have been easier to relate to them if I'd understood.

It is not clear from the interview what exactly he means by "senseless narratives," but he seems to have in mind some kind of fabricated and for him harmful narratives that have been presented as the truth and which he was not able to see as narratives at the time. Thus, Juha's narrative awareness manifests itself as awareness of some specific narratives in his life and as critical awareness of their possible effects.

Moreover, Juha's narrative awareness manifests itself as curiosity toward narrative models. He says, "I can't say for sure if I have observed some model types," and later continues, "But what is interesting, in my view, is to go on to make sense of whether there are these different narrative models and what can be done with narratives." Juha's experience illustrates the processual nature of shaping narrative agency in reading groups: usually, a starting point is increased awareness of some narratives, and later, the process may move towards discussing different cultural narrative models in a more differentiated way. To provide further support for this process, the role of facilitating could be strengthened in the reading group model, and in addition to reading metanarrative texts, the reading groups could nurture more comprehensive and multifaceted discussions of cultural narratives. In the final meeting of Juha's group, different cultural narratives were explored in an exercise in which the participants read

magazines in order to analyze the limits and possibilities of narratives available in media. A similar exercise could be included in the developed version of the reading group model.

Another meaningful tool in navigating narrative environments appears to be “access” to certain “concepts,” which Juha mentions in connection to questions of *narrative perspective awareness* as he reflects on family stories:

so throughout this autumn, I have noticed in my own family the way in which a narrative is told from different perspectives [...] when people tell these stories from different perspectives and how we then boil in the same soup kettle, so to say, everything it affects, and then I end up feeling kind of powerless that... I can't do a lot about this bustle of narratives. But, but I mean this, this [reading group] is in my opinion the most wonderful possible thing, so I hope all people were able to attend this kind of reading group [laughs] to access these concepts.

In this quotation, Juha's narrative perspective awareness manifests itself as understanding how stories are always told from different perspectives. This insight on multiple perspectives has also prompted him to reflect on the challenges involved in dealing with “boiling in the same soup kettle,” as he puts it. Then he shifts to talk about the potential of the reading group and “accessing these concepts.” Here, the conceptual tools and narrative understanding emerging from the reading group seem to provide him with critical distance from dominant narratives in ways that help him deal with “this bustle of narratives,” the overwhelming plurality of stories and narrative perspectives in everyday life. Although the specific concept of narrative agency was not introduced as a term to the participants, the use of the concepts of narratives and narrativity already seems to have cultivated Juha's narrative awareness. As the concepts seem to contribute to awareness of narratives as phenomena and thereby to the participants' narrative self-understanding, this suggests that also using the concepts of cultural narratives and cultural narrative models and even introducing the concept of narrative agency and its three dimensions to the participants can be a way of giving them interpretative resources to reflect on their own agency and tools to navigate their narrative environments.

All in all, this analysis demonstrates how examining the interviews from the point of view of narrative agency may reveal different aspects of narrative awareness. It provides new insights on the reading group model: the main improvements it suggests are the more explicit articulation of the group's aims, the use of narrative-theoretical concepts, and the additional

exercises to concretize different cultural narratives. Of course, using theoretical concepts in the reading group practice is a delicate process. They need to be introduced step by step because if introduced too early in the group process, they may come across as challenging or alienating. This requires sensibility from the facilitator to recognize when the group is receptive to the use of such concepts. In addition to the reading group process, this analysis of Juha's experience also contributes to the theory of narrative agency. It raises the interesting question of how having a vocabulary to express narrative awareness could actually contribute to this awareness. A richer vocabulary to discuss issues of narrative agency could contribute to the strengthening of narrative agency, which could be elaborated in the further developments of the theory and the reading group model.

Oskari's reading group experience: The enriching power of narrative imagination in life-storying

In the interview of university student Oskari, *narrative imagination* is demonstrated in many ways. His narrative imagination already stood out in the initial interview, but in the final interview, his reflections on negotiating and navigating narrative environments are even more nuanced. His experience also foregrounds the potential of reading groups to augment reading motivation. When asked if anything has changed in his life due to the reading group experience, Oskari answers, "I do think I now have a much lower threshold to start reading prose." He asserts that many university students do not read these days and that this kind of reading group would be a great tool in motivating them to read. Due to the reading group experience, reading has gained a more important and vivid role in Oskari's life, and literature has started to contribute to his personal meaning-making processes.

As his most meaningful experience in the reading group, he mentions reading *Lighthousekeeping* by Jeanette Winterson: "that somehow stayed with me as a reading experience [...] perhaps it reminded me that reading can be fun and rewarding." In the final interview, he enters a dialogue with this metanarrative novel in order to reflect on the meaning of narratives in general and in his life in particular. In his opinion, when an author portrays life situations well and in interesting ways, it provides readers with "more resources to choose between them if, for instance, they encounter similar situations in life." When asked to provide

an example of this kind of a transformative reading experience, he mentions *Lighthousekeeping*. He reflects on how in the novel, the inner experience of one character made him think that he would “never, ever want to end up in that kind of situation.” In Oskari’s answers and reflections on *Lighthousekeeping*, narrative imagination is linked to the idea that reading about different life situations can provide richer resources for choosing between different life courses.

However, this notion of stories being models for one’s own life narratives is far from simple, and Oskari also discusses the complexity of such interactive processes. This relates to the idea of narrative imagination as an ability to engage in *ethical inquiry* on issues that lack definitive answers. As Oskari mentions later, engagement with books is not simple, as they do not directly create a sense that “oh yes, this is what I want, too” but provide, rather, “a play of imagination.” This idea of an open-ended ethical inquiry could be emphasized in reading group practices by highlighting that the purpose of reading groups is not to find definitive answers to existential questions, but, on the contrary, to explore the complexity of such issues together.

When asked about his “view of the narrative of a happy life” in the final interview, Oskari continues dialoguing with *Lighthousekeeping*, reflecting that despite the “bad” events, it was still a narrative of a happy life. His response signals how a narrative of a happy life can be less about a particular series of events and more about how things are experienced and recounted. He ponders how “perhaps that kind of happy narrative is, in the end, quite a lot about how the people in it experience things and how they deal with things.” When asked “How does your life story relate to this?”, he continues:

Perhaps how you tell yourself this narrative of your own, [and] you can probably of course become better and better in it over time, so that it’s kind of satisfying to yourself, life-storying of your own life. So that’s quite a good reminder to myself, too—that I can somehow make sense of these things so that I’m not just a kind of victim [...] but can kind of approach things from the perspective of different colors.

This illustrates how reading *Lighthousekeeping* seems to cultivate Oskari’s narrative imagination as a way of expanding his *sense of the possible* and strengthening his sense of agency. It reminds him that narrating one’s own life—being “one’s own narrator,” as he puts it in another part of the interview—is a way of taking up the role of being the central agent of

one's own life. Moreover, he emphasizes the processual nature of life-storying. Rather than thinking of one's own story as a single thing, he discusses life-storying as nuanced, ongoing, and dialogical narrative meaning-making practice.

In addition to *Lighthousekeeping*, Oskari briefly discusses the other novel that was read during the reading group, *The Summer Without Men*, as helping him to see things from another perspective. In terms of perspective-taking, in Oskari's experience, narrative imagination is an ability to co-imagine with literature and to gain new perspectives. Whereas narrative awareness includes narrative perspective awareness, the understanding that stories are told from different perspectives, narrative imagination may increase the ability not only to be aware of those perspectives but also to imagine stories from them. This illustrates how the three dimensions of narrative agency overlap and are entangled with one another. Oskari mentions that to him, reading means to be able to "reflect on things from perspectives different from one's own and to thereby kind of train the imagination," which connects awareness and imagination. In the final questions on the meaning of literature, he concludes:

that ability to make sense of different perspectives and of different possibilities and life situations and lives [...] so that you're not so stuck with your everyday experiences and just acting on the basis of them but are able to open up by drawing on different options.

The notion of "making sense of different possibilities" relates to the sense of the possible. Hence, his narrative imagination manifests itself as an ability to "make sense of different lives" both in terms of understanding possibilities in his own life-storying and in terms of gaining perspectives on others' experiences.

Regarding the further development of the reading group model, this analysis also suggests that it might be productive to facilitate the participants in linking their personal insights more explicitly to issues of narratives. Therefore, we have modified the final reflection exercise. In metanarrative reading groups, each meeting concluded with sharing "meaningful moments," and reflecting on the meeting in which they discussed *Lighthousekeeping*, Oskari mentions: "The most meaningful moments were probably precisely such insights [provoked by the meeting]." Prompted by his recurring emphasis on "insights," and in order to link these insights more actively to narrative agency, we have expanded the final reflective exercise by adding the concept of narrative insights. In the new version of the exercise, participants first write down

“meaningful moments” and then “narrative insights,” which could be any meaningful reflections connected to narratives that have come to their mind during the meeting. This exercise opens the possibility that some ideas connected to narratives that have been sparked by the discussions can be given a more personal verbalization.

Overall, Oskari’s experience illustrates the relevance of reflecting on insights provoked by literature in relation to narratives in the participant’s own life. In Oskari’s reading group experience, the metanarrative novels seem to contribute to his narrative agency. However, this analysis does not reveal whether these insights are instigated by the metanarrative features or by some other features of the novels, which suggests that the research interviews could benefit from additional questions about the texts that participants read during the group. The analysis of Oskari’s experience has also yielded new ideas for the reading group model, especially for the final exercise. In relation to the theory of narrative agency, this analysis invites us to explore more thoroughly the multiple ways narrative agency may manifest itself and how its three dimensions intertwine with one another. Although it is possible to analytically differentiate between the three dimensions, it is also important to acknowledge their complex interplay and entanglement.

Milla’s reading group experience: The multifacetedness of narrative dialogicality in practice

University student Milla’s reading group experience foregrounds *narrative dialogicality*, the interactive and relational nature of narrative interpretations and storytelling practices. Milla’s experience is one of the examples in which narrative dialogicality becomes salient in a way that validates the decision to include narrative dialogicality as one of the dimensions of narrative agency. Milla herself asserts that the most meaningful aspect of the group process was discussions with other participants, providing new interpretations and meaningful interaction. For her, the reading group created a space for pressure-free reading in which all interpretations were valued: “it emphasized and brought back [...] the sense that you can read all kinds of things and have opinions.” In Milla’s experience, the dialogical group process is connected with an appreciation of different reading experiences and narratives.

Throughout the final interview, Milla reflects on the balancing of cultural narrative models, others' expectations, and one's own life story. She discusses the importance of being "true to what makes precisely that person happy. That it's not an external mold according to which you should live." The negotiations between the cultural "narrative of a happy life" and finding her own way to live are visible in both the initial and final interviews. In her final interview, narrative dialogicality appears as a sense of a need for diverse narratives:

So if it sometimes feels like your own life... isn't that kind of straightforward "I will conduct my studies like this, and my life will move forward following the textbook," then it's nice to hear the kind of stories that show you it's not like that for many others, either, and that, ultimately, it turns out like that for quite few. Overall, hearing as many diverse life stories as possible probably increases the kind of understanding that we all have our own ways of living our lives on this planet.

Milla emphasizes that it is important to value the dialogue between multiple and diverse stories. She continues with reflections on possibilities to affect her own life narrative. In the initial interview, Milla expresses her hope "to be an active agent in my own story," but in the final interview, she is critical of both "the kind of way of telling one's own story that everything depends on others" and the idea that we are "self-made persons" because "not everyone has the same opportunities in life." She seems to seek a balance between acknowledging our relationality—our dependency on others and on our social circumstances—and our ability to practice active agency in telling our own life stories. Her reflections point to the need to further articulate the concept of narrative dialogicality so as to find a balance between individuals' different options to narrate and shape their own narratives, on the one hand, and awareness of the constraints linked to the relationality of narrative agency, on the other hand. This contributes both to the reading group model and to the theory of narrative agency by suggesting the addition of more complex reflections on the limitations, constraints, and issues of power in articulating the dialogical relationality of narrative agency.

Thus, narrative dialogicality manifests itself as a relational ability to negotiate between "pressures" coming from the outside and one's own choices of life-storying. In this respect, the group process is central, as it may nurture a space to explore and support one's own narrative choices. Therefore, facilitators' active role in group dynamics could be emphasized even more in the further development of the reading group model. Milla's amplified narrative dialogicality is also connected to perspective-taking and to the ability to understand others' experiences in

their uniqueness—which, again, is linked to the texts read in the group. This shows how narrative dialogicality is not reducible to the social dialogicality of the group but also intertwines with the texts. According to Milla, the reading group has increased her narrative perspective awareness specifically due to reading metanarrative texts:

it felt like those texts had been chosen so that they sparked things to discuss from different perspectives and, precisely, about different modes of narration and how each character... had somehow seen the events in what way and... At least one thing the reading group made me more aware of was how perspectives vary. I don't know how I'll draw on it in the future, but this is definitely something to which I've paid more attention.

The answer demonstrates the potential of metanarrative texts to cultivate narrative perspective awareness. Even though Milla mentions that she does not know how to “draw on it in the future,” the enhanced perspective awareness seems to have already strengthened her narrative dialogicality in terms of her ability to attune herself to the perspectives of others. The case illustrates that while narrative awareness involves awareness of different narrative perspectives, narrative dialogicality involves the ability to engage in actual dialogue with other perspectives and other experiential horizons in their uniqueness, in a *non-subsumptive* way that does not reduce them to pre-existing categories.

Indeed, narrative dialogicality, in terms of a genuine dialogue, manifests itself in Milla's reflections on the meaning of the reading group as a possibility to “encounter people.”

Interviewer: What about the reading group? Has it brought you some new possibilities?

Milla: Possibilities... Well, to that kind of discussion, encountering people... Somehow, it's made me think and has probably also developed my ability to engage in a dialogue and to take others into account [...] It's about giving everyone space, and somehow, even if I propose an interpretation then someone else presents a different one, I get a grip on it, and it sparks a new interpretative connection. So that kind of being affected by others' thoughts and interpretations in a gentle way... and changing one's own thoughts over such a brief period of time...

Thus, reading groups have potential to cultivate a new dialogical understanding of “interpretative connections.” Narrative dialogicality manifests itself in the groups in terms of

collective interpretative practices that create possibilities to renegotiate interpretations and points of views. Reading groups create *narrative in-between* spaces where interpretations and narratives can be discussed in dialogical ways. In this case, the texts may be seen as significant not only to an individual reading experience but also to the group dynamics. This analysis inspires us to continue studying the interesting connections between the selected texts and group dynamics and thus to explore deeper the process of shared reading as a process of creating concrete narrative in-between spaces.

Overall, the reading group process has shaped Milla's narrative agency, which emerges as enhanced narrative dialogicality in terms of a deepened understanding of the dialogicality of interpretative practices. Milla's experience indicates that the group process may also support the appreciation of one's own ways of reading, narrating, and living. Thus, the analysis suggests that the reading group model would benefit from additional facilitation of the group processes. The analysis of Milla's experience highlights the significance of narrative dialogicality in the reading group practices but also complexifies it by revealing the need for further research to explore more thoroughly the connection between group dialogicality and narrative dialogicality and to expand the notion of reading groups as narrative in-between spaces. It demonstrates the importance of narrative dialogicality as a conceptually distinct dimension in the theory of narrative agency. It also emphasizes the relevance of reflecting on the connections of dialogical relationality to issues of power and on our limitations in shaping our own life stories. This also suggests that amplified narrative agency can sometimes show itself as increased critical awareness of the limits of our possibilities of acting or narrating, which is an important insight from the perspective of further developing the theory of narrative agency and the reading group model.

Conclusions

In this article, we have explored the dialogical nature of our ongoing research project, in which we focus on developing a reading group model that aims to strengthen participants' narrative agency. We have discussed the ways we have applied the theoretical approach of narrative agency both to reading group practices and to the method of analysis and presented the development process from *metanarrative reading groups* to *narrative agency reading groups*.

Our research process has been shaped by the structure of a hermeneutic circle as we have brought into dialogue our theoretical approach, the reading group model, and the analysis of participants' experiences. This is not a process of straightforward, unidirectional application, as has become clear in the discussions above, but rather a multifaceted process in which we have tried to remain open to how new understanding of reading group experiences calls for revisions to the theoretical approach and to the reading group model.

We believe that the value of this kind of research lies precisely in its complexity. The analysis of reading group experiences expands and enriches the understanding of various ways in which narrative agency can manifest itself. The three participants' interviews demonstrate that the enhancement of narrative agency can be meaningful on a personal level, and thereby these cases both encourage and inform us to further develop the reading group model. Currently, we are continuing the research process by finalizing the analysis of the whole research data set and employing the knowledge provided by the participants' experiences in the new version of the reading group model. We have started to test this new version in reading group workshops, have organized training for librarians, and are currently planning groups for cancer patients and workshops for healthcare professionals in our new project, "Counter-Narratives of Cancer: Shaping Narrative Agency" (2023–2027).

Developing a theory-based reading group model is a highly processual, complex, and challenging process, but this project shows that applying the theoretical approach of narrative agency in reading studies and in reading group practices is productive and meaningful. There is much potential in the dialogical process of applying narrative theories to practice, which also opens up new directions for empirical literary studies. In our project, this dialogue has produced new knowledge on the phenomenon of narrative agency itself as well as on the applications of the theoretical approach in reading practices and method of analysis. Hence, based on our research, we would answer the question posed in this special issue concerning the possibilities of applying narrative theories in the affirmative: we can and we should apply narrative theories and concepts to practice—but also be willing to modify and further develop our theoretical frameworks and conceptual models in dialogue with what emerges from the research process and practice.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research project: “Narratives, Reading, and Well-Being”, part of the consortium “Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory”.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish. The questions have been translated into English for this article.

* The questions with an asterisk were repeated in the initial and final interviews.

Final interview after the reading group process

1. Would you like to tell me, now at the beginning of the interview, how are you doing at the moment? (A possible further question: How would you briefly characterize your everyday life?)*

Reading group experiences

2. What kind of experience was this reading group for you?

3. How did the reading group meet your hopes and expectations?

4. What do you remember as the most significant thing about the experience?

5. What did you take away from the reading group to use in your everyday life?

6. How did you feel about the other members of the group? What kind of role did you have in the group?

7. What do you think you were able to offer to the other members of the group?
8. How did you experience the significance of reading together aloud in the group?
9. How did you experience the significance of writing in the reading group?
10. How did the reading group compare to your other hobbies? What are the similarities and differences between it and those other hobbies? How did this reading group relate to other reading or writing groups you have participated in?
11. Has anything changed in your life due to the reading group? What?

On the meaning of reading literature

12. What does reading literature mean to you?*
13. What do you think about the significance of reading more generally in the group? What do you think reading means to the other members of the group?
14. Could you describe a reading experience that has been significant for you (a transformative or particularly powerful experience that changed you as a person or left a deep mark)?*
15. What do you think is the significance of stories, narrativity, and narrative models?*

Questions about narrative agency

Narrative awareness

16. During this autumn, have you reflected on what kinds of narratives or narrative models surround you?
17. Have you thought about what kinds of narratives are available in the media? (If the interviewee asks for examples of narrative models, you can mention, for example, “rags-to-riches” narratives; victim narratives; narratives of success, happiness, or being a man or a woman.)*
18. During the reading group, did you think about what kinds of narratives you have grown up with or what kinds of stories have been told or are being told in your family?*
19. What kinds of narratives do you find especially problematic or disturbing at the moment?*

20. Can you now think of stories that you find enriching or that particularly speak to you?*
21. What is your idea of the narrative of a happy life?*
22. How does your own life story relate to this?*
23. Have you thought about how you tell your life story to different people and in different situations?*
24. Do you feel that the narratives around you (e.g. stories told in the family or in the media) affect how you experience yourself and your life?*

Narrative imagination

25. Have you lately reflected on the different directions in which your life could develop, towards what future possibilities? If so, what kinds of future possibilities?*
26. Has literature opened up new possibilities for you—for example, new possibilities for being, experiencing, thinking, feeling, or acting, or possibilities for being in relationships? What kinds of possibilities?*
27. What about the reading group—has it opened up some new possibilities for you?
28. Do you think narratives can enhance our ability to imagine new communities or relationships? (A further question: Can you think of an example?)*
29. If you try to imagine humankind in 2060, what kinds of courses of events do you imagine, and to what kinds of futures do they lead?*
30. In what ways do you feel you can affect your own life story?*

Narrative dialogicality

31. What kinds of thoughts and feelings has sharing reading experiences with others evoked in you?
32. What do you think about the significance of different perspectives in stories? During this autumn, have you reflected on how someone else might tell a specific story—what they would choose to tell and what they would leave untold?*

33. Can you think of a reading experience that has made you more aware of the ways in which there are always many perspectives to every story or that has led you to reflect on some course of events from someone else's perspective?*

34. Can you think of a reading experience or story that has helped you to better understand the life situation of others and their specificity?*

Concluding questions

35. In your opinion, what is the significance of literature?*

36. Is there anything else you would like to add now, at the end of the interview, about reading, narratives, or reading groups?*

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