

## “Everybody Needs to Do Their Part, So We Can Get This Under Control.” Reactions to the Norwegian Government Meta-Narratives on COVID-19 Measures

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*On March 12, 2020, the Norwegian government put the country on lock-down to get the COVID-19 situation under control. Making people adhere to restrictive measures is difficult. Even so, the Norwegian government largely succeeded in getting the population to comply and became the first European country to announce control over the situation. In this study, we ask what narratives the government put forth in their communication of the measures and how these measures were handled and made sense of in personal narratives at the general population level. We base our discussion on near daily government press conferences in March–April, as well as qualitative interviews with 16 individuals. Using a cultural narrative perspective on the data, we tie these meta-narratives and personal narratives together. Persuading people to comply with prevention and control measures in a crisis is crucial, and our study shows the importance of the selection of meta-narratives. There will be cultural differences in governance and receptiveness of the population across different settings, and our study suggests that governments will have to balance where on different continua they place their narratives, balancing freedom up against restrictions, hope against fear, and individualism against solidarity.*

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### Highlights

- Practitioners and policymakers need to be aware of the narratives they use to communicate COVID-19 measures and how these fit with the overarching narratives in society. Using narratives that resonate as much as possible with people’s personal narratives may aid meaning making and compliance.
- Practitioners also need to balance where on different continua they place their COVID-19 narratives: balancing freedom against restrictions, hope against fear, and individualism against solidarity. The ideal placement of the narratives depends on culture and context.
- Ambiguously communicated messages make room for subjective interpretations in people’s everyday lives, allowing for differing and conflicting personal narratives. Therefore, communication should be as concrete and consistent as possible.

On March 12, 2020, the Norwegian government introduced the strongest measures in peacetime in Norway as a result of COVID-19. The measures were demanding and led to extensive uncertainty. Schools, nurseries, most workplaces, and leisure activities were closed, unemployment raised dramatically, and social distancing was enforced (see the appendix for a list of measures). The government gave daily press conferences updating and amending their advice and regulations. In the COVID-19 crisis, communication plays a key role, and in this “political leaders and health experts have a special responsibility to provide us with accurate information, and to implement measures that require behaviour change to fight the pandemic” (Finset et al., 2020, p. 873). This effort is also aimed at getting citizens to understand the public priorities and for them to be engaged (Chen et al., 2020). This engagement is further tied to partaking in the necessary collective action: “As the COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to nations’ security, prosperity and social order, collective actions led by governments are deemed as crucial steps to overcome the emerging problems associated with it” (Guan, Deng, & Zhou, 2020, p. 2). The Norwegian government largely succeeded in getting the population to comply. After the first three weeks of lock-down, surveys showed high levels of compliance, with nine out of 10 supporting the continuation of the strict measures (Norsk Koronamonitor, 2020a), and three out of four trusting the information given by the government (Norsk Koronamonitor, 2020b). Norway became the first European country to announce that the situation was under control due to low levels of hospitalizations and mortalities (Christensen & Lægheid, 2020). In our article, we ask: What narratives did the government put forth in their communication of the measures, and how were these measures handled and made sense of in personal narratives at the general population level?

We draw on two sets of qualitative data. First, we analyzed the government’s daily press conferences from March 12 to early April—a period with extensive uncertainty and widespread worry. We explore the meta-narratives the government used in communicating the measures. Second, in April, we conducted 16 in-depth semistructured interviews with a diverse sample of participants. We asked about the rules and regulations, the participants’ stance on these, how they followed up on these in their everyday lives, and whether people were policing each other.

Drawing on cultural narrative psychology (Hammack, 2008), we analyzed the material. The interviews and the press conferences were conducted at a given period, and recording and analyzing these contribute to the living historical memory (see also Andrews, 2020). In a pandemic, getting the population to comply with the imposed regulations is key, and our article contributes with an exploration of the narratives of both politicians and general population participants.

### *The Norwegian Context*

Stories do not exist apart from context. Placing our work within cultural narrative psychology, context is emphasized (Hammack, 2008). Contextualizing the “broader terrain” of our analysis (Andrews, 2020 p. 12) is necessary to place our study in context and time.

The Nordic model consists of a welfare model with high taxes, a large public sector, and inclusive welfare structures (Simon & Mobekk, 2019). Being a high-trust society, Norwegian citizens express trusting the government to a larger degree than many other countries (OECD, 2017). In addition, Norway has been categorized as a tight culture concerning adherence to social norms, implying strict norms and low tolerance of deviant behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011). These results have been discussed in relation to COVID-19 by Van Bavel and colleagues (2020), where it is emphasized that “tight groups have more order, synchrony, and self-regulation” and where it is questioned whether “loose societies will adapt as quickly to the virus” (p. 9). Christensen and Lægheid (2020) emphasize that “compared with many other countries, Norway has performed well in handling the crisis” (p. 1). They acknowledge Norway’s advantageous starting point and explain the context as

one with “competent politicians, a high-trust society with a reliable and professional bureaucracy, a strong state, a good economic situation, a big welfare state, and low population density” (p. 1). The Norwegian government could provide extensive economic support to companies and individuals in this crisis. This, together with the established welfare state and the tight culture, forms a crucial contextual framework for our analysis.

### A Cultural Psychological Lens on Narrative Psychology

In an unpredictable, changing world, humans try to make sense of their lives by organizing their experiences into narratives (Bruner, 1990). We here adopt a fluid take on narratives, where we look at the stories that are told about the COVID-19 measures and how the different narratives are accepted or altered. Our fluid take on narratives is one that allows for the “disorganisation of everyday life” (Emerson & Frosh, 2004, p. 8), rather than a stricter temporal structure. A cultural psychological stance on narrative psychology (Hammack, 2008) understands narratives as existing on two levels of analysis. On the individual level, *personal narratives* provide individuals with sense of meaning and continuity in their own lives, while the societal-level *master narratives* provide a sense of group meaning (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012, see also Hammack, 2008 for the interplay between personal narratives and master narratives). Multiple master narratives can exist within the same culture. The process of *narrative engagement* involves individuals deciding consciously or unconsciously which of these master narratives to adopt into their own narrative (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Different narratives and stances—including contradictions—can be combined in an individual narrative. Narrative science strives to understand how individuals respond to the master narratives and which they choose to integrate into their own personal narratives, and Hammack and Pilecki (2012) emphasize this approach’s usefulness for political psychology.

Persuading people to comply with prevention and control measures in crisis is crucial and involves storytelling and meaning making. Across and within contexts, there will be cultural differences in governance style and the receptiveness of the population. If master narratives in a society are shared collective stories, then *meta-narratives* can be seen as overarching narratives on a topic, such as those used in the Norwegian government’s communication of the COVID-19 measures. These meta-narratives tap into the master narratives for meaning making, as do the personal narratives. People can either develop their own personal narratives on the case in question in accordance with, unrelated to, or in opposition to these meta-narratives (or any combination of these; see Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). In our study, we explore both the meta-narratives and the personal narratives when it comes to the meaning making of the COVID-19 crisis, investigating people’s narrative engagement.

### Methodology

Our project consists of two data sources. First, we look at the government’s near daily press conferences. We chose the period March 12, when the government asked Norway to go on lock-down, to April 8, the day after a key press conference on easing the measures somewhat. We watched these press conferences (at nrk.no) and decided to focus on the narratives put forth by three representatives from the Norwegian government: Prime Minister Erna Solberg, as head of government; Minister of Health and Care Services, Bent Høie; and Minister of Justice and Public Security, Monica Mæland. As heads of the health sector (Høie) and the regulations implemented (Mæland), these ministries were key in both handling and presenting the measures (Høie appearing at nearly every press conference; Mæland participated frequently). All three politicians are from the main government party Høyre (the Norwegian Conservative party). We transcribed the contents of each press conference. We

read these transcripts multiple times, looking for recurrent meta-narratives in use to persuade people to comply with the measures. Both authors read the transcripts marking possible meta-narratives in use regarding the measures, and we then compared these. We were almost in complete unison, and the minor disagreements were discussed and resolved. There were several rhetorical tools in use by the government that we considered, but left out, such as the active use of stories from the peripheries, likely as an attempt to make the narratives relevant for the whole country. However, this was not included in our final five meta-narratives, as we saw this and other such communicative strategies more as rhetorical tools rather than extensively used meta-narratives. After careful analysis, we constructed five meta-narratives from the data that we saw as the main meta-narratives in use by the government.

Secondly, wanting to explore people's meaning making of the government measures, we conducted 16 qualitative in-depth interviews. Recruiting eight participants each by reaching out in our broad networks and using snowball sampling, we assured a sample of participants in diverse life situations affected differently by the government measures. Having acquaintance interviews in our sample can have both strengths and limitations (Garton & Copland, 2010). From a social constructivist perspective, such interviews can be particularly suitable for investigating individuals' subjective meaning making and can in some cases increase the trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretations, as it may allow for a more relaxed atmosphere, as well as interviewees potentially opening up more (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011). In their work interviewing their own acquaintances, Blichfeldt and Heldbjerg further argue that participants were allowed more control over the interview and played "a much more active role in the meaning making process than we traditionally assume" (p. 19). However, drawbacks include anonymity issues, which we handled by linking minimal personal information to each quote we present in the analysis. In addition, acquaintances can feel obligated to participate in the research. By asking many more than we needed, and emphasizing this in our communication, people were more at liberty to decline the invitation, which six people also did. We have a research permit from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The 16 participants constitute a diverse sample: eight female, eight male; age spanning from 20s to early 70s; five of the 16 are in the "high-risk" group; 11 are employed; two are retired; one lives alone; three have small children. Seven were working at home offices, two had lost their jobs due to the situation, and three were health professionals physically attending their jobs. All but two of the participants have center/left political stances (see limitations section). The interviews were conducted between the April 5 and April 23. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and done in person (4), via phone (6), or via Zoom (6). They lasted from 25 to 78 minutes, most around 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded, and each author transcribed her eight interviews in full. The study was presented as one focusing on meaning making of life under COVID-19, and questions included what the government approach to COVID-19 was, how the measures were influencing participants' lives, whether they agreed with the measures and whether other people in general seemed to think one should comply with the measures.

We read and reread the transcribed material and found the topic of people's engagement with government measures particularly valuable to the COVID-19 situation. Based on this early engagement with data, we constructed five main questions to guide our analysis of participants' narratives: (1) The government's communication of measures; (2) participants' stance on the actual measures; (3) participants' own narratives in use; (4) meaning making and negotiating the measures into daily life practices, and; (5) how they saw other people handling the measures. We then grouped all relevant material into these five questions and reduced this several times, eventually reworking these into three main sections (see below).

In terms of positionality, we are both Norwegian, and our being socialized into the Norwegian tight culture may have influenced our analysis. Both authors naturally "lived" the COVID-19 crisis alongside the participants. We also navigated these measures and followed these as best we could.

Being a part of the situation may provide less distance to the topic at hand, but it also gives us insight we do not always have in a research situation.

### Analysis and Results

The results are divided into two parts: the government meta-narratives from the press conferences and the interview participants' personal narratives.

#### *Part 1: Meta-Narratives Communicated by the Norwegian Government*

From the government's press conferences from March 12 to April 8, we constructed five main meta-narratives the government used to convince the Norwegian people to contribute and comply with the lock-down. We analyzed the narratives of Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, the Minister of Health, Bent Høie, and the Minister of Justice, Monica Mæland.

#### *The Norwegian Dugnad*

“Dugnad” in Norwegian can be defined as voluntary work that is performed as a collective effort. It comes from the old Norse word *dugnaðr*, meaning help, support or virtue, good quality. The word has been in Norwegian discourse for centuries, making it akin to a master narrative on unity and working together, which is also echoed in the foundations of the Norwegian welfare state (Lorentzen & Dugstad, 2011; Simon & Mobekk, 2019). Usually, *dugnad* is a shared project or undertaking that is performed by a local community, like a sports group or a housing association. March 11, Minister of Health Bent Høie had an op-ed in the national newspaper VG, entitled *A Call to Dugnad (Innkalling til dugnad)*. From day one, and throughout the COVID-19 period in question here, the term *dugnad* was used actively (and near daily) by the government in their press conferences, calling the measures a collective *dugnad* everyone had to take part in.

Date		
12.3	Solberg	In Norway we stand together when it counts. We mobilize to <i>dugnad</i> and collaboration in small and larger local communities, and this is more important now than ever before. This virus is so contagious that we cannot touch each other, but we will take care of each other
13.3	Høie	First off, I want to say that I am incredibly grateful for the way these extensive measures that we presented yesterday have been received. My experience is that the whole population now are onboard for this good <i>dugnad</i>
20.3	Høie	It may be that our <i>dugnad</i> will last longer than we hope and want. It may be that we have to work together a while longer. But there will be a day when we can take the work clothes and work gloves off. Then we will see that the work we have done together has yielded results

Using this concept speaks to the Norwegian intentional world (as per Shweder, 1990). The nation is familiar with this terminology and associated behavior, appealing to a positive social identity as Norwegians working together for a shared goal. This was met with criticism from some scholars, arguing that a word associated with solidarity, unity, and voluntary work obscured the forced nature of the measures (Tjora, 2020).

#### *National Romantic Norwegianness*

In the communication around unity, community, and doing this together, there were also frequent references to a Norwegian national romantic identity.

Date		
15.3	Mæland	The last few days we have seen what Norway is made of. There are not many countries in the world where the authorities can introduce the most intrusive rules of peacetime, with a population that responds by saying, “yes, we will partake in this.”
19.3	Mæland	As the prime minister pointed out yesterday, there is something special about Norway. The trust we have in each other is more powerful than any weapon and more valuable than any oil fund. And the government’s promise to the population is that it will not take this trust for granted
7.4	Høie	I am very fond of hiking in the mountains, as so many others in this country. . . . Together we have now struggled up a long, steep mountainside, and the rough measures have been difficult for a lot of people. . . . We have gained control of the spreading of the infection, and we have to maintain that control. We are not going to run down from the mountaintop with shaking knees, we will walk slowly and carefully, so that we make it safely home

The first two of these quotes speak to the fit between the Norwegian society and what was now demanded of people. It taps into national romantic, cultural narratives about who Norwegians are as a people and emphasizes their shared Norwegianness. The final quote speaks to a Norwegian way of life, related to hiking in the mountains. The use of this imagery of Norwegians as an outdoors, sturdy, mountain people may have inspired people to participate and adhere to the norms or for people to feel like the speech would resonate with relevant frames.

### *Solidarity with the Vulnerable*

In the two previous narratives, the government uses culturally salient concepts like *dugnad*, trust, and hiking. The government also actively made use of solidarity—that the many are doing this to protect the few.

Date		
12.3	Høie	Some people will probably say that they are not afraid of being infected. And this is my message to them: “Perhaps you are not worried for yourself. But you have to participate in limiting the infection out of consideration for your grandmother who is very old, your little sister who has asthma, or your neighbour who has cancer. And not least for all of the thousands in our health services who are now about to enter a demanding time and who need us all to contribute.”
20.3	Mæland	Our most important job right now is to still fight the spread of the infection, and so we all have to partake in that <i>dugnad</i> —it’s about protecting the most vulnerable ones amongst us
24.3	Solberg	Unfortunately, the government’s decision today means new weeks of severe limitations on our lives. But we’re doing it for everyone we love. For them to be able to keep their lives

The government frequently appealed to solidarity with “those whom the virus strikes the hardest.” Especially, as Høie’s quote from March 12 shows, the authorities appealed to people’s conscience, asking them to put their own interests aside out of solidarity for people in risk groups. Later it became clearer that the virus could be dangerous for people also beyond these groups, and this narrative thus changed somewhat, from being the key focus in the beginning to more of a focus on the virus being dangerous (see the *dangerous virus* narrative below).

### *Trustworthy Leadership*

The politicians drew on several aspects to emphasize that people could and should have faith in their handling of the crisis. They spoke openly about disagreements, about the facts they were basing their decisions on, about political unity and the mutual relationship between the competent

government and the people. As the Prime Minister (7.4) said: “The changes we [the government], are doing now, we [Norwegians] will do together.”

Date		
12.3	Høie	The measures we are taking may cause fear in some. I hope that it will also cause a sense of safety in most people. For the population can rest assured that we are taking the measures needed to prevent spreading of the infection and that the ones who become seriously ill also will receive good healthcare when they need it
17.3	Mæland	There are also many questions popping up, and it's not like we have the answer to everything. It's sort of like the road has to be made as we go
31.3	Solberg	I also want to thank Stortinget [the Parliament] for its good cooperation. We are also cooperating well with the parts in the labour market to make sure that the long-term consequences of this crisis will be as small as possible. That we are working together now in these times is a strength to Norway as a nation, it's a good sign that we will manage to move on when we can ease up on the measures

A narrative of trustworthy leadership is put forth, where the situation is handled and various parts are collaborating, but also with an honest approach saying that leaders do not know everything. At a press conference on April 7, when measures were eased somewhat, Høie said that the government and the different health authorities were in agreement as to the challenges ahead and how to deal with these challenges. In the same speech, however, he emphasized where the government approach deviated from the specific recommendations of the health authorities (e.g., Høie, 7.4: “We have received advice that the municipalities themselves should decide whether nurseries and schools should be open. We are not following that advice.”) The transparency of the government is emphasized in this open communication on the decision-making processes.

### *A Dangerous Virus*

Throughout the press conferences, the virus was presented as dangerous.

Date		
13.3	Solberg	Yesterday we had our first mortality. My thoughts go out to the family and relatives. But unfortunately, there will probably be more. This also shows the seriousness of the situation
24.3	Høie	The Corona virus has struck Norway and Europe. We see that hospital corridors in Madrid are filling up with sick people. We see that tired Italian doctors are unable to help all those in need of help. This is what we have to avoid in the Norwegian health service. That's why we have to stick to our measures
7.4	Solberg	But the virus has a high price. Many Norwegians have lost their lives. Their families have entered the Easter week without their loved ones. . . . Everyone has seen the pictures and read the horrible stories from other European countries, where the health services have collapsed. Our goal is to keep that from happening

Here, when seeing the press conferences at large, the narratives changed through the process, demonstrating the temporal fluidity of the narratives (Andrews, 2020). In the very beginning, there was little information, and the key message of the press conferences was on solidarity. As time went by, cases from Norway as well as other parts of the world demonstrated that the virus also claimed the lives of younger people without known underlying diseases. The government's narrative changed to one where the danger was less underplayed for others than those particularly vulnerable (see, for example, Solberg's quote of the 7.4 on “horrible stories from other European countries”). This narrative shift followed the increased knowledge and understanding of the virus and serves as an example of the dynamic engagement the government needed to have with its own narratives.

## *Part 2: Participants' Responses to Government Meta-Narratives*

In this second part of the analysis, we present the 16 interview participants' negotiations of their own and the governmental narratives in three sections: (1) how the participants saw the government measures; (2) how the measures were negotiated and made into everyday life practices; and (3) how other people behaved and handled the measures.

### *Stance on the Government Measures*

In general, the participants were well aware of the government measures. All participants except one explicitly stated an overall agreement with the measures. When legitimizing their support for the measures, many participants drew on the government meta-narratives. Especially frequent was the use of the meta-narratives of the collective *dugnad*, solidarity, and trustworthy leadership, suggesting a narrative engagement with the government meta-narratives. Many stressed a sense of community and solidarity in the *dugnad*, stating that people needed to take part in this shared project:

I feel that many of the measures that have been carried out seem reasonable, and I agree that everybody needs to do their part, so we can get this under control and not infect others who must not be infected. (Participant 4)

Several participants brought up this necessity of conforming to the measures to protect people in risk groups from being infected from the virus, echoing the governments' meta-narrative of solidarity. Participants described being in a state of emergency where their individual needs were secondary and a collective *dugnad* was needed to protect people in risk groups.

The participants described trusting that the government had the people's best interest at heart and that the authorities were doing what was necessary. This was also the case for participants who explicitly stated that the government was not their "preferred" one: "Generally speaking I do trust that they [the government] know what they're doing. Even though today's government is not my preferred government, one does have a fundamental belief that they know what they're doing" (Participant 13). Several other participants, also not supporters of the Conservative Party, similarly stated explicitly that they trusted both the ability and intentions of the government, echoing the narrative of trustworthy leadership.

This trust in the measures was also shared by participants who mentioned the economic aspect of the measures:

I think at least it's been very comforting that we have dared to come at it with force from the beginning, but it's also thought-provoking, because it has sort of been measures that have been very costly to the Norwegian state financially. . . . But I guess I'm one of those who are mostly happy that there have been such strict measures. (Participant 2)

Even though many of the participants mentioned the economic costs of the measures, most still stated they were not being particularly worried about Norway, mentioning the welfare state and stable economy as "good foundations" for getting through the situation. Furthermore, it seemed that participants were especially positive to the Norwegian approach when comparing it with that of other countries. Neighboring Sweden took a very different approach to the virus, something almost all the participants mentioned. For example, participant 16 agreed with the Norwegian measures particularly when comparing these to the Swedish approach: "I think Sweden, for example, is playing with high stakes with getting so many mortalities in their process of achieving immunity. I wouldn't be pleased with living in Sweden and having the measures they have."



*Criticism of the Measures.* As mentioned above, all but one of the participants stated that they agreed with the measures overall. However, several of the participants did mention things they were less happy with. A few said they thought the ban on traveling to your cabin was illogical (e.g., participants 2 and 16), others emphasized that measures could have been stricter (e.g., participants 7 and 13), and a few disagreed with the financial packages made available for businesses (participant 11 and 12). Some participants also criticized that the measures came too late: “We’ve now heard about this Corona-stuff since January, and then they [the government] were really surprised in March and had no plans ready, it seemed. I’m not very impressed by that” (Participant 12). While some shared this view of the measures being put in action too late (e.g., participant 10), others emphasized the timing being just right. A few others, on the other hand, stated that this was not the time to criticize, but to agree and comply:

I don’t think one shouldn’t be critical of politics, but I’m thinking that we’re not in a position where one should ask questions about the measures either, because that creates division, which again could lead to less support, instead of everyone thinking that, ‘okay, this is happening. So, we’ll just have to support it even if we disagree and we can sort of take that discussion afterwards.’ (Participant 6)

This focus on need for agreement, and that discussions and criticism could wait, echoed the general political sentiment at that time, with opposition parties working in unison with the government through the period of lock-down, a unity emphasized in several of the press conferences in line with the trustworthy leadership narrative.

*Communication of the Measures.* Not only did the participants talk about their views of the measures, they also discussed how these had been communicated. Many participants mentioned liking how the government talked of “a spirit of *dugnad*” (*dugnadsånd*), appealing to shared voluntary work rather than strict rules. Since most participants had taken the measures seriously from the beginning, several also described it as unimportant whether the government presented the measures as rules or recommendations as they were complying either way. However, a few participants, like participant 14, stressed that this rhetoric on recommendations was not always sufficient:

I think the government sort of tested the waters first by having recommendations . . . : ‘Hey, you, please, don’t party,’ ‘hey, you, please, don’t do this and that,’ ‘please, don’t go to Italy.’ And then they saw that okay, but people are doing it anyway. I guess it’s a bit like if speed limits were to be introduced today, it might have been merely encouraged at first: ‘Hey, please, don’t drive too fast, it’s dangerous.’ And then they notice: ‘Oh, people are still driving too fast. Let’s make it illegal and you get a very, very severe fine for doing it.’ (Participant 14)

In the press conferences, the government stressed that they wanted people to follow the recommendations voluntarily, instead of imposing strict punishable rules. However, some recommendations were made into rules as people were not complying (e.g., the cabin ban, where the government asked people to not go to their cabins in fear of strain on local health services, but the recommendation was made into a strict rule, enforced by the home guard at times, as many were not following the recommendation; see Moss & Sandbakken, 2021).

Even though most participants were pleased with the way the government had communicated the measures, several mentioned ambiguities in the messages from authorities. Participant 6 expressed worry for measures that were presented vaguely: “The rules that have been unclear, they have been a bit open to interpretation, and people have to different extents followed it [the measure in question] based on what they have interpreted as the purpose of the measure.” This criticism of vague or contradicting messages from authorities was shared by several other participants. Still, most pointed out that in the end, despite the vagueness, they acknowledged the government’s efforts to

answer questions and navigate uncertain times the best they could. As seen in the press conference, the government was transparent with what they did not know (see Mæland, 17.3). Participant 15 described how the government had been “open, and are creating trust, being present and clear, and are answering questions upon questions upon questions in press conferences.” Being accessible and taking people’s everyday life questions seriously was outlined as especially positive.

### *From Meta-Narratives to Everyday Practices*

Drawing on the concept of narrative engagement (Hammack & Cohler, 2009) related to the measures, we argue that most participants—as seen in the previous theme as well—integrated some of the government’s meta-narratives into their own personal narratives. However, adopting the regulations into one’s own life was not as clear-cut as agreeing to the measures at an overarching level. Participants discussed the microlevel meaning making of the measures, which shows the complexity of strict or ambiguous measures for everyday practices and how the participants tried to make sense of these measures in their own lives.

*Everyday Deliberations.* Most participants said they were trying to adopt the measures into their everyday living. However, integrating the measures to one’s own lives was not always a simple task with frequent ambiguities on what was “right” or “wrong.” Most participants described having inner discussions of what actions to take:

I spend quite a bit of mental capacity on it. . . . Having to think like, ‘yes, but can we go out now? We live in the middle of the city, so there’s a lot of people. We can’t go out at those times, we have to wait a bit’—or maybe we don’t *have to*, but we choose to do so to be on the safe side. (Participant 5)

Across the material, such inner deliberations seemed especially frequent when measures were presented ambiguously or were left open to interpretation, leaving participants to make their own “rules” based on interpretations of the measures. As participant 10 put it: “Much is vague, so then we’ve rather just made it into certain rules. Then it’s a lot easier to get by in everyday life.” Some reflected on the discrepancies in the messages from the government and the Institute of Public Health, which complicated matters:

I think that’s been very tiresome, that you yourself are supposed to discuss what’s okay and what’s not okay all the time. . . . The advice from the website of FHI [The Institute of Public Health] is not necessarily in line with what comes from the political side. They are much stricter from the political side than from FHI. That leads one to interpret it [the measures] through the channels and forums one moves in, and that can make it a bit random. There are definitely a lot of different opinions about how this advice should be put into practice. And if somebody has a very strong opinion, I think it gets a bit sensitive, because nobody wants people to die. (Participant 15)

Participant 15 draws on the meta-narrative of solidarity but stresses how ambiguous messages from authorities could lead to people having different interpretations of how measures should be translated into everyday life practice. Because of the room for such different interpretations of the measures, participant 13, who has small children, “interviewed” friends before meeting up:

13: The ones we socialise with now we have interviewed before we socialise with them. You sort of check, ‘who have you seen, where have you been, what are you doing?’

I: And then you make an assessment based on that?

13: Yes, then we make an assessment based on whether these are people we can socialise with.

*Negotiating Logic and Feasibility of the Measures.* It seemed especially difficult for the participants to follow the measures if these seemed illogical or without purpose:

I sometimes wonder, 'are we really thinking clearly now, what is the rationale behind what we are doing now?' . . . Because now we can't go to a therapist one by one, or go for a walk in the park with the therapist, but you can go to Narvesen [a kiosk] and stand close in line to get a hotdog. It gets difficult, because it doesn't make sense. (Participant 9)

Several participants similarly engaged in this search for rationality in the measures. Some participants described justifying adopting less strict adherence of the measures by finding rational arguments:

For example, we invited people to a dinner at our place where we were five people sitting close to each other. But we had managed to justify that to ourselves because these were people whom we met at work anyway. And kind of had close encounters with from before. So it sort of wasn't *new* close encounters. (Participant 2)

In some cases, following the measures was described as physically impossible: "the halls [at work] aren't two meters wide (laughter). So it's impossible to avoid bumping into people and being too close to people" (Participant 6). Many of the participants pointed out that when the logic and feasibility of the measures was unclear, this made it less motivating to follow.

*The Fear of Infecting Others.* In everyday life deliberations, participants especially drew on the solidarity narrative by describing fear of being the one to infect others, especially those in the risk groups. Participant 14, who is young and healthy, explained started taking the measures seriously when he realised his actions could lead to others dying:

So if . . . I have Corona, cough in my own hand and touch an item in the shop, and then an old man comes along and touches the same item afterwards and then wipes his nose or something like that, then he might catch corona. Then I very quickly realised that, 'okay. People can *actually* die from it.' And then I immediately realised that, 'okay, we have to take this seriously.' . . . You don't want to be the reason somebody else dies. That would be extremely bad. (Participant 14)

Participant 14 here echoes both the government's solidarity narrative and the dangerous virus narrative in his own personal narrative. When measures were ambiguous and up for individual interpretation, this fear of infecting others in the risk groups lead to internal discussions of what was the right thing to do:

I have many internal discussions about things. Should I go on a trip there? Well, I might be infected, without noticing it, and then I infect somebody on the bus. I don't go to my family, because I don't want that responsibility. (Participant 3)

Drawing on the solidarity narrative and dangerous virus narrative, most of the participants explicitly talked about avoiding infecting others as the key motivation to follow the measures.

### *How Other People Are Handling the Measures*

All the participants were asked how they thought other people around them were responding to the government's measures. Almost all participants emphasized that close to everyone around them followed the measures. Participant 4 described how everyone in his network viewed the measures as important: "Yes. Yes, yes, definitively. No one I have talked to thinks differently. Neither here in the neighbourhood nor family or friends. Everyone is sort of, sitting in the same boat." This sentiment was echoed by many other participants, several directly using the concept of *dugnad*. Participant 7 said: "I haven't heard about anybody that have protested or reacted. My impression is that everyone we know are eager to participate in this *dugnad*." Hence, the government's meta-narrative of the measures being a common effort—a *dugnad*—seemed to have been adopted not only by most of the participants, but also their networks. One participant had seen a change in sentiment. At the beginning some of his friends did not take the measures seriously, but then they later changed their perception:

I: But generally speaking, you now have the impression that the ones around you think that this is something we are on board with?

3: Yes, absolutely. Even those who joked more than me, who were very much like, 'oh my god, it's just blah blah blah again about virus and stuff like that, it's just hysteria from the entire society'. . . They are now very much siding with the measures and understand that it has to be this way.

*The Noncompliers.* Even though stressing that they believed most people followed the measures, several participants did spend considerable time in their interviews berating people who did not comply with the rules, frequently presenting this in ingroup and outgroup terms. Oneself and one's closest were largely presented as following the rules, while noncompliers were often spoken of as the outgroup. Participant 7 was very irritated at people who did not keep their distance:

7: Personally, I almost can't handle going for a walk, I get so annoyed.

I: Because people don't keep their distance?

7: Yes, you know what, I almost get sick and sort of get high blood-pressure just from taking a walk. One has to get out and get some fresh air.

I: Yeah, yeah. What is it that gives you high blood-pressure then?

7: That people don't keep their distance. That they jog past you breathing and panting.

While participant 7 expressed annoyance, others described disbelief when people were not complying with the measures to the degree that they themselves were:

The times when I hear about people maybe not being as thorough with those rules as I am, then I get a bit surprised, because now I feel that it's so imprinted in society and in me. I think everyone is thinking, 'now we have this spirit of *dugnad*. Now we won't go to the store like five times a day.' So when for example an acquaintance asks, 'do you want to meet for dinner after Easter?' Then I get a bit like, 'how can you even think about that?' Because to me that was completely out of the question. (Participant 8)

Experiencing surprise and disbelief when other people were not complying to the measures as much as themselves can be seen as an expression of the meta-narrative of the government having been incorporated into the participants' own personal narrative of the measures. This seemed to

particularly be the case for the *dugnad* narrative, where those not participating in the *dugnad* were seen as ruining the effort of those who followed it:

Even though absolutely most people follow it, and it's great to see that we have this *dugnad*, this spirit of *dugnad* in society, which is so great—but still, even if 90 percent follows it, there is still like 10 percent who go partying and stuff, ruining it for everyone else, spreading it [the virus]. And that's just extremely annoying. (Participant 14)

Other participants also spoke of the outgroup of “rule breakers” who were ruining the shared *dugnad*. For example, participant 12 was irritated at the people who still went to their cabins or who went to Sweden to shop. Then she paused and said:

But of course, you don't see all the ones sitting at home playing games on their phones and being bored out of their minds. They are pretty invisible. We see the ones who don't bother to listen. And that might not give a correct image. (Participant 12)

*Policing Others Without Becoming the “Corona Police”* When asked whether people were policing each other, many of the participants said there was no feeling of others being “corona police.” Others said that they felt watched and observed by others:

I'm very conscious of being observed, in any case, of being watched. Like yesterday, when we were standing out on the sidewalk and talking with a friend, then I was conscious of it when people walked past. A woman who walked past us looked at us very intently, and then I thought, “oh, are we standing too close to each other now, or is she wondering if she knows our friend?” (Participant 10)

Participant 10 indicates—as do many of the other participants—that he wanted to avoid others placing him in the noncomplier outgroup. Several participants also stated that they were paying close attention to other people's behavior. However, faced with noncomplying, most of the participants did not confront others directly. Rather, they used subtle comments, glances, or walking demonstratively to the side to show that they disapproved of nonconforming behavior. This subtle expression of their disapproval could be linked to fear of being seen as “corona police”: “I sort of don't want to seem . . . annoying or judgmental or like a “police” of any kind.” (Participant 14)

A final aspect that was raised under the topic of other people was what will happen when these measures are eased off. One participant said he had more faith in people now, as people in general did follow the measures. But, like some of the others, he also expressed concern for what would happen in the long run:

I'm very anxious to see what will happen if the same measures are to last a lot longer. If people can endure it. And not least what will happen when it eases off a little bit. Will people go completely bananas? If one is to sort of catch up for all that's lost, then we'll be back—if not to where we started, then at least way back. (Participant 5)

The government had achieved a large degree of compliance with the measures. However, as Participant 5 expressed, it was, at the time of lock-down, not clear how long the measures and compliance to these would last.

## Discussion

In our study, the government meta-narratives often resonated with the participants' personal narratives. This was particularly the case for *dugnad*, solidarity, and trustworthy leadership, and to some extent also the dangerous-virus narrative. The government meta-narrative on the national romantic Norwegianness represents a breach. Where the government explicitly and repeatedly spoke of Norwegians being well placed to get through this, being a dutiful, sturdy people, and doing well, the participants instead spoke of Norway as an advantageous setting. The participants thus did not explicitly draw on this meta-narrative in their meaning making, which could potentially be linked to the Scandinavian Law of Jante, a cultural narrative of not bragging or elevating oneself (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2018).

In our following discussion, we focus on two key aspects: government communication and cultural continua.

### *Government Communication*

Government communication in a pandemic is difficult, especially when knowledge is scarce (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Finset and colleagues (2020) suggest four key elements for effective health communication: (1) sticking to the facts as much as possible, but openly communicating the unknown; (2) avoiding vagueness by providing specific and consistent information; (3) demonstrating ability to make decisions with confidence but still being honest that decisions could be wrong; and (4) acknowledging people's hardship through empathy and understanding. Based on our analysis, it seems that the Norwegian government's approach fit well with the first, third, and fourth recommendations. First, the government openly communicated what they did not know, which made several participants describe trusting that the government were "doing their best" in spite of the lack of the available knowledge of this new virus. Secondly, the government confidently made decisions (the third element), implementing the strictest measures in peacetime in Norway. In the interviews, this was viewed positively: the government taking firm action created trust in both its ability and intentions. Finally, the government repeatedly acknowledged individual costs and distress caused by the virus and the measures (the fourth element). However, our analysis suggests that the government did not fully succeed in the second element. Most participants said they followed the measures as best they could but that "the right thing to do" was sometimes unclear. Ambiguously communicated messages seemed to lead different people to construct different and sometimes contradicting narratives. As participant 15 put it, "nobody wants people to die," but vagueness in government communication sometimes challenged interactions and negotiations in everyday life and left certain aspects up to individual interpretations.

### *Cultural Continua*

Our results indicate that politicians need to ground their narratives in the intentional worlds (Shweder, 1990) of their population. We thus suggest that there are several continua politicians need to place their meta-narratives on in a crisis.

#### *Emotional: Hope—Fear*

The continua of hope and fear echoes Petersen's (2020) "optimistic anxiety," where "citizens must be anxious enough to take the advice from the authorities to heart and optimistic enough as to feel that their actions make a difference" (as cited in Finset et al., 2020, p. 874). In the government's meta-narratives, hope and fear were frequently used: It was emphasized that the virus is dangerous,

but it was also emphasized that Norwegians could do this together (*dugnad* and Norwegianness narratives) and that hope was put forth by assurances of being in good hands (trustworthy leadership narrative). Fear is a powerful emotion that inspires behavioral change, but only when people experience efficacy (Witte & Allen, 2000). When leaders manage to invoke a sense of shared identity in handling the pandemic, this experience of being in the same boat may foster both efficacy and hope (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

#### *Behavioral: Freedom—Constraint*

In a pandemic, it may be relevant that “communities negotiate social norms so that there is a balance between freedom and constraint” (Van Bavel et al., 2020, p. 464). In line with the research on tight and loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011), Norway ends up in the tight category. This may have prepared people to follow instructions (see similar arguments in Huang, 2020, where high public compliance is presented as important for Taiwan’s handling of COVID-19). Our participants spoke at length about the noncompliers. In the government narratives, compliance was praised, but simultaneously the government emphasized that people should not act as a “corona police” towards the noncompliers. Instead, the government spoke of good examples and encouraged forgiveness and understanding for lapses (see also discussion in Van Bavel et al., 2020).

#### *Ideological: Individuality—Collectivity*

The Norwegian government placed their narratives specifically within the collective, emphasizing working together in the spirit of *dugnad*. In their communication, a key message was that we are all in this together. Tjora (2020) criticized the government’s use of the *dugnad* concept and emphasized that “politicians and other elites seem to want to categorize all forms of regulations and instructions as *dugnad*.” Tjora emphasizes that *dugnad* is something else, related specifically to collaborative work in civil society. However, in a pandemic, there is a particular demand for leaders who represent and advance the shared interest of group members and create a sense of shared social identity among them (Van Bavel et al., 2020). This, Van Bavel and colleagues argue, will motivate acts of the collective over each individual for themselves, and the concept of *dugnad* was echoed extensively in our participants’ personal narratives. There were no counter-narratives in the material as an opposition or alternative to the *dugnad* narrative. In a pandemic, it is crucial to create and use meta-narratives that are a good fit with the context and which are seen as meaningful to people, and this will be temporal. In this first critical lock-down period, participants largely seemed highly motivated to comply with the measures, rather than criticizing or questioning these.

#### *Limitations and Further Research*

Our study has several limitations. Socially desirable responding may have influenced the answers in our sample. Some may have expressed more compliance with the measures; others may have expressed less compliance as they may have feared coming across as “too hysterical.” Recruiting within our networks may have alleviated these tendencies somewhat. Politically, our sample is largely left leaning, commenting on and discussing measures put in place by a conservative government. Several participants specified that this was not their preferred government but that they still agreed with their approach and trusted them. The measures are favoring the collective over the individual and may therefore have been more well received by the political left (however, polls indicate a 90% agreement with the measures; Norsk Koronamonitor, 2020a). Further research should look at a more varied sample. It should also be emphasized, that in line with the temporal fluidity of narratives (Andrews, 2020), ours is a study of a very specific period during the lock-down. At the time of finishing this

article, Norway entered into its second lock-down, and Oslo City Council leader Raymond Johansen announced: “This is no longer a *dugnad*, this is serious” (Ali, Zhichkina, Hansen, & Vissgren, 2020, November 5). Perhaps indicating that the voluntary, shared work that *dugnad* constitutes was no longer sufficient. Further research should investigate the periods that followed, where the narratives became more diverse, the concepts changed in use and compliance in Norway was challenged more.

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## Appendix

### The Norwegian Governmental Measures to Control Spread of COVID-19 (implemented March 12, 2020)

Measure	Specifics
Social distancing	In public places, people should keep at least one meter apart Indoors, people not in the same household should keep at least two meters apart When away from home, there should be no more than five people in a group
Closing of kindergartens, schools, and other educational institutions	Closing of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childcare centers</li> <li>• Primary schools</li> <li>• Lower secondary schools</li> <li>• Upper secondary schools</li> <li>• Universities and colleges</li> <li>• Other educational institutions</li> </ul> Exceptions to the closure apply for children with parents working in health and care services and other critical society functions
Closing of/ban on cultural events and various services/activities	Closing of/ban on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural events</li> <li>• Sports events and organized sports activities, indoors and outdoors</li> <li>• Restaurants, bars, pubs, and nightclubs, with the exception of restaurants where food is served (i.e., canteens and restaurants that can facilitate social distancing of at least 1 meter between guests)</li> <li>• Hairdressing, skin care, massage, tattooing, piercing and similar services</li> <li>• Gyms, swimming pools, water parks, etc.</li> </ul>

Measure	Specifics
Travels	Domestic transport continues, but it is strongly encouraged to avoid leisure travels and journeys that are not strictly necessary Mandatory 14-day quarantine for everyone entering Norway from outside the Nordic countries Healthcare professionals working with patient treatment are prohibited from travelling abroad Border control of the international Schengen borders and rules for rejection at the border of foreign nationals who do not live or work in Norway
Public transport and working from home	Public transport continues normally so that people with critical society functions can get to and from work People not in such positions should avoid using public transport and should work from home
Entry control in healthcare institutions	People are requested not to visit people in vulnerable groups (e.g., elderly, prison, psychiatric institutions) Restrictions are imposed on visitors to all health institutions and entry is introduced to safeguard infection control for patients
Ban on staying at leisure properties	March 19 the government added a prohibition of residing in private leisure properties (e.g., own cabin) <sup>a</sup>

Source: The Norwegian Directorate of Health (<https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/nyheter/the-norwegian-directorate-of-health-has-issued-a-decision-to-close-schools-and-other-educational-institutions>) and Government Press Release No. 55/20 (<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/coronavirus-measures-to-continue/id2694682/>). <sup>a</sup><https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/innforer-hytteforbud/id2694262/>