

Intergenerational Solidarity

The Normative Significance of Narratives in the Corona Pandemic

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Introduction¹

“Live in a way that the old can survive” – with this phrase, the German journalist Samira El Ouassil summarized the “new categorical imperative” of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently spelled out the implicit moral expectations towards the younger generations: “To protect the old, the young should now show what they were expecting from the old regarding climate change: sacrifice” (El Ouassil 2020 [own translation]).

This comment not only illustrates the prominence of moral appeals for solidarity between generations in public debates about the pandemic in Germany (Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2020; Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2021). By connecting the COVID-19 crisis with previous inter-generational controversies on global warming, it also shows how such appeals are frequently intertwined with narrations of biographical and historical processes intended to substantiate the accompanying normative claims. At closer inspection, El Ouassil’s appeal is carried by a “contractualist” narrative of mutual reciprocal concessions between members of different, yet interdependent age groups faced with fundamentally different risks and challenges at different points in time. However, other contributions to the debate conveyed much more partisan and conflict-ridden storylines. For example, the “Boomer-remover” hashtag surfacing in early 2020 alluded to the previously popular narrative of a selfish cohort who had recklessly ruined the planet for future generations and therefore

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could not expect their compassion or support in the face of the pandemic (Elliott 2022). By contrast, in a German TV-report from December 2021, an elder interviewee voiced a different, discursively well-established storyline about his own age group in order to justify claims to priority of the older generation in the context of COVID-19 vaccination: “In vaccinating, we started with the elders, who have accomplished a certain life’s work and thus have done a lot to ensure that the younger generation is doing so well today” (Stumpf 2021 [own translation]).

These examples already highlight that “the public ethics narrative” (Samuel and Lucivero 2022) regarding the pandemic comprises a whole polyphony of storylines that suggest different, competing, and at times outright contrarian moral or political claims (Pedersen 2020). Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the normative significance of narratives in the German public media discourse about intergenerational solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on the questions which narratives became salient in the discourse and what argumentative function they fulfilled, that is, how they were used to shape, contextualize, and substantiate specific normative claims. To this end, we first provide a brief overview of the public discourse about intergenerational solidarity in the context of the pandemic and outline our theoretical perspective by reference to the concept of “justification narratives” (Forst 2013 [own translation]). On the basis of a comprehensive media discourse analysis of leading German newspapers between March 2020 and July 2021, we then consider exemplary contributions to the debate and highlight three types of narrative elements: (a) *expository narratives* that serve to define and frame the problem at hand, (b) *identificatory narratives* that help construct and specify the collective identities of generations as subjects or objects of solidarity, and (c) *explanatory narratives* that lend plausibility to normative claims regarding solidarity between generations. In light of the concept of justification narratives, we finally discuss the normative significance of these kinds of storylines as well as criteria of their acceptability and critical evaluation. In doing so, we also address the relevance of public media and art forms like literature and film for shaping and conveying common cultural narratives, thus pointing out perspectives for fruitful collaboration between ethics and literary or cultural studies.

Background: Discourses on Intergenerational Solidarity in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Role of Narratives

Given the lack of knowledge about – let alone therapies and vaccines against – SARS-CoV-2 at the beginning of the pandemic, the slogan “all together now” appeared to define the public and political maxim of the day (e.g., Ellerich-Groppe 2023; Zimmermann et al. 2023). Calls for social cohesion and cooperation were particularly pronounced with regard to intergenerational relations. Heads of governments and

international organizations frequently addressed the issue of solidarity with older people as a particularly vulnerable group in the pandemic. In spring 2020, 36 members of the European Parliament published an open letter to the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council demanding that “solidarity between generations must guide the EU response to and recovery from COVID-19” (Brglez et al. 2020). The WHO Regional Director for Europe urged the public to “act in solidarity” and be “supporting and protecting older people” (Kluge 2020). Similar appeals were also trending in public media and civil society discourses. Numerous commentaries stressed the vital importance of solidarity of the young with the old (cf. Haan 2020; Seyffarth 2020). Adolescents were asked to stay at home and young families were admonished not to visit the grandparents or draw on their services as babysitters. In many public pleas, residents were called upon to help older people (e.g., BAGSO 2020).

Over time, however, these attitudes were countered by an increasing number of voices that reversed the direction of solidarity between generations. Discussions about a possible triage of scarce intensive care resources like respirators were replete with suggestions for age-based rationing (Rueda 2021). In light of the persistence of far-reaching infection control measures like social distancing or complete lockdowns that meant substantial restrictions of individual liberties and socioeconomic welfare, the older generation was frequently called to responsibility, to put aside their own needs and to isolate themselves so that the younger generations could reclaim their freedom and the public and economic life could continue. “The expensive protection of the old” was discussed controversially (John et al. 2020 [own translation]) and different measures for different generations were brought into play (Fifka 2020). Appeals for more solidarity of the old with the younger generations accrued (e.g., Ahrens 2020). Also, many seniors themselves expressed the wish not to burden the younger generations and, hence, pleaded for voluntary self-isolation (Haarhoff 2020). There were even suggestions that the old should sacrifice themselves for the sake of their descendants and future economic welfare (Barret et al. 2021).

In the further course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public discourses about intergenerational solidarity took several more turns. When effective vaccines came into sight in the second half of 2021, the question of which population groups should have access first was already discussed controversially (Russel and Greenwood 2021). In many countries, age was eventually used as a decisive criterion for vaccine prioritization, spurring debates about distributive justice, the perceived privilege of older people, and the unrecognized and unrequited solidarity of the young throughout the pandemic (Allen et al. 2021). This line of argument was considerably reinforced once the detrimental consequences of pandemic policies for the mental health, psychological wellbeing, and personal as well as socioeconomic development of children, adolescents, and young adults came into the focus of public awareness in the course of the following year (Hafstad and Augusti 2021). Accusations about a preferential

treatment of the older generations and a continued disregard, neglect, and discrimination of younger people throughout the pandemic became more prominent and calls for increased societal solidarity with the shaken “generation corona” began to spread (German Ethics Council 2022).

As these examples already make clear, discourses on intergenerational solidarity in the pandemic were broad, diverse, and dynamically changing over time. In this course, also the term “solidarity” itself was far from being uncontested. From a moral philosophical perspective, contributions differed with regard to at least three elements of solidarity (Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2021; cf. also Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2024). First, they varied regarding the *groups* that were addressed as the respective subjects and objects of intergenerational solidarity. Thus, the old were initially often broadly labelled as a vulnerable group in need of care and support by seemingly more resilient younger people. However, they later found themselves addressed as equal members of a citizenry with mutual solidary responsibilities or even as autonomous and privileged subjects of a selfless solidarity with the young. Secondly, the contributions to the public debate about the pandemic differed in view of the *commitments*, that is, the specific moral bonds that were assumed between these generational groups. For example, while some seemed to presuppose asymmetrical relations of unidirectional gratitude of the young towards the old, others started from the opposite notion of guilt or indebtedness of the older generation vis-à-vis the young. Thirdly, the *costs* involved for those called upon to show intergenerational solidarity also varied. Especially in the first wave of the pandemic, younger people were expected to accept considerable sacrifices in terms of individual liberties, personal wellbeing, and socioeconomic welfare in order to protect the lives and health of the old. At the same time, the old were repeatedly called upon to withdraw from public life and sometimes even asked to give their lives to save the future of the younger generations.

Despite their heterogeneity, the different appeals to intergenerational solidarity voiced throughout the German public discourse on COVID-19 have one thing in common: they are deeply intertwined with narratives, that is, stories that help to shape, specify, and substantiate the normative claims made. Indeed, an important function of narratives “is their ability to transform something given into something justifiable” (Arnold 2012, 18 [own translation]). Thus, they can introduce identity-creating origins, draw morally relevant connections between seemingly isolated events, and frame future-directed plans as a continuation of past endeavors. They also address an emotional level and can evoke a feeling of coherence and consistency. In this way, they can contribute to the justification of current moral or political claims. This normative significance of narratives has been captured in the concept of “justification narratives” (Forst 2013 [own translation]) that underpin practical claims and lend them normative force in public discourse. For example, myths of origin like the story of Romulus and Remus substantiate claims about the supreme nature and

special entitlements of a political community by delineating its distinctive historical provenance (Darshan 2023). Tales about divine mandate played an important role in the justification of medieval sovereigns' claims to legitimate political rule (Burgess 1992). And the narrative of a continuous historical progress of mankind provided a basis for the justification of political battles of progressive social movements (Gröbl-Steinbach 1992).

The concept of justification narratives can also be made productive to analyze the role of narratives in the ongoing public discourses about intergenerational solidarity in the COVID-19 pandemic. The following considerations are based on a moral philosophical media discourse analysis of German newspapers between March 2020 and July 2021 (cf. Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2024). The sample consisted of 149 articles that were published in the newspapers *WELT*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *taz.die tageszeitung* (print or online).² These media were chosen for several reasons. First, they reflect the continued importance of leading media in general. The pandemic has underlined that especially large high-quality newspapers remain an important and trusted source of information and persuasion as “key players in public health” (De Coninck, d’Haenens, and Matthijs 2020; cf. also Zimmermann et al. 2021, 4; Boeff and Kirfel 2020). The second reason is the attempt to represent the public discourse in Germany in the best possible way. Thus, newspapers “can serve as a proxy for reporting across other channels” (Amann, Sleight, and Vayena 2021). Furthermore, the newspapers chosen here represent a scope of different political orientations and a heterogeneous readership. Therefore, they appear suitable to gain a first comprehensive insight in the public discourse. Finally, the media selected for our analysis provide a combination of daily news and more elaborated, reflexive articles on intergenerational solidarity in the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes it possible to trace the dynamics of the discourse in general and the development and argumentative function of narratives in particular in a differentiated way.

The Argumentative Function of Narratives in Public Debates on Intergenerational Solidarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the cursory overview of the debate already indicates, the public media discourse on intergenerational solidarity in the pandemic was replete with a great variety of storylines right from the start. A closer inspection of the respective contributions through the lens of moral philosophy reveals at least three different argumentative functions of such narratives: (a) *expository narratives* define the problem at hand in the

2 All source material in the analysis stems from the German media discourse and has been translated by the authors.

context of overarching historical processes and thus set the stage for the discussion of intergenerational solidarity, (b) *identificatory narratives* specify the collective identities of generations as subjects or objects of solidarity by recounting shared experiences, situations, or goals, and (c) *explanatory narratives* lend plausibility to normative claims regarding intergenerational solidarity by (re-)constructing morally relevant previous interactions and entanglements between generations.

(A) Expository Narratives: Setting the Stage for the Intergenerational Drama

One important function of narratives in public discourses about intergenerational solidarity is the historical localization of the present situation. Solidarity has been described as a concept for the “state of moral emergency” (Derpmann 2013, 209 [own translation]) that is invoked when ordinary moral orientations or political institutions are called into question. Accordingly, appeals to solidarity frequently start with the diagnosis of such an exceptional state of moral or political emergency, a fundamental crisis that challenges previous certainties and thus requires an extraordinary degree of social cohesion and cooperation. This also holds true in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the onset, the pandemic was framed as a watershed moment – “a universal shock to civilization” and a “turn of times” (Selge 2021). This expository narrative emphasizes discontinuity. The pandemic appears as an incisive event that divides history in a “before” and an “after.” The resulting rift between experience and expectation creates uncertainty and disorientation: Experiences made in the past may no longer be valid and applicable for a fundamentally different present and future. Thus, in an interview in the *taz* in spring 2020, Germany’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, emphasized the historically unprecedented situation: “This is about the consequences of a fundamental, global crisis, as we have not yet experienced. [...] I know that in history such severe shocks have never remained without consequences, also for the political system” (Fischer 2020). The statement sheds light on an interesting ambivalence of this narrative: on the one hand, it stresses the historical singularity of the present situation and the corresponding uncertain consequences (“as we have not yet experienced”). On the other, Fischer – in the role of an experienced “elder statesman” – draws a parallel to other “severe shocks” to estimate expectable political consequences. In such contexts, solidarity often appears as a coping strategy in the midst of disruption and uncertainty.

Another expository narrative also highlights the historical singularity of the pandemic but frames it in terms of a *challenge*. One article states: “The corona-crisis is a challenge for the solidarity between the generations” (Laschet 2020). Elsewhere, there is even talk of a test that the whole country is facing (Wernicke 2020). By comparison, this narrative of challenges transports a more conservative historical perspective oriented towards preservation and persistence despite all ruptures. The fo-

cus lies on maintaining historical achievements and the present status quo in an existential crisis. Solidarity has a twofold role to play in this context: on one hand, it is the means to “tackle the challenge we are facing” (Dahme 2020), a collective effort to preserve valuable resources and structures. On the other, it is itself a valuable resource and structure that must be preserved. In this sense, the pandemic must not result in a loss of solidarity but rather in stronger collective efforts to sustain it. Thus, the conservative German politician Armin Laschet claimed in the face of the first pandemic wave: “Retreat into one’s own four walls must not be accompanied by a retreat of humanity [...]. We must make a start now for unprecedented solidarity” (Wernicke 2020).

By contrast, a third form of expository narratives rather articulates a progressive view of history that highlights the future perspectives and the consequences of the pandemic. Thus, the crisis is framed as a chance and a possibility for collective change and learning. This is particularly evident in the following commentary: “This pandemic has taken too much from us to simply put it behind us now, without understanding it as an opportunity for change” (Behbehani 2021). The statement acknowledges the perceived historical uniqueness of the crisis but directly connects it to a positive outlook on potentials for the future. According to another commentary, the COVID-19 pandemic sheds light on social grievances, which “can also open up the opportunity to organize the economy and society differently if we draw the right conclusions” (Von Hirschhausen et al. 2020). In this context, there is sometimes a reference to further impending crises like global warming which are to be prevented or at least mitigated with what will have been learned in the pandemic (Fischer 2020). Thus, this narrative is oriented toward a positive turn that calls for a collective effort of solidarity to overcome existing social grievances and build a better future.

(B) Identificatory Narratives: Casting the Dramatis Personae of Generations

Generations are elusive entities. Their identity as collectives is usually based on the perception of some shared cultural imprint of their members. In this sense, they do not exist independent from the way they are interpreted (or interpret themselves). Narratives can have a constitutive function in this context. By articulating a common experience or outlook, e.g., a joint fate or historical mission, they help to construct and specify the collective identities of generations as (potential) subjects or objects of solidarity. Such identificatory narratives are often closely connected to age stereotypes that seem to give a concrete face to the respective generational group. This also applies in the context of public debates on intergenerational solidarity in the pandemic that were replete with age stereotypes (cf. also Steckdaub-Müller et al. 2026).

While older people were immediately detected and protected as a particularly vulnerable group during the first wave of the pandemic, this sweeping and ulti-

mately biologicistic stereotype of the “vulnerable old” was soon challenged by more specific narratives that cast the respective age group as a specific generation with a distinctive history and characteristic sociomoral features and achievements. One of these narratives was the story of the “oldest old” who had experienced the end of the war and the collapse of Nazi-Germany as children and adolescents. The respective narrative encompassed the survival of World War II and the ensuing profound upheaval with existential hardships while rebuilding a functioning and prosperous democratic community out of ruins. Accordingly, it countered the image of the vulnerable old with an epic storyline that attributed virtues of self-restraint and heroic sacrifice, e.g., strength, wisdom, and resilience, to the members of this age group, thus portraying them as role models for younger generations in a time of crisis:

Those over 80 today, [...] belong to the post-war generation that was brought up not to be weak and to cope by themselves at all costs. Gritting one’s teeth, not letting on, trusting in oneself – that was the maxim throughout one’s life. Even more so in old age, they do not want to be a burden to anyone. Asking for something and simply taking it without anything in return, “outing” oneself as weak and in need of help, does not fit in with the mindset of this generation. It is neither learned nor wanted. (Kutz and Haist 2020)

Another prominent but more ambivalent identificatory narrative targeted the subsequent younger segment of the old as the “baby boomer generation” at the center of intergenerational debates. Frequently portrayed as a generation who had grown up in a historically unprecedented era of political stability and economic growth in the Western world, they had long been characterized as a spoiled and egocentric age group, largely focused on individual fulfilment and excessive consumerism, e.g., in debates about intergenerational conflicts in the context of the welfare state or global warming. “They got the economy humming and developed a cracking lifestyle: big cars, big houses, big trips. Unfortunately, also: big ecological footprint. [...] There are eco-social outrages, but the parents’ generation was good at hiding them on the way up” (Balbierer 2021). Thus, cast as the self-centered, presumptuous, and reckless generational no-good at the center of many contemporary intergenerational conflicts, they suddenly found themselves in the role of a vulnerable group in need of protection and support. “The ‘golden agers,’ with their supposedly generous pension entitlements throughout and their supposedly cross-class lust for pleasure, have suddenly become frail people in need of protection, sitting frightened in their apartment waiting for their neighbors to help them with their shopping and only a face mask away from almost certain virus-related demise” (Lessenich 2020). Accordingly, reactions ranged from petty satisfaction to calls for magnanimous forgiveness. A younger commentator declared: “Now my generation must show

greatness” (Seyffarth 2020). Either way, the storyline of the baby boomer generation got a new narrative twist in the pandemic: the dethronement and humbling of its previously larger-than-life protagonists.

Eventually, a third identificatory narrative takes the pandemic itself as the collective experience that is shaping a new generation. In accordance with the idea that collective generational experiences usually affect individuals of a similar birth cohort during the formative years of their personal biographies, the target group are the children and adolescents that lived through almost two years of pandemic emergency. They are the “generation corona” for whom the pandemic and its aftermath will mark the decisive imprint of their collective identity (Behbehani 2021). This narrative is particularly interesting as it is clearly interwoven with two other kinds of pandemic storylines. On the one hand, it is embedded in the expository narrative of an unprecedented and at the same time still ongoing crisis with unclear outcomes. The young are “a generation [...] growing up in crisis mode” (Laskus 2020). Accordingly, the generational identity of the “generation corona” is not yet fully visible and determinable. It is only just emerging, and its future shape will ultimately be the crucial touchstone of our present management of the crisis. At the same time, the storyline is linked to another kind of pandemic narratives that delineates morally relevant entanglements between generations. The “generation corona” is described as a forgotten and disregarded generation who had to carry an unproportionate share of the physical, mental, and social burden of infection control measures for the sake of other age groups and without receiving appropriate attention or later reciprocal solidary support. Nobody “sacrificed as much of life as the young: school, training, studying, rock concerts, soccer practice, birthdays, bonfires, dancing, dreaming, making out. It’s a stolen time, and yes: it hurts” (Balbierer 2021). In this sense, they often appear as a betrayed generation, the “big loser[s] of today” (Matzig 2021) who now deserve special attention and maybe even compensation.

(C) Explanatory Narratives: Tracing the Dramatic Conflict between Generations

We usually do not count on solidarity from complete “moral strangers.” Instead, the expectation of attitudes and actions of solidarity seems to presuppose some pre-existing moral bond or relationship. Narratives can play an important part in this context. They recount past interactions and entanglements, for example, a shared history of mutual support or, on the contrary, unilateral failure and abandonment. In this way, they can help to substantiate current moral claims and liabilities among or between the respective individuals or groups. Such *explanatory narratives* were also pervasive in the public discourse on intergenerational solidarity in the COVID-19 pandemic.

One prominent explanatory storyline from the first year of the crisis was a narrative of incrimination and reprehension of the younger generation. Alluding to reports of violations of infection control measures and so-called “lockdown-parties” among adolescents, it condemned the behavior of the young as carefree and reckless, thus driving the pandemic at the expense of vulnerable groups as well as the general public. From this perspective, they appeared largely “inconsiderate and lacking solidarity” since they only took into account their own risks and benefits, thus provoking further pandemic waves and being held responsible for the ensuing infection control measures:

It is their fault that we all have to go back into lockdown. Because they didn't want to give up partying and traveling, even for a few months, we all have to suffer now. Because they themselves felt safe from severe disease trajectories due to their youth, they did not keep to the rules of social distancing, did not wear a mask and thus endangered older people and other risk groups. (Friedrich 2020)

From the point of view of many younger commentators, however, an opposing explanatory narrative of intergenerational entanglement suggested a completely different allocation of moral praise and blame between the generations that became apparent especially in the further course of the pandemic. Based on the story of a collective sacrifice of personal freedom and wellbeing of younger people for the sake of the protection of the older, more vulnerable generation, it brought to bear an expectation of gratitude and reciprocal solidarity that was subsequently frequently disappointed, e.g., in the context of the age-based prioritization of vaccines: “The latest outrage: while vaccinated people, so far mainly the older ones, are now allowed to celebrate birthdays and coffee parties again, the young continue to wait in isolation for their vaccination” (Balbierer 2021).

This narrative of unrequited support could ultimately nurture fundamental doubts about the overall state of intergenerational solidarity: “It is wonderful that life is gradually returning. But as a young person, one wonders what has become of the politicians’ appeals for more solidarity: Did they only apply in one direction?” (Balbierer 2021).

By expanding the temporal horizon of the narrative explanation, some older commentators actually arrived at a similar moral assessment of the situation and behavior of younger people in the pandemic. Assuming and at least tacitly regretting that the younger generations had long been economically disadvantaged and exploited as low-priced and fungible workforce in a precarious German labor market, these commentators now almost expected some form of (appropriate or at least understandable) retribution in the form of disregard and abandonment in the face of the COVID-19 crisis:

Now the “generation internship”³ is taking back what we stole from them, I thought. Now they are occupying the streets, the professions, the stores, locking us older people in our living rooms and putting food in front of our doors. This was followed, as if to prove it, by the horror images of overcrowded intensive care units and locked-up nursing home residents, cut off from the love of their relatives. (Selge 2021)

This type of explanatory narrative appears particularly interesting as it seems to be able to draw connections and conduct “moral accounting” across completely different crises at different points in time, thus (re-)constructing a morally charged intergenerational history that may span years or even decades. Thus, in an early contribution to the debate, a member of the older generation drew a connection between the assumed failure of his age group with regard to the prevention of global warming and the feeling of a moral indebtedness vis-à-vis the younger generation in the context of the pandemic: “He knows [...] that his decision is also about shame, he now sounds thoughtful: ‘Shame for a hardship, even if one is not to blame’. Of course, neither he nor anyone else can be ashamed of the pandemic, but he can be ashamed of the state in which he and his generation left the planet to those who came after them” (Haarhoff 2020). Such narratives can also have important implications for the moral justification of present decisions and future plans. Thus, a sense of shame for past moral failure and the wish for due exculpation can motivate actions aimed at restoration, compensation, and rehabilitation for those wronged:

If he had his way, those old people who can afford it thanks to their wealth should voluntarily make a financial contribution to mitigate the economic catastrophe that the young in particular will suffer after the pandemic. “I’m thinking of a foundation, ‘Old for Young after Corona,’ or perhaps a fund that could then be used to invest in training, education, and employment.” (Haarhoff 2020)

Discussion and Conclusion: The Coronavirus Pandemic as a Justification Narrative in Progress

With its reference to exceptional situations, specified social collectives, and reciprocal interactions between them, the concept of solidarity seems to have a particular affinity to narrative elements. Accordingly, the public discourse on intergenerational solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic is replete with a great variety of narratives. They help to shape, contextualize, and plausibilize the normative,

3 The term “generation internship” refers to young people who, around the turn of the millennium in Germany, had difficulties to obtain a permanent position due to the labor market situation despite their good education and were therefore shuttled from one internship to another.

moral or political claims articulated in the pertinent discussions about solidarity between generations. Starting from the concept of “justification narratives” (Forst 2013 [own translation]), we could distinguish at least three general types of such narratives according to their respective argumentative functions: expository narratives, identificatory narratives, and explanatory narratives.

Expository narratives offer a comprehensive historical classification and interpretation of the present situation. By drawing connections between events and integrating them into an overarching storyline, such narratives can generally provide traceability, orientation, and normative significance (Viehöver 2011). In the case of the pandemic, the definition and framing of the given situation in terms of a fundamental historical crisis thus frequently sets the stage for normative appeals to intergenerational solidarity as a (more or less) necessary and adequate response. Sometimes these expository narratives transport a whole implicit philosophy of history, some notion of the nature, structure, and direction of the historical process that also has implications for the ensuing conceptualization of the solidarity needed. For example, the narrative of the pandemic as a rupture emphasizes the discontinuity of the historical process and the openness and unpredictability of the current situation that necessitates standing together in the midst of fundamental uncertainty. The narrative of the pandemic as a challenge often rather expresses a conservative sense of history in terms of heritage and tradition that is accompanied by a communitarian understanding of solidarity as the collective preservation of past achievements in the face of destabilizing new developments. By contrast, the narrative of the crisis as a chance rather conveys a progressivist idea of history in terms of constant renewal and improvement. From this perspective, the pandemic uncovers the flaws and insufficiencies of the existing society and motivates a collective endeavor to overcome or optimize given institutions or structures. All in all, the relevance of such expository narratives for framing public debates about intergenerational solidarity must not be underestimated and therefore calls for critical analysis. After all, they can help clarify what is historically at stake in an imminent crisis, but also contribute to its trivializing appeasement or alarmist exaggeration and polarization (Roitman 2013).

Furthermore, *identificatory narratives* construct generations as subjects or objects of intergenerational solidarity by reference to shared experiences, situations, or goals. The potential to shape personal or collective identities has often been connected to narrative approaches (Viehöver 2011, 195; Forst 2013, 11; Lübke 2012). In the pandemic, different kinds of such narratives were taken up and further developed in order to specify the identities of the different generations involved. Often starting from the recollection of joint historical experiences and employing generalized images of age(ing), more or less clearly defined and homogeneous generational groups were (re-)constructed, for example, the battle-tried, wise and resilient veterans as a virtuous role model in times of crisis, the spoiled and self-indulgent baby boomers

who become dethroned and humiliated in the pandemic, or the “generation corona” whose future collective identity is at stake and will be decisively affected by our ability to cope with the pandemic. In light of such identificatory storylines, it is crucial to distinguish between those who narrate stories and those who are the subject matter of these stories. While the narrative (re-)construction of generations is often an act in which groups reassure themselves about their own collective identity by telling a shared storyline, the pandemic discourse was quite often dominated by external attributions which are prone to ageist stereotypes and stigmatization. Polemical generational caricatures like the needy or demanding old or the reckless young ignore individual differences and instead reinforce problematic othering, scapegoating, and discrimination (Meisner 2020; Vervaecke and Meisner 2021). Moreover, a simplistic view on generational relations during the pandemic may ultimately overlook the relevance of other intersecting social categories, such as class, race, or gender, as roots of social disadvantage and conflict (Rueda 2021).

Finally, *explanatory narratives* can serve to lend plausibility to normative moral or political claims regarding intergenerational solidarity by outlining relevant previous entanglements and interactions between generations that are envisioned in stories of achievement, gratitude, failure, guilt, indebtedness, forgiveness, exculpation, rehabilitation, etc. These narratives can reinforce mutual bonds and support between different generations but also bring to bear “open accounts” (Müller-Salo 2022 [own translation]) that need to be settled. For example, they comprise the incriminatory storyline of the reckless youths and their blameworthy misconduct in the pandemic that deserves reprimand and punishment, as well as the heroic narrative of a collective solidary sacrifice of the younger generation that remained largely unacknowledged and unrequited and now calls for due reparations. At the same time, there are more encompassing explanatory stories about the failure of older generations in previous crises connected to excessive capitalism, unrestricted industrialization, environmental pollution, and impending global warming that suggest a historical guilt and responsibility vis-à-vis subsequent and future generations that needs to be paid off. Of course, such explanatory narratives as well as their societal consequences are always in need of closer examination. Storylines about past entanglements between collectives have a notorious tendency to become biased, ideological, and instrumentalized political myths or conspiracy narratives that serve to “other,” scapegoat, and ultimately fight or suppress individuals or whole groups (Bergmann 2018). The emotional charge of narratives can complicate a rational discussion, here, but at the same time motivate it. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to critically assess such narratives with regard to their historical accuracy and balance in order to evaluate the plausibility of the moral or political claims derived from them.

The closer inspection of these different kinds of storylines thus shows that such “narratives are by no way innocent, they can contribute to the solidification of repressive domination and inequality as ideologies [...], they can justify discrimina-

tion, prosecution, hate and violence” (Forst and Günther 2021, 15 [own translation]). Under these circumstances, the critical appraisal of pandemic narratives on inter-generational solidarity clearly is a necessary and important task. This first and foremost concerns the epistemic quality and weight of the respective stories as well as the moral value of the justified notions of solidarity between generations. However, while there is a large variety of accepted theories and criteria regarding the evaluation of moral arguments, it seems much less clear how narratives are to be assessed from an epistemological and moral philosophical point of view. Criteria like historical correctness and normative acceptability (Forst 2013) appear obvious but remain vague and controversial. For example, stories obviously always leave space for various legitimate interpretations of events, and it is not clear *prima facie* how to decide between these different narrative versions of the past. Apparently, additional aspects like authenticity or coherence must be taken into consideration in order to judge the plausibility of narratives. At the same time, the normative force of narratives is not just a matter of their internal validity but also of their actual external impact. Therefore, the ethical discussion of the plausibility and persuasiveness of pandemic narratives has to be complemented by the critical analysis of the social effectiveness and influence they unfold. This also solicits further analyses of the role of art forms like film and literature in shaping and reproducing narratives, as well as an investigation of media like TV, print, or social media that amplify their impact and extend their social reach (Venkatesan et al. 2022; Nulman 2021).

Such a critical examination of justification narratives in a time of crisis can ultimately provide important insights into the fundamental moral constitution of our society – also for the future. Although pandemic narratives have turned out to be quite diverse, many of them have one thing in common: they assign a singular historical significance to the present moment in time. Such developments are predestined to become the starting point for new overarching justification narratives themselves (Forst and Günther 2021). Hence, the different narratives in the pandemic as well as the narrative of the pandemic itself will go on in one way or another and will play a role in future debates, for example, regarding our response to climate change. It is still open which of these narratives will persist and develop. In this sense, a commentator asked at the begin of the pandemic:

Will people later tell stories of us as a society that took care of its weakest members in a time of greatest need and not only made a charitable daily or weekly project out of it, but also learned the lesson that it can't work any other way than together? Or will they report of cold, inhuman considerations according to which an old human life counted less than a small business? (Klute 2020)

Not least due to the fact, that “narratives (including those in the public arena) have an important role to play in creating and shaping moral futures through social pro-

cesses" (Samuel and Lucivero 2022), it will also be an ethical task to analyze and criticize the COVID-19 pandemic as a narrative in progress.

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