

Proof

**PART II**

**Crisis and Relationality**

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## 6

**UNCERTAINTY – HAVE WE EVER BEEN CERTAIN? WHAT PFIZER, BILLY GRAHAM, TRUMP, AND PSYCHOLOGY HAVE IN COMMON...***Michael Bamberg*

CLARK UNIVERSITY

**What Happened?**

I had been on a Fulbright in Poznan, Poland, but by the end of March 2020, I was called back to the United States because my program had been suspended due to COVID-19. Then on April 25, I received an invitation to give a presentation at the PGC2020 ('The psychology of global crisis' conference), and six weeks later, on May 28, I presented a 15-minute PPT, followed by 45 minutes of discussion – both available on YouTube. I had been under the impression that all presentations had to be submitted and posted before the conference started; so, I had posted my presentation hoping to spend more time at the conference discussing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THy0eCJriHM>). What had attracted me to agree to present – on a topic I have no expertise<sup>1</sup> – were two (maybe three) factors: First, I thought that the idea to bring together psychologists from around the globe and ask whether they <as psychologists> might have anything to contribute to the current 'crisis' posed by COVID-19 – or to any other 'crisis' for that matter – is an interesting challenge for the discipline as a whole – and I was curious to see and hear. In addition, during my days back in the United States, I was surprised how quickly the advertising industry in the United States – and here I refer broadly to commercial as well as social and political advertising – was able to adjust to the new conditions: Bombarded with COVID-19-related advertisements, I thought that it could be worthwhile to sample some of them, try to critically scrutinize their messages – and begin to speculate about their effectiveness. Little did I know what I ended up with: a co-conspiracy theory between Pfizer, Billy Graham, Madonna, Trump – and lo and behold: psychology. I apologize for adding yet another 'conspiracy theory' to all those currently floating around, and while at the time I had called them more

innocently ‘bedfellows,’ I genuinely believe that there is more to them than an innocent alignment. This is what I will unpack in the following, and I start and take off from the advertisements I used in my presentation on May 28. As a third potential reason for participating, I saw an opportunity to try out and apply, what I have been working on over the past years, which is ‘small stories’ and their analysis in terms of ‘positioning theory.’ And the COVID ads that were flooding our TV screens here in the United States in those days back in April/May looked like great exemplars of ‘small stories,’ so I thought.

However, something else happened – exactly in the midst of our conference. On May 25, an incident took place in Minneapolis, MN: George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed – having been handcuffed and pinned to the ground by a police officer. The 8 minutes and 46 seconds were caught on camera by bystanders, and the distribution of the footage resulted in a nation-wide outrage and massive protests all across the United States against police brutality and systemic racism. What is of particular interest here, apart from the more coincidental temporal overlapping of these three events, i.e., our conference with George Floyd’s murder and the wave of subsequent protests, is that the media started to refer to the latter also as ‘crises.’ The argument was that we were having <at least> two crises on our hands; although, at the time, as to what exactly this ‘new’ crisis consisted of was left unspecified. Also, it was interesting to see that some of us conference participants tried to weave the raw events in the United States into our presentations, venturing off from what we originally had planned.

### **Where Are We Now?**

A bit more than six months later, today (December 18, 2020), the first people in the United Kingdom and the United States have been vaccinated, and Pfizer (in partnership with BioNTech) was celebrated as one of the first (in Western Europe/the United States) to develop and successfully position a vaccine against COVID-19 on the emerging vaccine markets. This is not the place to applaud their scientific success, particularly not as national ‘victories,’ as similar achievements were accomplished in other nation-states (such as China, England, or Russia). Though it requires mention, because in my talk on May 28, I critically reviewed – and will repeat this argument here – Pfizer’s advertisement strategies used back in April/May, and how they parallel similar strategies by others. Billy Graham commercials still run in the United States during prime-time but reduced in numbers, and no longer marketing COVID-19; Madonna has left her bathtub, cuddles with her daughter, and celebrates Hanukkah; Trump seems to be on his way out, and psychology – well, it is what it is, and we will return to its contributions to ‘crisis’ in general, and COVID-19 (and ‘uncertainty’) in particular. Overall, and six months later: While some things have changed, others are the same (or worse). The United States experienced yesterday (December 17, 2020) an all-time tragic high of daily increases of COVID-19 associated cases that

tested positive, hospitalizations, and deaths; while, on the other hand, vaccines appear as a silver lining on the horizon. In all this, the discipline of psychology seems to stand by. As already mentioned, we will return to the role of psychology in the current ‘crisis’ below.

With regard to the unrest that followed George Floyd’s murder, I gather it is fair to say that police brutality and systemic racism have not changed one bit. However, it may also be fair to argue that at the very least two ‘narratives’ have surfaced on the national scene with more clarity: the first, promoted by Fox News and U.S. President Trump, using the metaphor of anarchy and chaos to describe the unrest, coupled with the call for law and order – up to military intervention. The second, maybe even shared by large parts of the U.S. population, still uses the term ‘crisis,’ though to frame the current state of the history of settler-discourse – as being ‘in-crisis’; here in the United States, and more globally and generally: for ‘the crisis’ of whiteness and (neo-)colonialism in the global world. However, as we see quite clearly, to frame the appearance of these events as ‘crises,’ i.e., using the same term to capture (i) aspects of the epidemic associated with COVID-19, (ii) the unrest that took place in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, and (iii) the connection between whiteness, police brutality, and systemic racism in the United States, may hide more than the term ‘crisis’ may be able to reveal or illuminate. Thus, I will briefly sketch out why the term ‘uncertainty’ – particularly for us in the field of psychology – may offer a more productive metaphoric frame.

### **‘Crisis?’ – Or Are We Better Off Talking About ‘Uncertainty?’**

From a first look at how the collective experience of COVID-19 in U.S.-American English had been framed, the terms ‘crisis’ and ‘uncertainty’ were used interchangeably – almost synonymously. However, the use of the term ‘crisis’ frames an event – more typically a sequence of events – as having a clear beginning, a middle, and an end, i.e., a bounded temporal contour. As such, it is a perfect candidate for storying, i.e., pouring what happened into the form of a narrative. A second connotation highlights the ‘newness – namely, what is sandwiched between the beginning and ending was unexpected – and most likely experienced as an unwelcome and dis-preferred disruption. A third connotation calls on a crisis team that is able to manage the crisis – some kind of crisis experts who can advise on what to do and, if possible, shorten the temporal contour. There may be more aspects, but these three may suffice to briefly check whether and how the experience of COVID-19 fits. And while reports of the availability of vaccines these days (mid-December 2020) may stoke the impression that there is a clear ending of the pandemic and that we all will be <back> to a <new> normal, and while this type of reporting talk feeds into the impression that what we had was <just> a ‘crisis,’ this was not so at the peak of the first wave in

April/May 2020. Nevertheless, framing the COVID-19 experience as ‘crisis’ – back then, and definitely now in December – definitely transports the images of ‘light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel’ and hope into the collective consciousness of a U.S. population that back in April/May was more likely to be constructed in despair and suffering. In this context, and only retrospectively, it is fascinating to see how the COVID-19 crisis narrative was ‘politicized.’ There was the construction of an agentive and heroic crisis-manager on one side – and we will see how this strategically played out in advertising and branding – with the assembly of helplessness and victimhood on the other side, including all who had to undergo social restrictions and economic curtailments. One may just consider the thought: What if the vaccine had been on the market (and available for all) just one week before the U.S. elections?

In contrast, ‘uncertainty’ is not conceptualizable in the form of an eventive Gestalt-like figure. Instead, ‘uncertainty’ describes a state, i.e., it has no clear beginning nor ending – it is ongoing. To use a different perspective, ‘uncertainty’ focuses on the middle part of ‘crisis.’ As such, it does not call into effect a team of ‘uncertainty-managers’ who are supposed to put an end to it. And in this regard, ‘uncertainty’ shares with ‘crisis’ an element of new and unexpectedness. However, in our daily lives, not all new experience nor everything unexpected intrinsically is registered as ‘crisis-experience.’ Rather, a certain amount of ‘uncertainty’ gears up a person or organization wanting to ‘dig deeper’ and explore – coinciding with the image of ‘the scientific explorer.’ Now, it could be argued that certain kinds of ‘uncertainty-experiences’ are more unsettling than others. This definitely will be the case. However, and this is a striking difference and superseding the use of ‘crisis,’ some situations are interpreted by some as a challenge, driving them to agentively confront and explore. In contrast, others interpret the exact same experience as a threat – resulting in the typically more passive reaction of withdrawal (cf. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is precisely this difference between the discursive connotation of ‘uncertainty’ in contrast to ‘crisis’ that I have been exploring in my own work that I will briefly lay out.

‘Uncertainty’ in my own discursively informed work is not meant to be anything existential – and particularly not due to ‘fear-of-death.’ Instead, ‘uncertainty’ results from and is visible in the kind of daily practices we engage when doing ‘identity-work.’ Identities can be differentiated and claimed vis-à-vis varying socio-cultural categories, e.g., gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, class, nation-states, or regional territory. With regard to each of these categories, people engage in communicative practice with others, and as such, are not considered categorially static but as having options. For instance, navigating a sense of *who-I-am* in a job interview, in contrast to interactions we have with our colleagues in a bar, in contrast to an intimate conversation with our partner, and other contexts may be added, is not the same. In each and any situation in which we position a sense of *who-we-are*, we have options, and in each and every new context, we are challenged to

navigate a number of terrains in a new but sensible way. In previous work (Bamberg, 2011, 2020), I have shown in detail that there are essentially three areas in which individuals face the uncertain terrain of how to navigate their *sense-of-self*: (i) sameness of a sense of self across time in the face of constant change, i.e., how we navigate the temporal contour of how we became who we (believe we) are; (ii) distinctiveness/uniqueness of ourselves vis-à-vis others in the face of being the same as everyone else; and (iii) the construction of the relationship between our own agency (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and the agency of world/others (with a world-to-self direction of fit that places the self in an undergoer position). Uncertain are these navigations because for once, the space is open: We can either stress ourselves as the same we used to be – or as having changed; we can either stress ourselves as similar/same in comparison to others (individuals or collectives) or as different; and lastly, we can either present a sense of ourselves as highly agentive (as in control), who, for instance, interprets COVID-19 as a challenge, or we can view it as a threat – and often, these two seemingly opposed interpretive frames can operate side by side. In addition, in a certain context, as, for instance, with a team of experts from afar, we have the option to downplay our difference vis-à-vis them and their expertise – or touch up and boost our sense of professional continuity and agency. None of them are identity traits that cause people's actions. Rather, they have choices (cf. Bamberg, in press a) – but our choices are made in terrains that are uncertain. Against this background, I will revisit and analyze the advertisements I had picked for my presentation earlier this year on May 28.<sup>2</sup>

### How Does Advertising/Branding Fit into This?

Modern commercial and social/political branding largely employs storytelling techniques. The identity of the brand/product<sup>3</sup> is positioned with respect to particular culturally/collectively shared master narratives (also called master/dominant discourses – cf. Bamberg & Wipff, 2020, 2021). These master narratives provide the relevant background assumptions against which targeted consumers can align, to the effect that the product/brand can “speak-to-them.” More concretely, the brand/product is positioned to “pick up” targeted consumers in the space where they typically position their own sense of self and promises to be ‘of-value’ for them<sup>4</sup>: (i) They position the consumer in terms of their continuous (traditional-same) or newly emergent (typically young and/or open-to-change) identities; (ii) they appeal to consumers’ alignments (or dis-alignments) with others – particular <special> individuals (e.g., celebrities, role models) or collectives (race, gender, age or national/regional identities); and (iii) as agentive, energetic and dynamic, versus threatened, suffering or neglected. How this is effectively being accomplished, also by the use of aesthetic means, will be the subject of demonstration in the next section of this contribution.

## What Do We Have as Data? – And How Do We Work with Them?

As mentioned earlier, for my presentation back in May, I had selected eight short clips to work with – covering five different thematic master narratives; and I shall run through the first four here, ending up with a more detailed discussion of the fifth (at 18'30"). As mentioned earlier, it is advisable to watch the advertisements – available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THy0eCJriHM> (find below the timestamps for each of the ads discussed):

- *Science and Progress* – <two clips branding Pfizer, ad I at 4'20", ad II at 7'20">
- *Religion* – <one clip branding Billy Graham at 10'15">
- *Equality* – <one clip branding Madonna (in the bathtub) at 12'10">
- *Exceptionalism/Greatness* (in cahoots with nationalism) – <three clips branding Trump, starting at 14'00">
- *Psychology* and its by-product: the *Self-Help-Industry* – one clip <MindSpace, at 18'30"> and several non-visual ads, all promoting Self-Help/Well-Being products

For the purpose of brevity, I will lump together the first two master narratives (*Science-and-Progress* <Pfizer> and *Religion* <Billy Graham>) and the second two (*Equality* <Madonna> and *Exceptionalism/Greatness* <Trump>), and subsequently work in a bit more detail through the last clip <MindSpace>. Reasons for advancing this way are (i) space limitations and (ii) my hope that by the time we shall turn to the analysis of *psychology* and *MindSpace*, we will have a general sense of the analytic procedure for analyzing how brands position their clients/consumers – and thereby position their own identities. To be more explicit, each clip will briefly be analyzed in terms of how the brand positions its clients and where and how – in terms of navigating the brand's own identity – brands promote to “pick up” their clients. To foreshadow and illustrate, the first two clips, for instance, were both released in late April by Pfizer, an international pharmaceutical corporation (with its headquarters in the United States); and both use a similar device of brief image sequences. However, whereas the first construes their clients as navigating the uncertain terrain of agency and control, the second aims to construe and pick them up in their uncertainty to draw up their alignments (and differentiations) between self and others. In both advertisements, Pfizer speaks from an authoritative position, promising to bring their clients' comfort in solidarity/togetherness and a safe end of uncertainty/crisis – under the umbrella of science and progress. We will briefly touch on each clip, but attend more closely to the last, i.e., how *psychology* and its by-product in the form of the self-help ethos strategically position their clients – and thereby themselves; and how this is conducted in close proximity with other brands and their products – including the identity politics of the White House at the height of the second wave of COVID-19 in the United States.



### ***Science and Progress AND Religion***

The first three advertisement clips employ two meta- or grand master narratives as framing devices for their brand: science and religion (cf. Lyotard, 1984) – the first two, Pfizer I and II, use science, and the third, Billy Graham, religion. All three employ the same technique of seriating brief shots – often stills – with a <male> voiceover. Each sequence presents an overall coherent message, though not telling a story. The lines of argument presented by the voiceover also in a strict sense do not tell stories, although they start with a problem, to which, by the end of the clip, a solution is being offered. Here the first lines from each advertisement:

- Pfizer I: At a time when things are most uncertain, we turn to the most certain thing there is: science...
- Pfizer II: We come from different places; we look differently; we live different ways; we love different ways; we worship different ways... – ... but one shared goal: to discover the cure.
- Billy Graham: Don't let the headlines frighten you – Yes, we're living in a crisis – period. But God is with us in the midst of grief...

Whereas Pfizer I and Billy Graham position their clients in an identity terrain where people navigate their agency, i.e., whether and how they are in control or being controlled, Pfizer II addresses their clients' need to navigate how to fit in (or stand out) – being different and/or same vis-à-vis others. Pfizer II here offers a <brilliant> solution, inasmuch as we all <are said> to agree wanting to solve a shared problem, namely the epidemic. Note that in this clip, the problem is never made explicit. The shared characteristic of the characters featured in this advertisement is 'difference' – or, to use a more suitable term: being members of a diverse population. As such, Pfizer II builds on diversity – something that some may see as a threat and problem, while others see it as strength and continuity; building on an already diverse community, and presenting its characters as embracing their diversity, makes it possible to integrate under an umbrella of a shared goal, to “*discover the cure.*” To sum up, what we can take away from these brief observations: While Pfizer I and Billy Graham present themselves as authoritative voices and offer their clients to navigate their experiential terrain as change, Pfizer II chose a relatively unconventional strategy of client-positioning – thereby positioning their own sense of who they are as a brand.

### ***Equality AND Exceptionality/Greatness***

There are actually four clips featured in my presentation under this header: one narrated by Madonna, and three by Trump. The first of Trump's three clips makes use of the same technique as Pfizer and Billy Graham, i.e., promoting a

sequence of visuals with excerpts from Trump's 2019 (February 5) State of the Union address as a voiceover. His two subsequent clips ("*transition to greatness*") stem from press conferences held on May 8 and May 21, the days preceding and even overlapping with our conference. Madonna, stressing that COVID-19 has the potential to affect every person equally, although by now we know that minority populations are more at risk, she employs a similar strategy as Pfizer II, i.e., she minimizes differences in her targeted audience, playing down individuality and their potential for uniqueness. Conversely, she positions them all as same and equal. And, though we are not sure if she took sameness and equality as a positive value to strive for, COVID-19 as "*the great equalizer*" is positioned as highly agentive, and people struck by the virus are positioned as undergoers, in what she calls a '*great*' equalizing process. Ironically, the master narrative of national exceptionalism and greatness, pressed by Donald Trump, also positions us (i.e., U.S. citizens) as same and equal, although in stark contradistinction – and as superior – to others,<sup>5</sup> i.e., people who do not share the same history, non-U.S. citizens. In essence: The only value that unites the limited set of U.S. citizens is their difference vis-à-vis others.

Without being able to go deeper into a more fine-grained analysis of the four clips under consideration here, it nevertheless is noteworthy that the two clips of Trump's accounts that address COVID-19, though only indirectly, intend to pick up their audiences in all three terrains of identity navigation. As just identified, Trump constructs an 'outside-other' for how to navigate difference and sameness for those who identify as insiders: 'We' (i.e., those who subscribe to 'greatness and exceptionality') are same and equal because we endorse this identity claim. At the same time, the division between 'us' and 'them' is apt to give instruction on how to navigate both the continuity/change identity dimension as well as the agency terrain: First, "*making America great again*" implies that greatness/exceptionality had been on the decline in recent years – from wherever it used to be; and the images provided in the first clip suggest a time of past military conflicts and victories. "*Transition to greatness*" at the height of the first COVID-19 wave promises a return to pre-COVID and the continuation of undefined times of <military> strength and exceptionality – pre-Obama and previous administrations. This offer for how to navigate the temporal terrain of identity continuity simultaneously is meant to provide guidance for how to navigate the terrain of agency/control: The collective agent 'we' is regaining agency and control – agentive strengths that 'we' had been deprived of in times of pre-Trump leaderships.

### **Psychology**

As I had mentioned in my presentation, I had never come across a commercial for self-help products on TV, and definitely never during prime-time. This was new when COVID-19 started to peak in the United States in April/May. Also new

was how the media reacted: bringing in and interviewing psychologists left and right, and representatives of self-help brands in particular. Compared to those that I analyzed in previous sections, the advertisement I used in my presentation is relatively low tech and cheap to produce. However, it may be fair to say that it nevertheless may have proven similarly effective.

- During this crisis – millions of Americans have lost their jobs – leaving many things stressed (.) and anxious – and most of us (.) just don't know how to deal with it – but we can try (.) by taking time to look after our minds – headspace is now free (.) for everyone in America who's lost their job (.) to help you get back on your feet – headspace can't fix everything – but it can help you cope with today (.) and whatever tomorrow brings – be kind to your mind – at headspace.com [(.) stands for brief pauses; – for longer pauses.]

First off, it positions its clients similar to other branding strategies – as suffering victims (*stretched, anxious, and confused*), and alongside “*this crisis*” as the powerful agent and the cause for holding its victims in its grip. Picking up its potential clients in the uncertain terrain of agency/passivity navigation, “*looking after our minds*” is what Headspace offers as potential remedy to turn the tables – with the goal “*to get back on your feet,*” and to be able “*to cope with today, and whatever tomorrow brings.*” And although ‘uncertainty’ is not explicitly mentioned, this concept is at the core of the argument: Having no certain ground to stand on, not knowing how to deal with the present and what tomorrow may bring, all are concerns for how to navigate individual (or organizational) agency in our daily practices. Interestingly, Headspace, and none of the other self-help products that I sampled back in May (AltaMed, PTNL, and BIKTARVY), and my mention of *Psychology Today* from March 17 (Estrada, 2020), draws on possibilities to navigate identity relationally – although loneliness and isolation could have easily been thrown into the mix. Instead, the brand calls for turning inward, i.e., to withdraw from typically mundane and everyday activities (with others), to take a time-out, to “*look after our minds.*” In terms of agency maneuvering, the client is positioned at the receiving and undergoing end of the agency-passivity terrain: first struck by COVID-19 and placed in ‘crisis,’ and secondly in need to be administered a product that has healing power when turning inward. Interestingly, the brand promises its clients that they can regain lost agency: With the powers of Headspace, they will be able to *heal themselves*. At the same time, Headspace does not entitle itself (nor their clients), at least not explicitly, to end or overcome clients’ in-crisis-mode; just dealing with today’s uncertainty – and maybe tomorrow’s. In other words, Headspace is not offered to serve as a long-range remedy – as, for instance, getting rid of COVID-19 (as, for instance, through the development of a vaccine). Rather, self-help brands during the COVID-19 pandemic offer to help navigate the constancy/change terrain as a step-by-step

procedure and in the form of repeated micro-procedural, self-therapeutic inward-moves. Here, at this point, it would be the right moment to pause and dwell in more detail how this may be possible – or better: what background assumptions are called into this kind of positioning strategy, and how this may speak – particularly to a <white> liberal, educated, self-critical, and middle-class client identity.

### **Any Take-away Message?**

The core concern during my participation in the conference – and this has not changed over the last six months – was whether there actually is anything that psychology can provide at times that are constructed as crises. Why would anyone call for or turn to psychologists in times of uncertainty or when ‘in crisis’? Even more succinctly, what could psychologists offer that is not already ‘on the market’ in the form of products offered by the self-help industry?

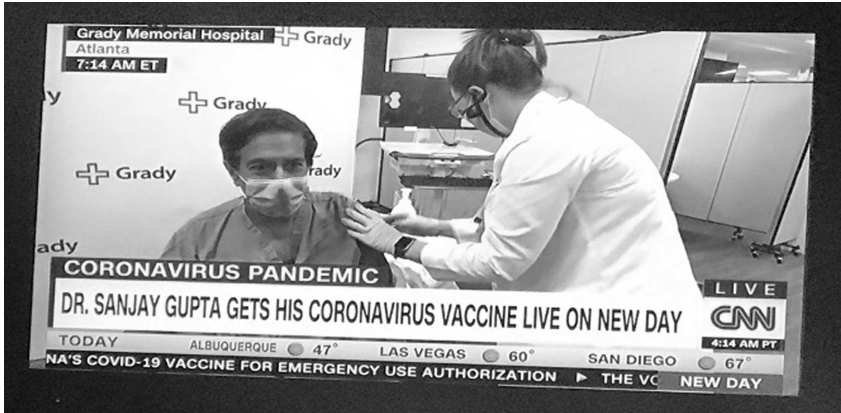
To address this question, I would like to briefly dwell on how I see the current state of psychology as a discipline that is stuck between <still> viewing the individual as its center, and confronted with systemic issues of inequality/inequity and social injustice, that are woven into the fabric of everyday interactions and practices – whether around issues of gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, age, physical and mental abilities, education, and the like – all in dire need for change. The following is a simplification, though one that may help illuminate the issue at hand: Psychology seems to have become the terrain where to stand-by and jump in to give “treatment” when people experience ‘uncertainty’ or helping to “manage” their ‘crisis.’ In the face of systemic and epistemic issues, these treatment and management services are at best covers and band-aids – and as such, they are undoubtedly of value. However, how these local treatments can ever serve or feed into systemic change that enables to control crises and uncertainty remains unacknowledged.

To clarify: What COVID-19 – in concert with the killing of George Floyd and the resulting movement in the US (and world-wide) against police violence and racial injustice – and I would include the 10 days of our conference in May – have taught us is the necessity to rethink some basic matters of the discipline. Having worked here through a few aspects of ‘crisis’ and ‘uncertainty,’ trying to show how facets of both have become marketed and are capitalized on, and how psychology as a discipline is implicated, calls for a radical rethinking. Of course, I do not have a fully fledged answer. However, if psychologists were to start from and work with a notion of ‘uncertainty’ that is not hidden inside individuals’ interiorities, but instead open to observable developmental processes in relational interactive practices, we may be able to begin shifting the public discourse of what psychologists actually could be doing. Let me briefly touch and build on the methodology I have tried to showcase in this contribution to exemplify what direction this type of work could take (cf. also Bamberg, in press b).

Over the past decade, psychologists have made important advances by recentering our focus on populations that are underserved and have shifted the spotlight significantly toward issues of equity and social justice (cf. McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2017; Palacios et al., 2014). However, the integration of populations who have been on the fringe of psychological research thus far may not be sufficient. Following up on the imperative to move toward more diversity in work with vulnerable populations, I would like to orient the discipline toward a shift in analytic emphasis as well – one that also may better serve the exploration and impact on equity and social justice. Out of recent work with counter narratives, i.e., narratives that are “intended to counter background assumptions that support another alternative narrative” (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021, p. 80), the call has emerged to make use of positioning analytic procedures (the way I showcased in this contribution) that are able to micro-analytically, in depth, explore how dominant master narratives can be interrogated and subverted. This way of approaching the topic of ‘uncertainty’ and how it is navigated in narrative practices such as advertising and branding, and employing qualitative means that are able to go beyond interiority and above the thematic analysis of what these advertisements are about, would get psychologists out of a stand-by position and launch a deeper and more productive engagement with systemic concerns and societal change (cf. also for a deeper discussion: Bamberg & Dege, in press). As an educator and researcher in the discipline of psychology, this is what I feel may constitute a good step in the right direction.

### Where Are We Headed?

As mentioned, today is December 18, and I have been looking back at the year of 2020 – with a focus on the theme of the conference: “The psychology of global crises.” My ruminations on the state of the art of the discipline of psychology in the face of ‘crises’ and ‘uncertainty’ for me as a teacher and researcher may be shared by colleagues who speak from a similarly critically and qualitatively informed perspective. Others, particularly practitioners, may be able to suggest additional or divergent propositions. Irrespective of where and how we land, my interpretive efforts in this chapter, I hope, will not be misinterpreted as anti-science or anti-religious; and neither were they intended as anti-psychology. Having, hopefully, clarified this, I would like to end by sharing an image I took this morning on CNN *New Day* at 7:14 AM (Eastern Time), while still in bed. As a piece of news presentation, it attempted to capture and embrace a moment that symbolized and as such signaled something like an ending of or closure to the narrative of 2020 – or at least an important episodic portion thereof. At the same time, it symbolically pointed forward and signaled change and hope – salvation from a threat: as putting a dark temporal episode behind us<sup>6</sup> (Figure 6.1).



**FIGURE 6.1** Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN chief medical correspondent, receiving his vaccine injection. Screenshot taken on December 18, 2020

I will abstain from a deeper and more critical analysis of how this news event was staged and how it positioned the protagonists in this event (Valerie Montgomery Rice, MD, and Dr. Sanjay Gupta, and an unnamed nurse) and managed to position itself (the show *New Day*, and the organization CNN); and there certainly are a number of interesting layers of contradictions and insights we would be able to discern. Reading this chapter at a later point in time will unquestionably add additional layers to the snapshots of interpretive efforts inspired by the conference organizers and attendees – for which I would like to thank them.

## Notes

- 1 In a first exchange with the conference organizers, I tried to convince them to better use the term ‘uncertainty’ instead of ‘crises.’ However, the title had already been set, and it was interesting to see how many – and how quickly – psychologists were ready to jump onto and operate with the <metaphoric> term ‘crises.’ So, I asked the organizers whether it was okay to tackle – and publicly oppose – the term ‘crises’; to which the organizers <as they ensured: *happily*> submitted.
- 2 As mentioned earlier, it is advisable to watch the advertisements – available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THy0eCJriHM>.
- 3 Product advertising and brand advertisements are not the same. However, for the purpose of the argument here, and in order to simplify, I have collapsed them.
- 4 It should be noted that in principle, especially in long-term strategic organizational branding, a general ‘brand-alignment’ typically trumps more short-ranged and concrete ‘product-alignments.’
- 5 ... especially ‘superior’ to people who live in or “come from shithole countries” (Trump, January 12, 2018, quoted in the *Washington Post*, Dawsey, 2018).
- 6 The screenshot presents Dr. Sanjay Gupta, the CNN chief medical correspondent, who appeared more than once or twice daily on CNN and presented his analyses of daily events, while receiving his vaccine injection. He was/is the second most well-known

(and liked, if I may add) medical expert in the news media – just after Anthony S. Fauci, MD – director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

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