Dismantling Resistances to Hearing Women’s Voices

A Review of

*Women Voicing Resistance: Discursive and Narrative Explorations*
by Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. Lafrance (Eds.)
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Master narratives capture dominant ways of thinking, and thus talking, about a topic within a given culture and historical time period. In contrast, counternarratives can challenge this normative storytelling by offering a different social construction, sometimes suggesting a story line that “works better” (ideally both for the individual and by transforming restrictive master narratives). In *Women Voicing Resistance: Discursive and Narrative Explorations*, various expert authors explore individual women's topical stories to expose how master narratives can box women in and how counternarratives might, instead, liberate and empower them. In doing so, the authors provide insights that are valuable for therapists/counselors, researchers, and feminist scholars/activists, as well as for a general audience seeking to understand a specific topic area.

The topical breadth of the chapters in this edited book is laudably broad and sensitive to critical issues in diverse women’s lives. These topics span lesbians’ “coming out,” childbirth, rape, premenstrual change, intimate partner violence, casual heterosexual activities, depression, nontraditional employment, and body image. Bookending these topical chapters are two excellent overviews by the book’s editors, Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle Lafrance (Chapters 1 and 12), that add coherence to the volume and should be read in conjunction with any of the otherwise stand-alone chapters.

Taken as a whole, the contributors more artfully uncover and dissect master narratives than offer concrete examples of useful counternarratives. Given that master narratives often are invisible and thus insidious, providing insights into various master narratives and their frequent shortcomings is not a small contribution for both practitioners and general readers. I found such deconstruction especially enlightening when chapter authors traced the historical evolution of a master narrative. A particularly strong example is McKenzie-Mohr’s (Chapter 5) account of the evolution of rape narratives from a blame to a trauma narrative, with the latter proving to be an improvement but still itself lacking in critical ways (e.g., by downplaying women’s resilience). Brown (Chapter 11) also does an exemplary job of unpacking the master narrative of self-mastery that runs through some women’s body talk.
As a largely quantitative researcher, what I often find most intriguing about qualitative work is its potential to reveal insights that go beyond what is normative, either statistically or culturally, and, by doing so, to suggest ways to expand and/or transform my thinking. Although I continue to find small convenience samples troubling (and I applaud authors who are clear about their purposive sampling), each contributor enticed me with the potential of counternarratives to work both for women’s well-being and for liberating and empowering women in their relationships and sociopolitical worlds. After reading the book, I wanted additional, richer examples of counternarratives, suggesting the possibility of a follow-up book.

Toward that end, the current book offers useful ideas about how to ferret out women’s reliance on failed master narratives as well as ways to uncover women’s counternarratives, complete with their advantages and shortcomings. In their closing chapter, the editors highlight the importance of pursuing metaphors, exploring humor, and fleshing out “narrative debris” (conversational rough spots) as ways to unmask counternarratives, persistently looking at not just what is said but how it is said, as well as what is left unarticulated.

For example, Farvid (Chapter 8) not surprisingly reports that those women who adopt a male-extrapolated master narrative through which they regard casual heterosexual activities as biologically driven describe sexual encounters as good, fun, and acceptable. However, what becomes fascinating about her analysis is that these women cannot clearly articulate what gives them sexual pleasure, succumbing to the tired master narrative of female sexual passivity and reliance on men’s active “sexpertise.” This example also points to the importance of understanding the gendering of counternarratives so that what works for women typically is not some modified version of men’s master narrative.

Also important for uncovering counternarratives is the fundamental understanding that all narratives are context dependent and thus open to change when contexts change. Gibson and Macleod (Chapter 3) cleverly trace the development of lesbians’ "coming out" narrative from being a counternarrative in postapartheid South Africa to becoming something of an inadequate master narrative in a more tolerant contemporary climate. Their analysis suggests that some new counternarratives, yet to be fully articulated, are developing under such constructs in which sexual identity is less strongly tied to risks associated with disclosure and are, instead, more "normalized." Thus a counternarrative that may have worked for an earlier generation may be quietly evolving as times change.

The most clearly specified approach for therapist/counselors to use to uncover counternarratives is outlined by Brown (Ch. 11) in her chapter on body talk. She lays out three sets of questions that "unpack the meaning of fatness and thinness in a woman’s life" (p. 186) and explore "the connection between the issues of feeling thin and in control, and feeling good about oneself" (p. 187). Having laid this groundwork in relation to the master narrative of women's thinness as a way for women to establish control over the body that they can indeed control—in contrast to other “uncontrollables” tied to being a disempowered woman within a patriarchal culture, the third set of questions exposes “the control paradox and the difficult struggle of letting go of coping through controlling the body” (p. 187). Although outlined by Brown as questions specific to body image, these concrete examples may serve as a blueprint for developing ways to raise awareness that some problems can be productively externalized rather than pathologically internalized. A similar argument is made for reframing "depression as oppression” (p. 141) by Lafrance (Chapter 9).
Thus, a general thread that runs through the topics covered in this book evaluates counternarratives for their potential to “work better.” Second-wave feminist psychologists have long operationalized this utilitarian yardstick as including not only individual well-being (the personal) but also sociopolitical activism (the political; Goodman et al., 2004). In this light then, “working better” means achieving both personal and social justice (Mays, 2000) goals, that is, promoting well-being with liberation (both from oppression and to be empowered) and as operating across three spheres: personal, relational, and collective (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003).

However, there are multiple instances throughout the book when both goals are not adequately addressed. For example, to embrace premenstrual disruptions (Ussher and Perz, Chapter 6) as a way to justify self-care in the face of other pressures (e.g., overwhelming child care responsibilities, relationship problems) may work for an individual, but doing so ultimately reifies biological essentialism and maintains the status quo at both the interpersonal and cultural levels. Similarly, when a generally questionable pharmacological approach to depression proved effective for an individual, Kate (Lafrance, Chapter 9), this case does not mean that a master narrative (of a biomedical approach to depression) should be beyond scrutiny, especially in relation to its broader ramifications for women in general. Furthermore, the self-fulfilling discourses on happy home birthing by select mothers who elect this option (Chadwick, Chapter 4), the contradiction of women’s expressions of agency in escalating physical abuse (Boonzaier, Chapter 7), and some women’s adaptation to the status quo of male-dominated and male-defined police work (by playing at being one of the boys; Rickett, Chapter 10) do little to offer useful counternarratives for individual women or to dismantle systems that work to oppress women in general.

Although the editors sagely open the book by highlighting the need to carefully consider the role of power (and hence privilege and oppression) in constructing counternarratives that “work better,” more is needed. Women Voicing Resistance: Discursive and Narrative Explorations offers a useful and compelling start in this direction by giving readers some tools to dismantle resistances to hearing women’s voices, including deeper understandings of influential master narratives and ways to elicit genuine counternarratives. Although it is valuable in its own right, I am looking forward to a sequel that further draws on these discursive and narrative explorations to tell us more about diverse women’s insightful counternarratives.

References

