

# Apocalypse, Restoration, and Emergence: Spontaneous Use of Archetypal Narrative Devices in Solicited Diaries of College Seniors Writing During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

As a source of comfort in crisis, people have long turned to archetypal motifs and stories of disaster and triumph to gain a sense of meaning, order, predictability, and even hope for the future. We explored the spontaneous use of three archetypal narratives by university seniors writing in diaries

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic led to grave human loss, economic disorder, and disruption of everyday life for many people around the world. For some young adults in the USA, this was their first experience of a global crisis of this magnitude, threatening their sense of security for the future. Archetypal motifs and stories of disaster and triumph can help people to gain a sense of meaning, order, predictability, and even hope for the future. Work by Alex Evans, Casper terKuile, and Ivor Williams (Collective Psychology Project, 2017) points out three common myths. We explored these three motifs in the pandemic context:

- Revelation — narratives about learning or something being revealed from the pandemic
- Restoration — healing or return to the way things were in the past before the pandemic
- Emergence — fundamental change, the birth of something new as a result of the pandemic

We explored the spontaneous use of these motifs by university seniors writing in diaries about the pandemic during a senior capstone course.

## Methods

A diary researcher in the higher educational context and a licensed psychologist working in a college counseling center conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) on a selection of 28 diaries from a larger sample of 58 diaries written for a multicohort diary study spanning more than two years. Using a “coding reliability version” of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Terry et al., 2017), two coders both code all data and work through disagreements with discussion. Each coder read over and independently rated each diary entry for the presence of each of the three myths of revelation, restoration, and emergence. The coders then met and identified disagreements. Pre-reconciled interrater agreement was 81% for Revelation, 77% for Restoration, and 84% for Emergence. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and then examples were selected to illustrate each myth.

## Diary Excerpts Representing the Archetypal Narrative Devices

### Myths of Revelation in 44% of entries

“Farah” (4/16/2020): The issues of unemployment and low-income are prominent now because of the pandemic. I have seen so many people struggling financially, becoming unemployed, or putting their lives on hold until this all improves, which could be a substantial amount of time. It breaks my heart to see people I love, both living in fear of the virus and struggling to make ends meet.

“Uri” (4/23/2020): Over the last few days, I have been trying to find the lesson in my circumstances. I used to complain about not having enough time. Now that I do, I have realized that I wasn’t utilizing it like I should be. So I thought about what I should do to ensure that I can be productive towards becoming the man I would like to be.

“Leah” (10/30/2020). The pure greed sweeping over people while dealing with this virus has come into full view. Lives are at stake, but I see all of these people saying ‘I can’t live this way.’ College kids only care about partying. In the end, all are losing sight that we should be cautious, wash our hands, wear a mask, to protect others’ lives. Greed is what runs the world.

“Brooke” (4/1/21): When I’m riding my motorcycle, my thoughts are mostly staved off by the focus necessary to keep me safe on the road. I don’t have too much time to worry about the endless cycle of anxiety that plagues my mind. With the spring flowers blooming, I have lots of wonderful scenery and smells to take in as I ride. It’s so nice to see people out and about again. By now, the people wearing masks are not jarring at all to me—they are expected—though it is so nice to see whole faces again when pedestrians are walking on sidewalks or in parks. I’ve almost forgotten the intrigue of defining, beautiful, asymmetrical features on the faces of strangers. But, when I’m able to ride past a group of people laughing together or families playing in the park, it brings me a sense of comfort. It’s like present-day nostalgia.

### Myths of Restoration in 40% of entries

“Naomi” (9/15/2020): I miss normal life—being able to do normal things like visiting my parents without a mask and without having to stay outside and six feet apart. We didn’t take our family vacation this summer. I can’t take my great niece trick-or-treating. I have only seen my best friends once since the pandemic hit. The holidays won’t be the same either—no extended family and social distanced with masks doesn’t sound too festive. I can’t wait to go back to “normal.” I didn’t think I loved my normal as much as I do.

“Owen” (9/29/2020): I feel that people need to stay at home more and try to do better at quarantining. It is important so they we can stop the virus from spreading. We need to get to a point where there is little to no cases, so we can get life somewhat back to normal. I will be the first to say it sucks having these restrictions, but I do believe if we stay with them then we will be back to normal sooner.

“Lilly” (4/6/2021): The number of people who have been vaccinated across the world is incredible. It makes me feel optimistic that life may be back to how it was before this pandemic. This has been so difficult for everyone and there have certainly been setbacks, but I hope that others are beginning to feel hopeful like myself.

### Myths of Emergence in 29% of entries

“Brad” (4/16/2020): This Coronavirus isn’t getting any better. Seems as if we are living day to day. People are still adjusting to the new social norms. All we can do is adapt and evolve.

“Stephanie” (9/22/2020): The whole situation has brought up many thoughts about the 40-hour, 5-day work week and I think we may realize we need a new system moving forward.

“Cedrick” (2/25/2021): It’s interesting, all the challenges Covid has subsequently presented due to isolation and forbidden experiences. A general increase in work, as well as stress, have also helped me create new solutions, new ideas, and new paradigms. I’ve learned to take the bad with the good. Although I am feeling stressed, I refuse to lose hope, and will stay determined.

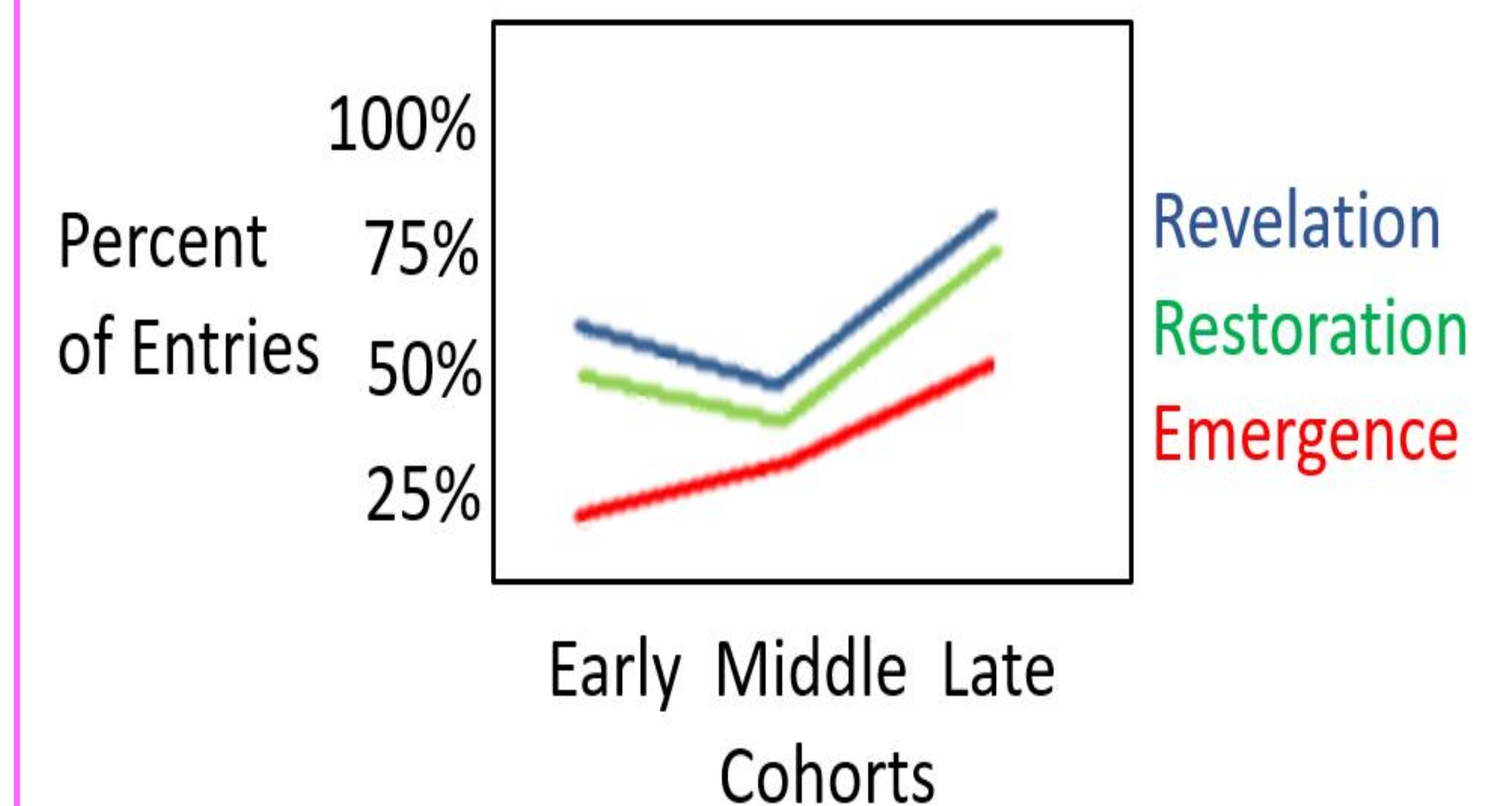
“Madeline” (9/20/2021): Recently, I feel defeated by the pandemic, like life is never going to go back to normal.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

- Hyers, L. L. (2018). *Diary methods: Understanding qualitative research*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
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## Variation in Use of Narratives

The most common motif was Revelation, followed closely by Restoration, with Emergence being the least common. Looking at the relative use of the three motifs over the course of the pandemic, it was apparent that the cohorts’ engagement with Revelation and Restoration motifs dipped during the middle of the pandemic and their engagement with motifs of Emergence steadily increased. Although diarists thought less about life lessons and/or nostalgia for pre-pandemic days in the middle of the pandemic, these motifs returned again later, as thoughts of permanent change steadily increased over the course of the pandemic (see Figure 1).



## Discussion

In a time of crises, the new learning that comes with Revelation narratives can help with sense-making, can provide a reason for an otherwise crisis event, and can help spur people to action to change themselves or social injustices. Many of the students in our sample described learning new things about themselves or learning a new skill, which may have been efforts to seize control and decrease anxiety in an uncertain time. The focus on Restoration, returning to the “normal” life of the pre-crisis world, encouraged hope and engendered nostalgic savoring of the past, but it might also have provided a means for denial of the true “perfection” of the past longed for. Emergence is similar to Revelation in its permanent effects and meaning making, and can help diarists to process just how different things may become. People who engage in this myth may be more prepared to face the “new normal” as it is, rather than wishing things would return to the way they were. The variation in use of these three motifs, especially the growth in Emergence over time, suggests that change was hard to ignore as the pandemic continued.

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