



Strengthening Narrative Agency Through Social Reading: A Comparison Between Two Reading Group Models

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

In the field of empirical literary studies, research on social reading has increased in recent years and reading groups have been studied from various perspectives. We contribute to the field by applying narrative theory to reading group research and studying the potential of reading groups to enhance the narrative agency of the participants. Narrative agency refers to the ability to navigate narrative environments and to critically and creatively engage with culturally available narratives. Supporting this ability is crucial in contemporary culture as diverse cultural narratives shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. In our study, we have developed a reading group model that aims to enhance participants' narrative agency. In this article, we compare two creative reading group models—metanarrative and basic—and their potential to cultivate narrative agency and its three dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. Our hypothesis was that metanarrative groups have particularly strong potential to strengthen narrative agency. Relying on qualitative and quantitative methods, we found that both reading group models enhanced the narrative agency of the participants ($n = 30$). In addition, the qualitative analysis suggests that the narrative agency of the participants strengthened more in the metanarrative than in the basic groups and narrative awareness was particularly strengthened in the metanarrative groups. Hence, the results indicate that the metanarrative groups have specific potential to cultivate reflection on cultural narratives in a meaningful manner, which encourages us to continue further developing the reading group model. The results also demonstrate that the framework of narrative agency provides rich analytical tools to explore reading group experiences.

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In the field of empirical literary research, social reading has been attracting increasing interest during the last few years. Various forms of social reading have been explored by employing diverse research methods, and reading group research has focused particularly on Shared Reading (Billington 2019; Billington & Steenberg 2021). The concept of social reading refers to the processes through which individuals collaboratively engage with texts through discussion and shared reflection and then share their thoughts, experiences, and responses with others, thereby turning the solitary act of reading into a dynamic and interactive communal experience (see e.g. Swann & Allington 2009). Social reading has the potential to shape group participants' thoughts, emotions, and even ways of being and acting in the world. However, this potential is not by any means always actualized, and thus, to cultivate it, different kinds of reading methods and reading group models have been developed over the last decade.

Recent research has demonstrated how social and facilitated reading in reading groups may support participants' well-being and mental health (Billington 2019; Billington & Steenberg 2021; Kosonen 2019; Kosonen, Meretoja & Kinnunen 2025), linguistic and cultural learning (Kekki, Jytälä & Parente-Čapková 2023), professional development (Renko & Valtonen 2025), engagement with the climate crisis (Williams et al. 2024) and possibilities of anti-racist solidarity (Harinen forthcoming). Reading and discussing texts in a group can strengthen diverse narrative skills, such as narrative competence (Charon et al 2017; Spencer 2023), or deepen critical and embodied close reading (Ovaska 2024). Further, social reading can provide meaningful, although different, reading experiences both on-site and online (see e.g. Andersen et al. 2025). In our research, we focus on reading groups' potential to enhance participants' narrative agency which refers to the ability to navigate narrative environments and to critically and creatively engage with culturally available narratives (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022; Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024).

In our research team, we developed a creative reading group model, which was tested in 10 reading groups. To study whether a creative reading group model that focuses on metanarrative reading has a different impact on participants' narrative agency than a basic reading group, we created and organized two types of creative reading groups. In the metanarrative creative reading groups, participants read metanarrative fiction—fiction that thematizes the significance of narratives for our lives and different roles that narratives play in society. In the basic groups, participants read non-metanarrative (“basic”) fiction. Both types of reading group meetings followed a prespecified structure, the discussions were facilitated by group facilitators, and the participants were also engaged in creative writing exercises.

In this article, we compare the two reading group models—metanarrative and basic—and their potential to cultivate participants' narrative agency. We examine how the reading groups shaped the participants' narrative agency and whether the two types of reading groups have shaped it in different ways. First, we present the theory of narrative agency and the idea of the metanarrative reading group model. Then, we describe the research design and methods: interviews and questionnaires. In the results section, we present quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data collected from the reading group participants. Finally, in the discussion, we compare the findings and discuss the limitations of this study.

THE THEORY OF NARRATIVE AGENCY AND THE METANARRATIVE READING GROUP MODEL

In our study, the metanarrative reading group model, interview questions, questionnaires, and analytical framework of the qualitative analysis draw on literary scholar and narrative theorist Hanna Meretoja's (2018, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) theory of narrative agency. This approach is based on narrative hermeneutics, which conceptualizes narrative as a culturally-mediated practice of sense-making that involves the activities of interpreting and presenting someone's experiences in a specific situation to someone from a certain perspective as part of a meaningful, connected account, and which has a dialogical and productive, performative dimension and is relevant for the understanding of possibilities of being in the world (past, present, and/or future) (Meretoja 2018: 48). In this approach, narratives create meaningful connections between events and experiences, and they have world-constituting significance as well as a

strong existential and ethical dimension in that they shape how we perceive our possibilities of action, affect, thought, and experience. Narrative is not only an object of interpretation but also functions as “a mode of interpretation” in its own right (Meretoja 2018: 44). Narratives provide interpretations of experiences of being in the world; they organize experiences, social reality, and historical developments. Underlying concrete textual narratives, there are cultural narrative models that function as *models of sense-making* that provide ways of framing events and experiences; culturally dominant narrative models have normative power to guide people’s actions and to influence how they experience things in the first place. Such culturally dominant narrative models constitute the narrative environments, the webs of narratives, in which individuals grow up and which surround them as they make sense of their lives and their possibilities.

According to Meretoja’s theory, narrative agency refers to “our ability to navigate our narrative environments: to use, (re)interpret, and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narrate our lives, relationships, and the world around us” (Meretoja 2023a: 296). Narrative agency involves our ability to practice our agency by positioning ourselves in relation to cultural narrative models of sense-making and the ability to reflect on these models that constitute our narrative environments—models that organize social reality by conveying norms and expectations that shape how individuals experience things and how communities narrate events and experiences. For example, overcoming hardship is commonly narrated in terms of the American Dream or as a rags-to-riches narrative—as a story of how hard work leads to success and happiness—and the dominant way of narrating serious illness is in terms of a battle narrative that leads to victorious survival (Meretoja 2021: 37–38). Such narrative models affect us irrespective of whether we wish for them to, and bringing them to the level of conscious awareness—as much as possible—enables us to gain critical distance from them and to have more agency in our engagements with them. Such ability is crucial in contemporary culture, as diverse cultural narratives shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world.

The concept of narrative agency is part of the same family of concepts as narrative competence and narrative literacy. Narrative competence is a foundational concept for narrative medicine, and Rita Charon defines it as “the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others” (2001: 1897). Sarah Dillon and Claire Craig define narrative literacy as “understanding how stories function and their effects at individual and collective levels” (2022: 162). All three concepts refer to the ability to recognize and analyze narratives as well as to understand how they are constructed and how they function. However, these latter two concepts place more emphasis on the ability to engage with stories in an analytic manner and to receive them in responsive and competent ways (what Dillon and Craig call “storylistening”), whereas narrative agency also involves the ability to practice agency by using narrative imagination and creating new narratives and narrative communities (as well as by being receptive to the stories of others in dialogical interaction). Moreover, narrative agency strongly emphasizes the cultural and existential dimensions of narratives—that is, how cultural narratives shape our sense of the possible (Meretoja 2018). According to Meretoja’s (2022, 2023a) theory, narrative agency has three central dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. Narrative awareness has the most similarities with narrative competence and literacy, narrative imagination places the emphasis on the creative competence to imagine and create new narratives, and narrative dialogicality emphasizes the relationality integral to narrative agency.

Narrative awareness refers to awareness of cultural narratives that shape lives by functioning as models of sense-making and to the ability to analyze narrative environments and different ways of narrating experiences. We analyze, for example, whether the reading groups were able to enhance the participants’ ability to recognize cultural narratives in the media, in literature and in their own lives. The two subdimensions of narrative awareness are *narrative self-understanding*, which concerns the participants’ understanding of what kinds of narratives they employ in making sense of their lives, and *narrative perspective awareness*, which implies awareness of how each narrative is told from a certain perspective and involves interpretation, selectivity, and meaning-giving (Meretoja 2018: 98–107, 125–132; 2023a: 298).

Narrative imagination refers to the ability to imagine beyond what appears to be evident in the present, to creatively engage with cultural narratives, and to imagine different narrative trajectories for themselves, their community, humankind, and the planet more broadly. We analyze how the reading groups affect, for example, the participants' ability to imagine different futures and to influence their own life stories. The two sub-dimensions of narrative imagination are a *sense of the possible*, which concerns the participants' ability to imagine different routes to different futures and how things could be otherwise, and the ability to engage in *ethical inquiry*, which involves the participants' ability to explore fundamental ethical questions with undogmatic openness, recognizing the complexity of such questions and how they can be approached from many different perspectives (Meretoja 2018: 90–97, 133–142; 2023a: 299).

Narrative dialogicality refers to the narratively mediated process of how we become who we are in relation to other agents in the world—in a fundamentally dialogical and relational manner. We examine how the reading groups shape, for example, the ability of the participants to engage with the stories of others and to understand their experiences in their specificity. The two sub-dimensions of narrative dialogicality are *encountering the other non-subsumptively* and the ability to participate in creating shared, intersubjective, narratively mediated spaces—*narrative in-betweens* (Meretoja 2018: 107–125; 2023a: 299).

The presented theory of narrative agency emphasizes the connections between cultural narratives, reading experiences, and personal meaning-making processes. Our research project is the first to apply this framework in empirical literary research (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022; Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024). We aimed to explore how the theory of narrative agency could offer new perspectives on the potential and affordances of reading groups. In addition to the reading group model, we applied the framework of narrative agency in the interviews and questionnaires. We formulated the interview questions and questionnaire statements on the basis of the three dimensions of narrative agency. Moreover, in the qualitative analysis, we utilized the three dimensions of narrative agency and their subdimensions to analyze how reading groups shape participants' narrative agency. Hence, the framework of narrative agency forms the very basis of our study.

As mentioned earlier, in this study, we compare two creative reading group models—metanarrative and basic—and their potential to cultivate participants' narrative agency and its three dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. In the metanarrative group, participants read metanarrative fiction by which we mean fiction that “makes narrative its theme by reflecting not only on its own nature as a narrative but also, more broadly, on narrativity as a cultural phenomenon, on the significance and functions of narratives in our lives” (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022: 394).¹ The selected texts for the metanarrative groups discuss the roles of narratives and cultural narratives from different perspectives. For example, an excerpt from Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (1993) reflects on the pressure that narratives exert on us and on the possibilities of freeing oneself from diminishing stories; Lucia Berlin's short story “Point of View” (from *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, 2015) explores the significance of changing the narrative perspective; and Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) deals with the desire for stories and the significance of different narrative forms, including fragmented narratives that ascribe a momentary form to reality, similar to a light that sweeps across the dark sea (see also Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024: 286). As narrative agency refers to the ability to critically and creatively engage with cultural narratives, this kind of metanarrative fiction that specifically thematizes the roles of narratives in our lives could engage participants in insightful reflections on cultural narratives.

In the metanarrative reading groups, the participants read metanarrative fiction together and shared their thoughts on the text, and the facilitator gently drew attention to the metanarrative aspects of the text (for a more detailed presentation of the metanarrative reading group model and an example of the metanarrative reading group session, see Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022). In contrast, in the basic creative reading groups, participants read “basic,” “non-metanarrative” fiction that does not explicitly thematize cultural narratives or reflect on the roles of narratives in our lives; the facilitators guided the meetings without specifically prompting questions related to cultural narratives. Both reading group models included reading, facilitated discussions on the text, and creative writing exercises, and both reading

¹ For more on metanarrativity, see Meretoja (2022) and Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen (2022).

group models were based on creative reading principles (see [Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022: 400](#)).

Our hypothesis was that the metanarrative groups have specific potential to strengthen the narrative agency of the participants because metanarrative fiction provides participants with interpretative resources to understand the significance of cultural narratives in multifaceted ways, including resources for critical reflection on problematic cultural narratives. We acknowledge that the group process—texts, facilitation styles, discussions, writing exercises and group processes—shape participants' experiences, thus making it difficult to disentangle the exact components that produce the potential differences between the two group models. Thus, our aim is not to argue that all the differences between the group models result only from the texts utilized in the reading groups, but also to indicate that these may arise from the more complicated and multifaceted reading group processes. We see this complexity as an inevitable aspect of reading group research.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, we compare the potential of metanarrative and basic creative reading groups to enhance the narrative agency of the participants. In 2019 and in the beginning of 2020, we organized five metanarrative creative reading groups and five basic creative reading groups. Three of the groups were facilitated by the researchers of the project, and seven of the groups were facilitated by the students of literature or psychology. Before facilitating the reading groups, the students had participated in a university course organized as part of our project, where they obtained information on narrative agency and training to facilitate the reading groups. Each group was facilitated by one or two students. From among the seven groups facilitated by the students, six groups were completed (one of the groups was interrupted due to COVID-19 and the data was not collected; see also [Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024](#)). In this article, we compare the six completed groups facilitated by the students: three metanarrative groups and three basic groups.

The research design was a two-group pre- and posttest design, where participants were divided into basic ($n = 15$) and metanarrative ($n = 16$) reading groups based on self-selection into available time slots and meeting locations, the participants did not have prior knowledge of whether the group was metanarrative or basic. All participants completed pretest measures prior to the reading group meetings and the posttest measures immediately after the group meetings ended. Participants were also individually interviewed at both pretest and posttest; this provided qualitative data on the reading group processes beyond those revealed by the quantitative measures. The number of participants was defined by the practical limitations of organizing the reading groups; thus, the sample size for the statistical analyses was rather modest.

PARTICIPANTS

The 10 reading groups organized in the project had 54 participants (in addition to the group facilitators). The 6 groups selected for this study included 31 participants: 16 participants started in the metanarrative groups and 15 participants in the basic creative reading groups. One participant of a metanarrative group left the group in the middle of the process, and this participant's experience is not analyzed as part of the data. Hence, the analysis in this study compares the experiences of 15 participants of the 3 metanarrative groups and 15 participants of the 3 basic groups. Participants were aged between 20 and 71 years (median 29.5 years). They were asked to complete the gender section on the background information form in their preferred terms; 19 identified as female, 10 as male, and 1 as other. Participants were recruited by advertising at the university, in reading group locations, and via the university's email lists. Two of the groups (groups 1 and 6) were open to all adults interested in reading groups and four of the groups (groups 2–4) were targeted to university and university of applied sciences students.

INTERVENTIONS

The groups were organized in cafes, a university library, a yoga studio, and students' club houses in Turku and Helsinki. The groups met seven times biweekly for two-hour meetings. To enable comparisons between the two group types, the reading lists for the groups were synchronized to a certain extent. The texts—for example, short stories, and novel excerpts—were mostly read aloud in the meetings, and participants read a novel beforehand for two of the meetings. The reading plan was that participants read a chapter from Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2005/2003) in all the six groups; in addition, participants in the metanarrative groups read metanarrative fiction and participants in basic groups read non-metanarrative fiction. The metanarrative texts selected for the three metanarrative groups were Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* (2011), Lucia Berlin's short story "Point of View" (2015), and an excerpt from Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (1993).² To support group facilitators' own preferences, each facilitator(s) selected two additional texts for their group. The texts in the three basic creative reading groups included Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Tove Jansson's short story "Art in Nature" (2012/1978), and Claire Castillon's short story "The Break Up" (2009/2006).³ Also in the basic groups, the facilitators selected the additional texts; in certain groups, the participants brought excerpts to be read in the last group meeting. The texts in all the groups were read in translation to Finnish. The complete reading lists of each group are available in the Open Science Framework (OSF, <https://osf.io/qt9gh>).

Both group types followed creative reading guidelines and a specific meeting structure (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022: 399) which have been modelled on creative group practices. Creative reading groups aim to provide a safe and creative space which enables participants to engage with the texts in inspiring ways. Creative reading groups are facilitated and structured reading groups with creative writing exercises; they are neither text analysis groups nor therapeutic groups. The group meetings had a specific structure: with the guidance of the facilitator, the participants tune into the creative space, work on and around the text, engage in a creative writing exercise, and participate in final reflection in which they write down and share meaningful moments of the meeting (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022: 400).⁴ Creative writing exercises were related to and inspired by the texts and were slightly different in each group (see Reading lists and writing exercises in the OSF, <https://osf.io/qt9gh>). In addition, in the metanarrative groups, the facilitators drew attention to relevant themes from the perspective of narrative agency. We present the creative reading group model applied here, particularly the metanarrative reading group, more thoroughly in our previous article (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022; see also Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024).

During the reading group processes, we attempted to provide the most safe and inspiring reading group experiences possible for both the participants and the student facilitators. We met or emailed the facilitators once a month to discuss their group experiences. One of the researchers is also a trained work counsellor and a bibliotherapist; thus, we had expertise to deal with any challenging situations that may have occurred.

The reading group process is shaped by multiple elements: texts, facilitators with their questions, unique group discussions, different creative writing exercises in each group, and the whole group process. Hence, in comparing the metanarrative and basic groups, different kinds of texts and facilitators' questions—in metanarrative groups that focus more on the themes relevant to narrative agency—are not viewed as the only factors that affect the process. Even though it is

2 On the metanarrative features of the selected metanarrative texts, see Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen (2024: 286).

3 A few differences were present: in one metanarrative group (group 1), participants did not read the excerpt from *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, and in another metanarrative group (group 3), participants did not read the excerpt from *The Stone Diaries*.

4 In one basic group (group 4), the meetings did not end with the exercise of sharing meaningful moments.

not possible to determine whether certain effects of the reading groups originate in the texts or in other elements such as writing exercises or group dynamics, in our view the two types of groups offer, also in terms of their complexities, interesting points of comparison.

INTERVIEWS

To identify possible changes in participants' narrative agency, the participants were interviewed individually before and after the reading group process.⁵ As narrative agency has not been studied in reading group research before, we created a list of 36 interview questions that tapped into narrative agency.⁶ The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions regarding reading habits as well as participants' thoughts on narratives and literature. In addition, in the final interview, participants were asked to reflect on the reading group experience and its significance for them (see initial and final interview questions in the OSF, <https://osf.io/qt9gh>). The theory of narrative agency and its three dimensions particularly informed questions 16–34. The questions related to narrative awareness (questions 16–24) dealt with, for example, what kinds of narratives or narrative models the participants notice around them in media and in life; questions related to narrative imagination (questions 25–30) concerned the potential of reading to open up new possibilities and the possibilities one has to affect one's own life story; and questions related to narrative dialogicality (questions 31–34) concentrated on understanding the perspectives of others in relation to both the reading group and literature (see also Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024: 289).

The student facilitators also acted as interviewers.⁷ The duration of the interviews varied from 17 to 90 minutes. The interviewers were instructed to follow the list of 36 questions, but they were allowed to leave out a couple of questions if the interview seemed to last very long. In some of the interviews, one or two questions were not asked, and in the final interviews of one metanarrative group (group 1), the interviewer omitted approximately 5–15 questions in order to maintain the timeframe. The group facilitators also transcribed the interviews. The transcripts focused on the content rather than on the tone: the guideline was to include laughs, cries, and long pauses, but not to include more detailed information, such as speed, emphasis, or short pauses.

The interviews were analyzed using *narrative agency analysis*: we utilized the theory and the three aspects of narrative agency as analytical tools and categories to identify possible changes in participants' narrative agency. Narrative agency analysis identifies the ways in which the participants reflect on narratives and cultural narratives around them (for narrative agency analysis, see Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024: 290–291).⁸ The first author of this article (EK) was responsible for the qualitative analysis. She compared each participants' initial and final interviews and identified whether and how narrative agency strengthened between the interviews. Then, these identified strengthenings were categorized and grouped according to the three main dimensions and six subdimensions of narrative agency. As the three dimensions overlap with one another, in the analysis, all the answers were not categorized under the same dimension as in the question sheet: for example, answers on happy life (questions 21 and 22) were analyzed as part of narrative imagination instead of awareness and answers on perspectives (32 and 33) were analyzed as part of awareness instead of dialogicality. The analysis is theory-driven in the sense that the theory of narrative agency guides the manner in which aspects of narrative agency from the data were analyzed, interpreted, and categorized, and it is data-driven in the sense that the detailed categories were formulated on the basis of the kinds of changes in narrative agency that we observed in the data.

5 The research material analysed in this article consists of interviews and questionnaires. In addition, the complete research material includes the audio recordings of the reading group sessions, working diaries of the facilitators, and the texts that the participants wrote during the reading groups.

6 The interviews were conducted in Finnish and we have translated the quotations in English for this article.

7 Regarding the limitations and benefits of facilitators acting as interviews, see Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen (2024: 289).

8 We have developed and explored narrative agency analysis in our previous article, see Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen (2024).

We interpreted as strengthenings of narrative agency the answers in which the participants themselves directly stated that they had reflected more on questions related to narratives or in which the final interview revealed a deeper engagement with the topic than the initial interview. In certain cases, it was difficult to determine whether narrative agency had been enhanced or whether the final answer was only different without manifesting any strengthening, and we discussed the ambiguous cases in our research team during the process of analysis. In other cases, narrative agency was strengthened between the initial and the final interviews, and even though it is not always explicitly spelled out whether this was due to the reading group, it was interpreted as strengthening of narrative agency in this analysis. However, if the answer specifically indicated that the change resulted from other reasons (e.g. participating in university courses, reading a transformative book outside the reading group, or major life changes) it was not listed as strengthening of narrative agency in this analysis.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Participants responded to two questionnaires at pre- and posttest: a psychological well-being scale and a narrative agency scale. Both questionnaires are available in the OSF (<https://osf.io/qt9gh>).

For psychological well-being, we used the 42-item version (see Abbott et al. 2006) of the Ryff psychological well-being scale (Ryff 1989a; 1989b), which measures six dimensions of well-being (seven items for each dimension): self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. The participants responded by indicating the extent to which they agreed with each item on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. A sum score was calculated for each dimension. The reliability of the sum scores can be evaluated with the estimated internal consistency of the scale, indexed by Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha values in the pretest sample ranged from 0.45 (autonomy) to 0.90 (self-acceptance). Ryff's well-being scale was selected because it has been utilized in previous reading group studies (Longden et al. 2015; see also Corcoran, Billington & Watkins 2019).

The questionnaire for narrative agency included 35 items, designed by us to measure the three dimensions of narrative agency (Meretoja, Kinnunen & Kosonen 2022; Meretoja 2022, 2023a): narrative awareness (20 items), narrative imagination (10 items), and narrative dialogicality (5 items). Participants responded with the extent to which they agreed with each item on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. As this was the first time this scale was utilized, we first examined the factor structure of the scale by conducting exploratory factor analyses; these analyses are reported in the supplementary material available in the OSF (<https://osf.io/qt9gh>). The factor analyses suggested that the structural validity of the three subscales was acceptable. Thereafter, we calculated the sum scores of the responses given on each dimension, and these sum scores were utilized in the statistical analyses reported here. Cronbach's alphas in the pretest sample varied between 0.84 (narrative imagination) and 0.89 (narrative awareness), thereby indicating good internal consistency for all three subscales of narrative agency.

RESULTS

INTERVIEW DATA

The analysis of the interview data demonstrates that narrative agency increased in both reading group models, but slightly more in metanarrative groups. Table 1 presents how the three dimensions of narrative agency strengthened.

READING GROUP	THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHOSE NARRATIVE AGENCY HAS BEEN STRENGTHENED		
	NARRATIVE AWARENESS	NARRATIVE IMAGINATION	NARRATIVE DIALOGICALITY
Metanarrative	15/15	12/15	13/15
Basic	13/15	12/15	12/15

Table 1 Strengthening of narrative agency in the metanarrative and basic reading groups.

In the metanarrative groups, the narrative awareness of all 15 participants, the narrative imagination of 12 participants and the narrative dialogicality of 13 participants was strengthened. In the basic groups, there was an increase in the narrative awareness of 13, narrative imagination of 12 and narrative dialogicality of 12 participants. For some of the participants, the strengthening of narrative agency was visible in many answers, whereas for others, it was only visible in a few answers; in this analysis, however, all these have been counted equally as strengthening of narrative agency.

Table 2 demonstrates whether the narrative agency of each participant has strengthened under 0, 1, 2, or 3 dimensions.

READING GROUP	THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHOSE NARRATIVE AGENCY HAS BEEN STRENGTHENED			
	NO DIMENSION	ONE DIMENSION	TWO DIMENSIONS	ALL THREE DIMENSIONS
Metanarrative	0	0	5	10
Basic	1	2	1	11

The results reveal that the narrative agency of fifteen participants in the metanarrative groups strengthened in two or three dimensions, whereas in the basic groups it varied slightly more, even though the difference was small. Hence, on these levels of comparison, the differences between the metanarrative and basic groups were minor.

Table 2 Strengthening of narrative agency in terms of three dimensions for the metanarrative and basic reading groups.

Narrative agency analysis also enables a more detailed analysis of the interview data. In Table 3, the changes in narrative agency are grouped under the sub-dimensions of narrative agency and categorized according to different instances of the strengthening of narrative agency.

THE DIMENSIONS AND CATEGORIES OF THE STRENGTHENING OF NARRATIVE AGENCY						
DIMENSION	SUB-DIMENSION	CATEGORIES	META-NARRATIVE	BASIC	METANARRATIVE TOTAL	BASIC TOTAL
Narrative awareness	Narrative self-understanding	Increased interest to reflect on narratives or narrative models	6	3	50	33
		Strengthened ability to reflect on narratives or to recognize narrative models	6	3		
		Stronger awareness of narrativity in the texts	3	1		
		Strengthened reflection on narratives of their families or childhood environments	6	5		
		More detailed analysis of the effects of narratives on the self or others	6	4		
		Amplified ability to take critical distance from narratives or narrative models	5	3		
	Narrative perspective awareness	Increased reflection on different narrative perspectives	8	4		
		Increased reflection on how to tell different people about oneself from different perspectives	2	4		
		Stronger sense of how texts can be interpreted from different perspectives	5	4		
		Stronger awareness of narrative devices and of the ambiguity of literature	3	2		

(Contd.)

THE DIMENSIONS AND CATEGORIES OF THE STRENGTHENING OF NARRATIVE AGENCY						
DIMENSION	SUB-DIMENSION	CATEGORIES	META-NARRATIVE	BASIC	METANARRATIVE TOTAL	BASIC TOTAL
Narrative imagination	Sense of the possible	Stronger self-knowledge and material from the reading group for reflecting on one's own life	3	8	22	24
		Stronger sense of the enriching potential of narratives and literature	8	3		
		Increased or deeper reflection on the possibility to affect one's own life-story	4	6		
		Amplified aspiration to search for new narratives or more multifaceted narrative environments	2	1		
		More multifaceted ability to see future possibilities	1	4		
	Ethical inquiry	Deepened reflection on ethical questions	4	2		
Narrative dialogicality	Narrative in-between	Strengthened experience of how joint dialogue can provide new perspectives on and shared interpretations of the texts	10	9	24	21
		Increased understanding of the different perspectives of the participants and that one's own perspective can change in conversation with others	6	1		
		Strengthened sense of how narratives can increase the ability to imagine new communities and relationships	4	3		
	Encountering the other non-subsumptively	Stronger experiences of connection and strengthened understanding of encountering others through their stories	2	5		
		Increased ability to reflect on how literature or narratives can help to understand the singularity of other people's experiences or life situations	2	3		
The total number of instances of the strengthening of narrative agency in the interview data					96	78

In Table 3, each dimension of narrative agency is divided into two subdimensions which are again divided into categories to describe the various ways in which each dimension has been strengthened. Each category includes the number of participants whose agency increased in that category. Each participant was counted only once in each category, irrespective of whether their agency strengthened in one or several questions in that category. In the last columns “metanarrative/basic total,” all the instances in the categories have been summed up. The same participant may have been counted several times if their agency strengthened in several categories, and, therefore, the numbers are higher than the total number of participants. In the last row below, these numbers have been summed up once more and the results indicate that narrative agency strengthened more in metanarrative (96) than basic groups (78).

Based on this analysis, the first dimension of narrative agency, *narrative awareness*, increased more in metanarrative than basic groups. In general, changes in awareness were more visible than in imagination or dialogicality, perhaps partially because awareness included more questions in the interviews. The first sub-dimension of awareness, *narrative self-understanding*, strengthened more in metanarrative groups in all six categories. The first category, “increased interest to reflect on narratives or narrative models,” includes answers in which participants have not necessarily begun to recognize different models but feel more interested in reflecting on them. Responses involve incipient reflections on whether a phenomenon can be perceived as a narrative model. For example, one participant said, “perhaps those are a bit difficult to

Table 3 Categories of the strengthening of narrative agency in the metanarrative and basic reading groups.

recognize in my own life so that I should, mm, put a lot of time in it and reflect on what kinds of stories there really are, in there, for me to find” (metanarrative/participant 12).

The category “strengthened ability to reflect on narratives or to recognize narrative modes” manifests itself, instead, as increased ability to reflect on narratives. This strengthened more in the metanarrative groups. In some participants’ interviews, the difference between initial and final interview was evident. For example, in response to the question “have you ever reflected on what kinds of stories or narrative models surround you?” one participant provided the following answer in the initial interview: “No, I have never reflected on that, never.” In the final interview, he began reflecting on the narrative between good and evil and concluded: “Such a continuous struggle between good and evil is right now the surrounding narrative in my life” (metanarrative/P9). In other cases, the enhancement was subtler, as in the following example:

I thought it was really interesting this autumn how we tried to kind of look for those [narrative models] in everything... because, as mentioned, they are sort of all around us in various media, and actually very much in the texts we read, too, certain narrative models kept recurring. But I don’t know... (...) It’s really interesting to notice these kinds of patterns behind everything... but I still somehow haven’t quite been able to... somehow, like, I can’t quite put into words this whole... the concept of narrativity or these narrative models. (metanarrative/P1)

This answer demonstrates the process of the strengthening of narrative agency: the ability to notice different narratives increases, but the concept of narrative models might still feel unfamiliar.

The category “stronger awareness of narrativity in the texts,” which intertwines with the previous category, was mentioned by one participant in the basic groups and by three participants in the metanarrative groups; the latter three all participated in the same group (group 1). This suggests that, in this particular group, participants were more aware of the group’s focus on narratives. As one participant described, “somehow you now see and read all literature with quite fresh eyes, I think. Precisely from the perspective of this kind of narrativity.” (metanarrative/P2, see more on Juha’s analysis in Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024).

The category “strengthened reflection on narratives of their families or childhood environments” strengthened almost equally in both groups. Participants explicitly stated that they had been thinking more about these stories or they analyzed family narratives more thoroughly in the final interview. In this category, many participants mentioned that the initial interview evoked these reflections. For example,

Participant: Yeah, well actually, I’ve been thinking about that, like, back when [in the initial interview], when I first realized these kinds of things could even be thought about so yeah, yeah. Yes, and I would still say that I was definitely raised to cope, to manage. (...) That really does still guide what I do, there’s this need to challenge myself to reach higher. I don’t know if that’s a good thing though, like, does it cause too much stress.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: Like, if I could now create my own model or framework for it, maybe that would be better, probably would. (basic/P7)

The participant discussed the same narrative in both interviews, but in the final interview she also began to ponder creating a narrative model of her own.

The category “more detailed analysis of the effects of narratives on the self or others” includes answers in which participants asserted, in the initial interviews, that they do not recognize that stories significantly affect their lives; however, in the final interviews, they analyzed in a more detailed manner the effects or began to reflect on possible unconscious effects of stories. Even though this category strengthened slightly more in the metanarrative groups, one participant in the basic group also reflected on it in the following manner:

Well, I feel that after this reading group, I’ll start even more actively, even more consciously looking at what stories I actually carry with me in my life. (...) I have reflected on them before as phenomena, but not so much as stories. So now I’ve started to think more about them—about how we talk about those things. (basic/P12)

In this example, strengthened narrative agency manifests itself in a clear and explicit manner.

The last category in narrative self-understanding is “amplified ability to take critical distance from narratives or narrative models.” This category includes, for example, the need to “push away” certain narratives or disrupt certain collective narratives, critical reflections on how life cannot be reduced to one story, increased ability to analyze the negative effects of stories, and critical distancing from one’s own problematic family story by terming it as a “classic.” There was a slightly greater amount of increase in this category in the metanarrative groups.

The other subdimension of narrative awareness, *narrative perspective awareness*, is divided into four categories. The category “increased reflection on different narrative perspectives” strengthened more in the metanarrative groups for approximately half of the participants. Participants had, for example, been thinking more about how stories are always told from someone’s perspective or how it is important to bring forward multiple perspectives in both literature and life in general. One participant asserted how “it felt that those texts [that were read in the reading group] had been chosen so that they always raised things to discuss about different perspectives and precisely about different modes of narrating” (metanarrative/P14). Another reflected on a writing exercise that writing first from one person’s perspective and then from another’s “involved concretely trying to put oneself in another’s perspective and reflect on what the other person really thinks, and I noticed that it’s quite difficult when you don’t really ever quite know what thoughts are going around in the other person’s head” (metanarrative/P12).

The category “increased reflection on how to tell different people about oneself from different perspectives” is the only category in narrative awareness that strengthened more in the basic groups. For example, one participant of a basic group said that, after the initial interview, she had been thinking that all differently narrated versions are needed, and another participant had noticed how he holds a rather rigid narrative regarding himself. One participant of a metanarrative group pondered, “And now somehow that question really came up even more strongly here. (...) No matter how much you want to be honest and tell things exactly as they are, how you tell a certain thing always changes depending on who you’re with. It’s just like... so many things influence it” (metanarrative/P10).

The category “stronger sense of how texts can be interpreted from different perspectives” was amplified almost to the same extent in both group types. Several participants mentioned how the reading group strengthened their understanding of how people interpret texts in diverse ways and notice different kinds of things. For example, one participant engaged in a similar reflection as many other participants: “It felt like others interpreted it from completely different starting-points” (basic/P9). One participant of a metanarrative group also mentioned that it was interesting to get to know each participant’s unique styles of interpreting texts.

The last category of awareness, “stronger awareness of narrative devices and of the ambiguity of literature,” has only a few instances. Participants’ answers demonstrated that they had started to think about how, in fiction, portraying certain problematic issues may have an important function. In addition, one participant of a metanarrative group said that the group had improved her ability to analyze texts.

The second dimension, *narrative imagination*, was strengthened to an equal extent in both group types, but slightly more in the basic groups. The first sub-dimension, the *sense of the possible*, was strengthened in five categories. The category “stronger self-knowledge and material from the reading group for reflecting on one’s own life” was particularly amplified in basic groups for approximately half of the participants. For example, they brought up that the themes discussed in the group had supported them in dealing with life changes and that they have gained self-confidence from the group or received support for their creativity. These experiences are only implicitly linked to narrativity, which might be one possible reason why they did not strengthen as much in the metanarrative groups as in the basic ones.

The second category, “stronger sense of the enriching potential of narratives and literature,” increased particularly in the metanarrative groups for approximately half of the participants. In these experiences, the texts and narrativity are emphasized and the participants profoundly reflected on the enriching potential of literature and how it may open up new possibilities. They also pondered how literature could provide models for their own reflections. For example,

one participant discussed, in the initial interview, the possibilities literature has opened up in relation to literacy; in the final interview, he deepened such reflection in relation to his own reading experiences: “And it’s easy to think that because this person was a lot like me, and their story went like this and ended up like that, then you can start to assess whether that kind of direction might be meaningful for me too—something I’d want to pursue—or whether it’s a direction I should try to avoid” (metanarrative/P13).

The category “increased or deeper reflection on the possibility to affect one’s own life-story” strengthened almost to the same extent in both group types. In this category, the participants of the basic groups also related their reflections to stories and narrativity. For example, one participant related her answer to narrative models in the final interview: “Well, in principle I write that life-story of mine, in the end, so. I receive these kinds of narrative models and then I kind of think about how to react to them” (basic/P7). Amplified agency was also evident in the idea of how life stories can be shaped by narrating them in a different manner than before or in the critical reflections on the relational limits of affecting one’s life trajectories.

The category “amplified aspiration to search for new narratives or more multifaceted narrative environments,” which overlaps with the previous category, includes only a few instances; however, it appears to be an interesting aspect that must be focused upon more in the further developed versions of the reading group model. Strengthened agency manifested itself, for example, when a participant reflected on being surrounded by certain types of stories and, in the final interview, mentioned, “If you wanted to develop yourself, improve certain things and make changes, then you should also, in a way— maybe even consciously—seek out new kinds of stories around you, instead of looking for ones that are similar to what you’re already going through” (metanarrative/P3).

The category “more multifaceted ability to see future possibilities” was amplified more in the basic groups. Participants highlighted the importance of reflecting on one’s possibilities, were more open-minded regarding their future directions, or saw more alternative futures for humankind in the final than in the initial interview.

The second subdimension of narrative imagination, *ethical inquiry*, has only one category—“deepened reflection on ethical questions.” This category had a few instances and increased slightly more in the metanarrative groups. Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on many ethical questions, but it was difficult to distinguish when the ability to engage with these complex questions had been enhanced. However, it was evident that moderate strengthening had occurred, particularly in deepened reflections on the story of a happy or good life. For example, in the initial interview, one participant described how she had had a rather easy life and then, in the final interview, provided a more nuanced reflection: “Sometimes it’s not so easy to filter out which things are what society has fed me—what I’ve been told I should want—and what I actually want to do” (metanarrative/P4). The category also manifested itself as an amplified understanding of the meanings of different ways of narrating one’s life (see also Oskari’s case, in Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024).

The third dimension of narrative agency, *narrative dialogicality*, increased almost to an equal extent in both group models, but slightly more in the metanarrative groups. Its first subdimension, participating in building *narrative in-betweens*, was amplified in three categories. The category “strengthened experience of how joint dialogue can provide new perspectives on and shared interpretations of the texts” strengthened more than any other category in both group models. Many participants brought up that they have gained new perspectives on the texts and how enriching it has been. For example, one participant described in a vein similar to many others the importance of being “able to bring perspectives of others” to reflections on different experiences and “to understand from them things you wouldn’t have thought of yourself” (metanarrative/P13). Dialogical encountering of other viewpoints was also linked to a more profound sense of being heard and, as one participant described, “learning to think that perhaps my views have meaning too, even when they feel insignificant, but perhaps for someone else they are significant” (basic/P1).

The category “increased understanding of the different perspectives of the participants and that one’s own perspective can change in conversation with others” was strengthened to a clearly stronger extent in the metanarrative groups. This category could have also been alternatively categorized under narrative perspective awareness; thus, the changes evident

under this category are in line with how narrative awareness particularly strengthened in the metanarrative groups. When asked what the participant took away from the group to use in everyday life, one participant in a metanarrative group mentioned: “openness, towards argumentation that’s somewhat different from my own” (metanarrative/P6). Another participant reflected on new interpretative connections and on changing one’s own opinions (more on Milla’s experience, see Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen 2024).

The category “strengthened sense of how narratives can increase the ability to imagine new communities and relationships” increased almost to an equal extent in both group models. In this category, it was particularly challenging to interpret whether or not agency has been strengthened. However, in certain cases in the final interview, participants more confidently expressed that narratives do enhance this ability or they reflected on this question in a more multifaceted manner than in the initial interview.

The second subdimension of narrative dialogicality, *encountering the other non-subsumptively*, increased slightly more in the basic groups, even though it did not become strongly visible through these interview questions and has only two categories. The category “stronger experiences of connection and strengthened understanding of encountering others through their stories” includes examples of a shared sense of connection with other group members and experiences that reading has enabled participants to get to know one another better. As one participant asserted: “when we dealt with that mother-daughter text, in that moment or during that session I felt particularly strongly that I could get closer to those other people” (basic/P5).

For the last category “increased ability to reflect on how literature or narratives can help to understand the singularity of other people’s experiences or life situations,” it was challenging to identify strengthening (related to interview question 34), and only a few participants’ answers indicated this. For example, these participants could not think of any examples in the initial interview but mentioned some examples in the final interview or explicitly said that they had been thinking more about this question after reading group meetings.

When we sum up all the instances of enhanced narrative agency, it is evident that narrative agency has strengthened more in the metanarrative (96) than in the basic groups (78). In addition to all the dimensions and categories presented here, the reading groups affected participants in other ways as well. Participants in both group models reported increased reading motivation, stronger interest to participate in reading groups in the future, and increased writing inspiration. They obtained reading recommendations, found informal book discussions enriching, and discovered new perspectives to themselves as readers or to reading as a collective phenomenon. In addition, participants mentioned general well-being effects: they found it meaningful to get to know new people and to do something together in a good group spirit. The reading group was seen as a hobby, and some of the participants explicitly mentioned how it made them feel good, calm, or grounded. All these effects have not been categorized here because they appear to be supportive elements for narrative agency rather than strengthened agency per se. Of course, the boundaries between agency and its support are negotiable. This, once again, illuminates the complexity of narrative agency and its intriguing multidimensionality as a phenomenon.

QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

The questionnaire data were subjected to statistical analyses to examine whether there were changes in the psychological well-being measures and narrative agency dimensions between the pre- and posttests in the metanarrative and basic reading groups. The data, detailed analysis code, and outputs are available in the OSF (<https://osf.io/qt9gh>).

We first examined changes in psychological well-being in the basic and metanarrative groups. The means and standards deviations as a function of time (pre- and posttest) and group type (basic and metanarrative) are presented in Table 4.

Both groups revealed increased *autonomy* ($B = 12.91$, $SE = 5.71$, $t = 2.26$). Examining the means presented in Table 4, it is evident that the autonomy scores increased by 1.9 points in the basic groups and by 0.94 points in the metanarrative groups. However, as there was no indication of an interaction between time and group in the analysis, we cannot conclude that the scores would have increased more in the basic group as compared to that in the metanarrative group.

MEASURE	TIME	GROUP			
		BASIC		METANARRATIVE	
		M	SD	M	SD
Autonomy	Pretest	28.43	3.30	28.33	3.94
	Posttest	30.33	4.03	29.27	5.60
Environmental mastery	Pretest	28.93	4.08	30.00	4.16
	Posttest	29.67	3.81	28.73	4.88
Personal growth	Pretest	36.00	2.80	34.47	4.82
	Posttest	36.33	3.48	34.60	4.75
Positive relations	Pretest	32.87	5.28	34.67	4.75
	Posttest	33.87	4.96	34.00	6.39
Purpose in life	Pretest	28.93	6.49	29.67	5.90
	Posttest	30.93	5.15	29.87	6.75
Self-acceptance	Pretest	28.14	7.13	30.57	6.02
	Posttest	29.50	6.07	30.00	7.05

Table 4 Means and standard deviations for different subscales of psychological well-being, as a function of time (pretest and posttest) and group type (basic and metanarrative).

For *environmental mastery*, an interaction between time and group ($B = -0.50$, $SE = 0.20$, $t = -2.54$) indicated that environmental mastery scores changed differently in the basic and metanarrative groups. As evident from Table 4, environmental mastery increased by 0.74 points in the basic groups, which was not a statistically significant change (estimate = -0.73 , $SE = 0.56$, $t = -1.32$). In the metanarrative groups, environmental mastery decreased by 1.27 points, which was a statistically significant change (estimate = 1.27 , $SE = 0.56$, $t = 2.28$).

Further, there was an interaction between time and group for *positive relations* ($B = -0.42$, $SE = 0.20$, $t = -2.08$), thus suggesting that there were differences between basic and metanarrative groups in how the scores changed from the pretest to the posttest. In the basic groups, positive relation scores increased by 1.0 points, whereas in the metanarrative groups the scores decreased by 0.67 points. However, follow-up comparisons failed to show evidence for statistically significant changes in either group (both $|t|s < 1.8$). Finally, there was no evidence for any effects on *personal growth*, *purpose in life*, or *self-acceptance*.

To summarize the results of the psychological well-being scale, the dimension of the Ryff well-being scale that is most relevant from the perspective of agency is “autonomy.” Autonomy implies the ability to independently regulate one’s behavior and make decisions according to one’s own values and standards rather than being swayed by external pressures or expectations. It signifies self-determination and the ability to resist external influences. The results reveal that autonomy increased in both group types, which is in line with the results from previous reading group research, thereby suggesting that experiential social reading increases participants’ sense of autonomy and self-understanding and, thus, their well-being (e.g. Billington et al. 2010). Environmental mastery slightly diminished among the participants of the metanarrative reading group. Environmental mastery refers to the ability to build an environment that feels satisfactory from the perspective of one’s own needs. It is possible that the participants became more self-critical and critical toward their environment after attending the metanarrative reading group, which involved critical discussion of the oppressive aspects of narrative environments. Participation in the metanarrative groups could also have led to an increased awareness of the limits of one’s ability to control one’s social environment.

Next, we examined changes in narrative agency in the basic and metanarrative groups. The means and standard deviations as a function of time (pre- and posttest) and group type (basic and meta-narrative) are presented in Table 5.

Narrative awareness ($B = -1.90$, $SE = 0.68$, $t = -2.79$) and narrative dialogicality ($B = -0.45$, $SE = 0.20$, $t = -2.27$) increased in both groups. There was no evidence for an interaction between time and group, thus indicating that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups in how much the scores changed. In addition, there was no evidence for changes in narrative imagination.

MEASURE	TIME	GROUP			
		BASIC		METANARRATIVE	
		M	SD	M	SD
Awareness	Pretest	91.86	10.76	91.13	13.11
	Posttest	98.40	12.28	93.20	14.45
Imagination	Pretest	48.07	7.58	48.29	6.45
	Posttest	49.20	6.46	46.93	8.33
Dialogicality	Pretest	25.67	3.50	25.00	5.14
	Posttest	26.60	2.92	25.87	4.96

Table 5 Means and standard deviations for different subscales of narrative agency; as a function of time (pre- and posttest) and group type (basic and metanarrative).

In summary, the narrative agency scale revealed an increase in narrative awareness and narrative dialogicality in participants of both group models. These dimensions of narrative agency strengthened according to the interview data as well; however, whereas the interviews revealed a stronger increase in the narrative awareness of those who participated in the metanarrative reading groups, the questionnaire data failed to show this difference.

DISCUSSION

We studied how two creative reading group models, metanarrative and basic, strengthen participants' narrative agency. Qualitative and quantitative analyses demonstrated that narrative agency strengthened in both types of groups. Based on the interview data, narrative agency increased more in the metanarrative groups, but the difference was clear only under the dimension of narrative awareness. Hence, in order to achieve stronger strengthening of the other two dimensions of narrative agency, the reading group model needs to be developed further.

Our original hypothesis was that metanarrative groups amplify narrative agency more than basic groups. The hypothesis has been partially confirmed: according to the qualitative analysis, narrative agency, particularly narrative awareness, strengthened more in the metanarrative groups, whereas the quantitative analysis did not demonstrate similar differences between the group models.⁹ Through the analysis of the interview data, it was also possible to depict other differences: in the metanarrative groups, participants' answers related to narrative imagination and its subdimension "sense of the possible" included more reflections on narratives and literature; in the basic groups, narrative imagination appeared to be more intertwined with personal reflections. The questionnaire and interview data indicated that narrative dialogicality increased in both groups. The interview answers particularly emphasized the significance of the dialogical group process, one of the aspects that the questionnaire did not focus on.

Overall, the analysis of the interviews appears to have captured the diverse instances of strengthened narrative agency in a more detailed manner than the utilized questionnaire. This indicates that narrative agency is such a complex phenomenon that it is difficult to measure it. The challenge of analyzing manifold and often subtle effects of the reading group process has been noted in previous research on reading groups as well. Different qualitative methods have been applied to address the complexity of reading group processes (e.g., [Billington et al. 2019](#)), and these have been complemented with case studies (e.g., [Davis 2020](#)). Nevertheless, qualitative methods also inevitably involve challenges. In our study, in certain cases, it was challenging to interpret whether or not narrative agency was strengthened. In addition, if narrative agency was strengthened, the changes might have been difficult to categorize because of the overlap among the dimensions of narrative agency. As a method, narrative agency analysis is always based on interpretations; in this study, we acknowledge that although we discussed ambiguous cases as a team, others may have interpreted the data differently.

Naturally, this study has some limitations. The relatively small number of participants means that there was limited statistical power to identify differences between the two groups. Thus,

⁹ For similar findings that metanarrative groups enhanced narrative awareness in particular, see Laura Mustajärvi's master's thesis that compared one metanarrative group and one basic group in greater detail ([Mustajärvi 2022](#)).

the results should be interpreted with some caution. However, we did observe some group differences, thereby implying that at least some of the effects were sufficiently large to be detected even with a small sample. Our sample size was limited due to practical reasons (e.g., recruiting participants, resources needed for organizing the reading groups), which is typical for this type of research. The interview data also has its limitations: interviews varied in duration and in terms of the questions actually asked. As our research proceeded, we realized how important the more uniform interviews would have been for comparing the group types; in the future, we would provide more detailed instructions for the interviewers. Moreover, a couple of participants were interviewed by different interviewers in the initial and final interviews, which might have also affected the answers. In reading group research, comparisons between different groups are always confronted with the complexity of the reading group process: in addition to the texts read in the group, many other elements—such as different facilitation styles, writing exercises, and group processes—shape the experience. In this project, all six groups had different facilitators and various types of writing exercises. In the future, it would benefit the comparison between group types if the same facilitators could facilitate both the metanarrative and basic groups and if the writing exercise instructions were more uniform in each group.

One possible reason for the finding that many aspects of narrative agency were strengthened in both reading groups is that participation in the research process may have influenced the participants—a rather typical problem in this type of research (see e.g. French & Sutton 2010). We noticed that the initial interviews evoked many reflections in the participants. The focus on narrative agency in the initial interviews and questionnaires framed the entire process of participating in the reading groups and provided them a “metanarrative” orientation, a lens through which they engaged in the reading groups regardless of group type. Moreover, a few changes in the final interview answers may have followed from the fact that the participants had already answered the same questions in the initial interview and were familiar with them rather than indicating an actual strengthening of narrative agency. Hence, the study would have benefited from the inclusion of a control group whose participants completed the questionnaires and participated in the interviews but did not take part in any reading groups. However, despite all these limitations, the data still proved to be interesting for a comparative analysis of the differences between the reading group models, and we find it important to report and record these results and learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

Approaching reading groups from the perspective of narrative agency has offered new insights into reading group studies and into reading group practices. This study demonstrated how the theory of narrative agency provides a multifaceted framework to study the potential of social reading. The qualitative interview data appeared to be better equipped to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of narrative agency as compared to quantitative questionnaire data. In the future, we will focus on further developing research methods by modifying the interview questions and complementing interviews with observation.

The results, even when considering all the limitations of the study, suggest that reading groups have the potential to enhance participants’ narrative agency—particularly the metanarrative groups that bring cultural narratives to a conscious level of reflection. Although the differences between the two reading group models examined here were not as clear as hypothesized, the qualitative analysis showed that the narrative agency of the participants strengthened more in the metanarrative than in the basic groups and hence the metanarrative approach has substantial potential. The results have encouraged us to further develop the metanarrative reading group model, which we will now refer to as the *narrative agency reading group model* (NARG). Currently, we are also applying the NARG model in new contexts. In the project “Counter-Narratives of Cancer: Shaping Narrative Agency” (The Research Council of Finland, 2023–2028), we apply the NARG model to cancer narratives and work with cancer patients and medical professionals (see Kosonen, Meretoja & Kinnunen 2025). In the project “Narrative Agency Reading Group Model: Applications for Libraries, Schools and Hospitals” (The Research Council of Finland, 2025–2027), we organize training and are writing a manual on the NARG model. The reading groups analyzed in this article as well as all the reading groups organized

in the abovementioned new projects indicate how meaningful social reading can be at its best—by providing opportunities to reflect on one’s own experiences in dialogue with other participants’ stories and cultural narratives, and, hence, by strengthening agency and a sense of meaningfulness.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Reading lists, writing exercises, interview questions, questionnaires, the questionnaire data and the quantitative analysis code are available in the OSF (<https://osf.io/qt9gh>). The full interviews are not openly available in the OSF due to the privacy of the participants and because the participants have only provided consent to make the anonymous numerical data openly available.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kinnunen was the main author of the text and responsible for the qualitative analysis. Kaakinen was responsible for the quantitative analysis. Meretoja developed the theoretical framework of narrative agency and wrote the section related to the theory. Kinnunen, Meretoja and Kosonen were responsible for the reading group model development, research design, and data collection. Meretoja and Kosonen supervised the analysis performed by Kinnunen. All authors participated in writing and editing the manuscript.

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