

Reconsidering counter-narratives

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Introduction

In this chapter, we shall review and follow up on the history of analytic work with master and counter-narratives through the narrative practice approach, beginning about 15 years ago (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Initial work with these constructs through the methodological lens of narrative practices tried to disentangle two potentially misleading assumptions that had surfaced throughout many contributions discussing counter-narratives: (1) that ‘counter’ and ‘master’ were two clearly definable and opposed territories, and (2) ‘master’ typically as coinciding with ‘collective’ and ‘culturally-shared’, in contrast to ‘counter’ as voiced by few – typically in the form of *personal* (and oppressed) narratives of experience. In contrast, it was argued (Bamberg, 2004, pp. 353 and 368f.) that countering and doing ‘being complicit’ (both as discursive activities) go hand-in-hand and emerge in co-presence; and that the role of the individual and personal as the center for suffering and agency for self-reflection (and change) had largely been overestimated.

In the years since, a number of important contributions have presented a more complex landscape within which counter-narratives play an important role. To name just two – and we will follow up on them – the first consisting of Frandsen, Kuhn and Lundholt (2017), who expanded and enriched the analysis of counter-narratives in personal storytelling by turning our attention to the public domain of organizational identity formation. They also deserve credit for complexifying the original and somewhat naïve strict opposition of counter-narratives to dominant, hegemonic, or master narratives (Frandsen, Lundholt & Kuhn, 2017; Kuhn, 2017). A second major turn was facilitated by discussions around what would empirically qualify as ‘narrative’; and here it was particularly Georgakopoulou’s (2007) continuous promotion of the ‘small story approach’ which later turned into a more integrative approach under the header of ‘narrative practices’ (cf. Bamberg 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2015). The importance of these moves cannot be underestimated, since they signify a shift from the analysis of narratives as texts or personal memories (i.e., as parts of people’s or organizations’ interior resources) to empirically analyze discursive activities taking place in interactive activities.

In the following, we start with a brief presentation of advances made with the development of an integrated approach to the analysis of narratives termed ‘narrative practices’. This will give opportunity to qualify what narratives (better: storytelling practices) consist of, where and how

to locate them empirically, and how to approach them analytically. To clarify: this implies shifting the unit of analysis from people's interiorities, where they are said to HAVE memories, and where stories are assumed to guide peoples' lives, to the ethnographic study of the contexts in which people share stories in interaction. Thereafter, we will re-address the relationship between master/hegemonic and counter-narratives and attempt to clarify how alternative narratives fit into the larger picture.

Narrative practices

Recent events unveiled more clearly the promise and confusion that co-exist when it comes to how widespread, but simultaneously how diverse, we make use of the term 'narrative'. For instance, when the *Social and Behavioral Sciences for National Security* summoned leading US-scholars in 2018 "to explore featured state-of-the-art narrative studies to examine cutting-edge questions relevant to national security and intelligence analysis" (National Academies of Sciences, Medicine and Engineering, 2018), we found little agreement as to what the term narrative meant, and which approach ultimately would have more potential regarding making decisions for national security and foreign affair purposes. Although we all seemed to be in some sort of agreement that well-established cultural or communal storylines have a certain organizing power for individuals' and organizational experience and decision making, what exactly would count as narrative or story, but even more so, what formed our 'unit of analysis' for analytical purposes, seemed to remain up for grabs (National Academy of Sciences, Medicine and Engineering, 2018). While some of us seem to trust that the study of narratives may grant access to the interiority of subjective experience and memory (e.g. Pennebaker, 2011), especially to so-called "autobiographical memories" (Smorti, 2011), others confine the study of narratives to texts – usually in the form of transcripts (e.g. Franzosi, 2010). Another distinction that crisscrosses the domain of narrative studies is the investigation of unfolding or developing stories, such as in breaking news or new revelations that require adjustment to existing, larger sense-making units (Georgakopoulou, 2013). And last, but definitely not least, there is the use of the term 'narrative' for pre-existing and often dominant sense-making and framing strategies, as for instance national narratives positioning 'others' as foreigners or immigrants. In one storyline they may be positioned as an enrichment to 'our nation-state', and as such are constructed as important characters in a continuing line with our (US-) forefathers; in another storyline they are positioned as a threat to national security that interrupts temporal continuity and threatens well-being.

It is our aim with this chapter to sort through some of the existing ambiguities and forge a path that connects the study of personal and organizational/institutional narrative – as well as what can be considered counter and master narratives – and across existing disciplines and contrasting methodologies. To do this effectively within the boundaries of this chapter, we start with two points of divergence from traditional narrative theorizing and their methodologies, and specify from where we enter. The first challenges the assumption that individual selves (people) and social systems or organizations (such as institutions or nation states) HAVE a story, and that this story can be explored through interviews. The second challenges the study of narratives as texts or products – where we will make the argument to study narrative as process. Let us briefly outline our line of argument that will be clarified and made relevant throughout the rest of this chapter.

First, the approach presented in this chapter, labelled 'the narrative practice approach' (laid out in detail in Bamberg, 2020), works from the assumption that the same methodology applies to work with stories of individual storytellers as to stories of organizations. In both cases, we study the 'small' stories of people who share accounts of events that happened, are unfolding and about

to happen, or as imagined for distant futures. These stories are communicatively situated and shared for a (relational/social) purpose vis-à-vis others and typically occur in mundane, everyday encounters. In addition, these stories are shared in a vis-à-vis relationship to culturally shared background assumptions. And in terms of why they are called ‘stories’, we principally follow traditional formal/structural assumptions that storied accounts create characters in a there-and-then of a story-world, woven into a temporal beginning, middle, and ending. However, we additionally include in our analysis stories that are alluded to, are not well-formed, or incomplete. And, in contrast to theories that consider narratives or stories as representations of reality, we claim that storytelling always incorporates fictional elements into story-making processes; the question only becomes: to what degree. Finally, we include all kinds of stories – thereby countering the traditional privilege of story-analytic approaches to self-reflective stories, in which tellers thematize themselves as the topic of reflection (cf. Bamberg & Wipff, in press). What already shines through the approach we are advocating is an emphasis on storytelling as an interactive activity in contrast to stories or narratives as textual products (Georgakopoulou, 2007, 2015). Thus, neither individual selves nor social systems or organizations are said to HAVE a story that can be studied independently from actual storytelling interactions. Consequently, the analysis of storytelling activities cannot be carried out independently from their local context, revealing where, how, and why stories are told. Thus, individuals and organizations cannot be reduced to ‘walking stories’, and they also are more than the stories *they* tell or the stories that are told about them.

Our second point of divergence considers narrative practices as situated processes. Traditional approaches typically consider stories as representations of (subjective) experience or memories, for which psychologists developed the term ‘autobiographical memories’, hoping that particular elicitation techniques¹ can “dig into” the interiority of story-tellers and “unearth” the narratives they HAVE – thereby gaining access to their deep-seated convictions, beliefs, and values (cf. Smorti, 2011). Interestingly, these traditional approaches simultaneously work with the assumption that these deep-seated convictions and values are the motivating forces for what people say and do; and as such, people’s engagement in storytelling activities are at best performative ‘expressions’ of their interiority – clouded and impaired by the interactive situation and the actual language used. In stark contrast, our narrative practice approach urges us to investigate storytelling processes, i.e., to interrogate the contextual embeddedness as the analytic starting point for how meaning and identity are regularly constituted and continually under construction. Methodologically, this approach favors culturally sensitive, ethnographic perspectives – including the analysis of micro-genetic, moment-by-moment navigations of the processes in which narrative practices are being conducted and ‘small stories’ emerge.

Counter narratives – a preliminary definition

A counter narrative has the illocutionary force to *counter*, i.e., in one or another way, it not only contrasts with, but opposes, another narrative – just as counterstatements or counterintelligence counter other statements or another intelligence. As put lucidly in a recent opinion piece by David McCraw, the deputy counsel of the NYT: when coming to the defense for doctors who botched surgeries, or greedy industrialists, he argues,

I try to look for the counter-narrative that they could (and their lawyers will) build from what supposedly is the same set of facts. It’s a counterintuitive form of reading. It’s looking for the innocent explanation or the possibility that what appears to all the rest of the world to be nefarious may in fact just be a mistake made in good faith.

(McCraw, 2019)

In other words, a counter-narrative starts as a counter-piece, a *vis-à-vis*, to which it can be viewed as a reaction – usually, but not necessarily, crafted to come across as intended – and bearing some similarity by seemingly following the same line of factual statements, though most likely constructing events and happenings differently in terms of their relevance to the unfolding storyline. And, it also has a connotation of being somewhat counter-intuitive, i.e., outside of what we typically and commonsensically would expect. As such, for a text or stretch of talk to count as counter-narrative it must relate to other texts, inviting an analytic perspective that draws on intertextual knowledge. To reiterate, we view the speaker/author of the narrative as intentionally drawing on and positioning themselves *vis-à-vis* another storyline; or, we as readers or recipients, may bring this perspective to a text as part of our interpretive intertextual repertoire (Kristeva, 1980), i.e., our collective personal knowledge of storylines through which we make sense.

It is these two strands of what intuitively seems to define counter-narratives, (a) in terms of their counter-relationship to other narratives, and (b) in their potential break-away from expectations, that we will further explore, with the aim of explicating the worthiness of counter-narratives as strategic devices in the business of grappling with frame-breaking, diverging from established assumptions, and their potential for facilitating change. To do so, we also may need to consider in more detail how counter-narratives differ from (and overlap with) often called alternative, or contesting narratives. However, before settling deeper into these matters, we see the need to clarify why and how the insistence on analyzing counter-narratives as *narratives* still carries with it certain benefits – in contrast to dealing with the kind of illocutionary force of *countering* as *claims* or *arguments*, or simply as ‘contrasting rhetorical strategies’. In a second step, we would like to clarify how positioning counter-narratives *vis-à-vis* master or dominant narratives can be usefully built into the overarching aim of giving counter-narratives and their analysis a special and relevant place in social theorizing about change and innovation. After having worked through these two aspects of the function of counter-narratives, we will discuss how competing terms such as alternative and contesting narratives differ from counter-narratives and underscore the potential of the latter for the study of power relations and social change.

Frames, metaphor, claims-making, stance-taking, positioning, and membership categorization *vis-à-vis* narrative practices

There is no space here to launch into an elaborate differentiation between narrative and other discourse modes and rhetorical devices that are being employed in analytic approaches to cultural critique and change. However, a few of them deserve mention – even if only to see how they differ from narrative: first, *claims-making* (cf. Spector & Kitsuse, 1987) and *frame analysis* (going back to Goffman, 1974; elaborated by Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001) as two quite influential traditions that have successfully grappled with the identification and analysis of social problems and political protest. *Metaphor analysis*, following the groundbreaking book by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and *stance-taking* (cf. Englebretson, 2007) similarly have evolved as valuable analytic tools to investigate how speakers evaluate and navigate their take on what to consider factual as well as the social relationships that apparently are ‘in-the-works’. A rich and diverse body of work under the header of *argumentation theory* also fits the ticket under consideration. This discourse mode differs from narrative in that arguments are uniquely constituted by constellations of propositions (Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Snoeck, 1996, p. 4), typically with a personal intent to justify or refute a statement, fact, or desire (for a more detailed comparison of narrative and argumentation, see Parret, 1987). Over the last decades *membership categorization* (Baker, 1997; Sacks, 1972) as well as *positioning theory* and *positioning analysis* (Bamberg, 2003; Davies & Harré, 1990) have made

considerable advances in how to approach discursive sense-making in personal, institutional, and organizational settings. However, *narrative* as a rhetorical discourse mode – in contrast to argumentation, – and also in contrast to the aforementioned rhetorical devices such as framing, metaphor, stance-taking, and positioning differs as a sense-making mode due to its unique and inbuilt characteristic of temporality. Let us sketch out how narrative analysis has advanced over the last two decades and moved into a place from where it can more pointedly illuminate what counter-narratives are and how they function.

A number of reviewers (cf. Herman, 2007; Hyvärinen, 2007; Klapproth, 2006; Laverge, 2007) of previous discussions on counter-narratives (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004), have pointed out a common thread that addressed the under-determination of what was meant by the term ‘narrative’. As put by David Herman, the distinction between “TELLING a story” and “LIVING a story”, i.e., instances of actual stories told (and analyzed) and an appeal to a more or less hyperextended sense of the term narrative to any instance of sense-making, had been inadvertently blurred (Herman, 2007, p. 279). Since the distinction between ‘living stories’ and ‘telling stories’ over the last decade has been discussed and debated extensively, especially under the header of ‘Big’ versus ‘Small Stories’, we will confine ourselves to a brief summary of the repercussions of this debate for why and how acts of storytelling (‘narrative practices’) are a constructive move for the analysis of counter-narratives and how positioning analysis has been fruitfully incorporated into this theoretical approach.

As argued elsewhere (Bamberg, 2006, 2020), an aspiration that inspired a good deal of original narrative research – also called Big Story research – was based on (a) an analogy of life and narrative (both as having a beginning, middle, and ending), and (b) the assumption that a life lived – or at least striven for – can be captured in the form of a (biographical) life story. This short-circuit between people (or institutions) as *having* a story (their <autobiographical> memory) and *living* this story, i.e., the equation of life and narrative, has become widely criticized (cf. Bamberg & Demuth, 2016; Eaken, 2006; Sartwell, 2000; Strawson, 2004 – to name a few). The more radical form of criticism (e.g. Sartwell, 2000; Strawson, 2004) questions the general argument that life is structured like and following a narrative. A weaker criticism is open to the analogy between pre-existing and socially-shared storylines and their impact on lives lived (cf. Bamberg, 2020), but disagrees with the equation of *one* life as having or resulting in *one* story – and vice versa. It is this second line of argument that we will follow up below and further unpack. At this point, however, it should be recalled that approaching narratives empirically as *narrative practices*, i.e., as stories being told in everyday practices, and in addition, not privileging stories about the biographic self, does not start from the premise of an assumed contiguity between life and narrative, but approaches identity and sense-of-self from a radically different angle.

Positioning vis-à-vis: the interactional grounding of narrative practices

To start with, narrating a story requires a great deal of interactive business: shifting into narrating is typically accompanied by a discursive bid to hold the floor for an extended turn; and toward the end of telling the story, cuing the interlocutors that it is their turn to respond. Approaching narrative/story from this kind of narrative practice angle prioritizes the interactive relational business that narratives accomplish. The assumption here is that participants in communities of practice share a cultural understanding of narrating and stories – though not necessarily in the form of technical or theoretical second order concepts, but due to continuous bodily and verbal practices in their social interactions – in mundane and everyday activities (Georgkopoulou, 2007; Heath, 1983). Thus, while the discursive functions of storytelling may be manifold, such as to entertain, showing regret, or to embellish an argument, the relational identity work of storytelling

may best be condensed around the concept of positioning, and here in terms of three related positioning strategies.

Although the notion of positioning had originally not been designed as a tool for the analysis of narrating as an interactive activity, it nevertheless was meant to strategically employ the notion of plots and story lines. Davies and Harré (1990) had defined positioning as discursive practice “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). Thus, in conversations, in line with the intrinsic interactional forces of conversing, people position themselves in relation to one another in ways that traditionally had been defined as roles. More importantly, in doing so, people “produce” one another (and themselves) situationally as “social beings”. Although this approach explicitly addresses the analysis of language under the header of how people attend to one another in interactional settings, and although traditional narrative analysis suggests to address what stories are referentially “about”, i.e., the sequential order of events and their evaluations (cf. Labov & Waletzky, 1997), we suggested to apply the notion of positioning more productively to the analysis of storytelling to link and merge these two approaches. For this purpose, we considered the process of positioning to take place at three different levels that are formulated as three kinds of “*positioning vis-à-vis*”.

First, in our daily practices, we mark ourselves off as different, similar or the same with respect to others. Integrating and differentiating a sense of who we are *vis-à-vis* others takes place in moment-by-moment navigations; and stories about self and others are good candidates to practice this from childhood onwards. A second identity component can be called ‘agency’. And although it seems as if agency is something that exists a priori in the form of a human capacity, i.e., as if selves or organizations “*HAVE* an identity”, we suggested to better theorize agency as a space in which we navigate two opposing directions of fit: one going from world-to-person, the other from person-to-world. While it is possible to view oneself as a passive recipient of external forces (typically natural/biological or social – such as earthquakes or climate on the one hand, and parents, teachers, or culture on the other), it also is possible to view the world as a product of the self. In this case selves or institutions position themselves as impacting forces and as actively changing or even producing a world. The navigation between agency and passivity becomes particularly relevant in presentations of selves and organizations as involved and responsible – as for claims to success and aggrandizement – versus denials of culpability in mishaps or wrongdoings. Again, storytelling about (past or future) actions are good candidates to borrow and practice navigations of this sort. Third, when relating past (or future) to present, we can either highlight our constancy, i.e., declare that we are the same person or organization we used to be; or we can present a sense of self as having undergone some gradual (continuous) or radical (discontinuous) change – resulting in a different, new persona or entity. The space for how to navigate the connection of our past (or future) selves with our sense of who we are for the here-and-now, is often seen as closely coupled to acquiring or developing (more) self-worth, or as deteriorating and becoming useless (Bamberg, 2011). While identity navigations between sameness and difference and between the two directions of fit of the person-to-world orientation do not require diachronic temporality as an essential prerequisite, navigations of constancy and change do require the correlation of two events in time – which some narrative inquirers take to be the minimal definition of story (cf. Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Thus, it appears that navigations of constancy and change make a good argument for the privileging of storytelling as an opportune space for identity practices.

Second, we attempt to address the question of how characters are positioned in relation to one another within unfolding stories. At this level, we attempt to analyze how characters within the (typically textual) story world are constructed as, for example, protagonists or antagonists, as perpetrators or victims, and the like. More concretely, this type of analytic lens aims at the

linguistic and paralinguistic means that do the job of marking one of the textual characters as, for example, agent who is in control; while the action is inflicted upon other characters; or as an alternative, characterizing the central character as helplessly at the mercy of outside (quasi “natural”) forces – or as being rewarded by luck, fate, or personal qualities (such as bravery, nobility, or simply ‘character’). Simultaneously, we pay close attention to how characters are positioned in alignment or dis-alignment vis-à-vis others; and, last but not least, how characters are constructed as same or as changing over time. The analytic stance that governs this level of doing empirical analysis resembles and takes off from the work of literary interpretation or discursive text analysis along the lines originally suggested by Labov and Waletzky for narratives (1997).

In our final step, after having followed through on the question of how narrators position themselves vis-à-vis their audiences, and consequentially, how narrators position story characters vis-à-vis one another, we turn to the seemingly more interesting and relevant question, namely whether and how narrators actually may position themselves in relation to themselves (cf. De Fina, 2013). More succinctly, we address whether there is anything in narrative practices that we as analysts can interrogate in the form of claims or stances that go beyond the local conversational situation. In other words, we interrogate whether and how the linguistic devices and bodily maneuvers employed in narrative practices actually point to more than the contents of character positioning (i.e., what the narrative is “about”) and directives vis-à-vis the interlocutor in their interactional business. For level three positioning, we posit that in constructing the content *and* one’s audience in terms of *role* participants, narrators transcend the question of: “How do I want to be understood by you, the audience?” and are offering a (local) answer to the question: “Who am I?” (cf. Bamberg, 2011). Simultaneously, however, we must caution that any attempted answer to this question is not one that necessarily holds across contexts, but rather is “a project of limited range”. Nevertheless, we assume that these repeated and refined navigation projects rub off – producing and transmitting a sense of how to engage efficiently and productively in sense-making processes that endure and my turn into habits – and as such may contribute to a sense of self as perpetual.

Master narratives, dominant discourses, ‘the background’ – specifying how ‘counter-narratives’ fit into them

In this section we’d like to follow up on our discussion of the positioning concept that was introduced earlier; and here especially’ on how narrators draw on master and dominant narratives – and thereby bring off a sense of self that may have enduring repercussions. This interactive navigation of positioning work has been characterized as feeding the analytic work at positioning levels one and two, and fusing it into the interpretive layer number three, where we analyze how speakers/narrators can be argued to draw on existing master or dominant narratives, and making them relevant to the here-and-now of their storytelling activities. De Fina (2013) has effectively given more body to this claim by showing in detail how this type of analysis can proceed. Here, we will only elaborate on her insights as far as we can extrapolate considerations that help us better understand the relationship between master and counter-narratives.

In a general sense, the use of the term master narrative, also called dominant or capital-D discourses, goes back to the assumption of the necessity for a horizon or background against which human sense-making becomes possible. While this horizon or background has been theorized as based on a *collective consciousness* (and a ‘social mind’ or ‘intersubjectivity’), Searle (1995, 2010) uses the term *Background* to refer to something that is ‘deeper’ and more general, such as the human ability to walk (upright), being equipped with a front (from where we visualize the world) and a back, and using our hands for *manual* labor. Searle juxtaposes this *deep*

background with a collective/cultural background providing for what is assumed to be implicit to cultural routines and practices, and allowing for the subtleties of particular kinds of language games. We have tried to put the term master narrative to use by crediting this background, for lack of a better term, with providing “agency constellations” for individual as well as institutional sense-making strategies (Bamberg, 2005, p. 287), thereby alluding to an affinity to what we also called *story lines* or *narrative threads* with an intrinsic temporality. We would like to add to Searle’s two backgrounds a third set of assumptions that springs from interlocutors’ bodily engagement in local, situated contexts through which meaning microgenetically is worked up and comes into existence. Relevant for the discussion here is that storytellers in narrative practices always are assumed to find themselves in vis-à-vis positions with regard to preexisting assumptions – where some of these assumptions may come in the form of storylines – providing temporal contours.

Now, we would like to suggest that the span from deep-seated assumptions that are deeply woven into our language habits to assumptions that are more easily reflective and changeable forms a continuum. For instance, critical considerations of language habits that reflect gender or racial biases may lead to a change in language practices with more ease than assumptions that are much harder to reflect and reconsider – such as how our understanding of spatial dimensions is based off of our human up-right posture and forward-movement with a forward-oriented visual field, or how our understanding of temporal dimensions is based on our understanding of spatial relations.² It is against this backdrop that we now can more firmly argue that in small story, narrative practices, narrators by necessity are forced to navigate continuously their vis-à-vis positions in terms of what of ‘the background’ continues to go without saying, and what is standing out, special and unique to the circumstances of the here-and-now of the storytelling act. And although this can be said to hold for all speech, in storytelling activities this necessity of taking position promptly meets the additional necessity to take position and navigate the three identity dilemmas (agency/passivity, sameness/difference, constancy/change), and do this at three levels of positioning (level-of-interaction/level-of-character-construction/level-of-self-construction). Thus, engagement in narrative practices requires storytellers to engage in a continuous navigation between having faith and maintaining existing background assumptions on one hand, and testing or re-scripting – up to the possibility of challenging and openly countering – them on the other. Both being complicit and countering are at work in narrative practices simultaneously and in concert. And our analysis of them is able to lay open how they are at work and interact in micro-analytic discursive analyses we have published elsewhere (cf. Bamberg, 2011, 2020; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2013; Deppermann, 2015; Georgakopoulou, 2007).

Having clarified that storytellers inevitably position their alignments and divergence vis-à-vis assumptions that can be taken to filter into their narrative (and non-narrative) local and situated practices, and having shown that these positions are analytically accessible, we finally can turn and take issue with a particular interpretation and application of the term master narrative. Changing the focus from master narratives as enabling individual local storytelling practices to their constraining and limiting powers, especially where they are said to be experienced as hegemonic and subjugating, i.e., as ruling out potential other (counter-) discourses, gives the term counter a special and more concerted force. It is this particular contrast that we originally dwelled on when arguing “that countering dominant and hegemonic narratives is the flip-side of being complicit” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 351). However, in the same breath, we put forth that neither master nor counter-narratives exist as uniform, monolithic or pure, but rather both are plagued by inconsistencies and contradictions, and both also require to be interrogated by the same methodical means as when the lens is not on the master-counter dichotomy. In particular, the above mentioned concluding chapter of the original volume (Bamberg, 2004), from where this chapter is an offspring, attempts to refute two common misconceptions, both seemingly permeating

some of the volume's chapters back in 2004, namely first, that personal storytelling is the prime discourse type for countering hegemonic discourses (in the sense of subverting and undermining them); and second, that counter-narratives have a close to unconditioned tendency to be progressive. Admittedly, some first attempts to tackle and work with the master-counter dichotomy (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour & Bamberg, 1996) may have given rise to these interpretations; and in this respect, Rasmussen's (2017) critique may have been on target. In addition, it is in this context that counter-narratives gain their special meaning as being relatable to other story-products, and also as presentations of unfolding temporal events and constructions of agency relationships that on occasion contrast with routinely practiced and expected ways of unfolding events.³ And it is also in this context that the analysis of counter-narratives gains its attraction for opening potentially diverging gates into the analysis of power relationships and social change. Notwithstanding this incredible potential, our main bid for analyzing narratives as narrative practices, and thus as processes, and not solely as the product of narrative practices, remains central to our approach.

Returning to the preliminary definition of counter-narratives earlier in this chapter, we now feel better positioned to specify counter-narratives as uniquely distinguished by the aim to transform background assumptions, which typically support a master narrative. In other words, master and counter-narratives are identifiable through the foundational illocutionary criterion of distinction. Which narratives "master" and which "counter" remains situationally and contextually dependent, relative to the organization of social and political power in a given context. However, a variety of subcategories of narrative beyond master and counter can be delineated and may prove useful for analytic work with both master and counter-narratives. Unlike master and counter-narratives, parallel, alternative, and intersecting narratives are not identified through illocutionary intent and social context, but rather through content. To illustrate the differences between and utility of these constructs, we shall briefly touch on the alternative narratives of falling-in-love and arranged marriages and see how they differ from counter-narratives.

Marriage functions as a central organizing institution within societies globally (Penn, 2011). Despite this widespread commonality, differing cultures perform narrative practices like romance, marriage, and "falling in love" according to distinct cultural storylines. In what have been traditionally termed modern societies ("Western" industrialized cultures), love is scripted as a dynamic, spontaneous, mysterious agency. Common phrases like "falling in love" or being struck by "love at first sight" imply that the undergoer does not act as a stoic, rational, in-control agent, but rather is deprived of agency by the affective potency of their romantic attraction. Illouz (2015) describes this narrational practice of love as an urgent moment, an overwhelming "epiphany" which consumes the thoughts and feelings of the undergoer. If there is any rational explanation as to how and why the mysterious potency of love strikes, it is typically attributed to static forms within the individual's conscious or unconscious psyche, including parental oedipal schema and cultural familiarity (Illouz, 2015).

The "falling in love" storyline differs significantly from the prototypical storyline of arranged marriages. While the former describes the love experience as an unexpected, unpredictable, instantaneous cohesive force, the latter characterizes it as a controllable, planned, and gradual process, which is intentionally fostered. Arranged marriages differ from "falling in love" in that parents or matchmakers, rather than prospective partners themselves, take agency to select a spouse for them (Penn & Lambert, 2009). As of 2011, this practice forms the cultural background expectations for approximately half the world's population, particularly in nation states like China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (Penn, 2011). However, what is more interesting, is the fact that here we seem to have the option to choose between two strategic forces giving way to each other: either, we can make the argument that falling-in-love exists as a (master) storyline that "informs" the day-to-day narrative practices about love and marriage between interlocutors – all the way down

to ‘feeling rules’ that seemingly govern and regulate what happens emotionally between couples (cf. Hochschild, 1983). Or, and in contrast, it can be reasoned that those daily narrative practices have evolved into routinized embodied ways of feeling practices which may “call-for” feeling rules and rationalizations of love and marriage – that then, subsequently, are communicated in the form of the particular culturally sequential script of ‘falling-in-love’. Of course, the same arguments could be made for how we arrive at what is called ‘arranged marriages’ and how they are invested with affect and emotion.

While these diverse accounts of how love functions may in some ways appear as counter-narratives, as diametrically opposed, inimical accounts of the social world, we argue that they are not necessarily mutually antagonistic; and therefore are not typically weaponized as counter-narratives, but rather alternative (master) storylines. We anticipate that most readers will permit that many diverse formulations of love and marriage are ethically permissible, and that human beings are not somehow deficient or less legitimate for practicing one way of “doing love” versus another. The narratives of falling in love and arranged marriages, however, are only interpreted as “counter” to one another to the extent that the interpreter(s), be it an individual, a collective, or a culture, insist there is only one singular, monolithic way of experiencing love and romance as a human being. Again, while we do not expect this as a common view among our readership, it is admittedly a viable position. Therefore, we posit that alternative narratives *can* be mobilized as counter-narratives, but only if they are taken up with the illocutionary force of undermining an intertextually related, contrary narrative.

Counter-narratives and the narrative practice approach: a complementary methodology

Having reviewed recent developments within fields of narrative inquiry, we advocate for the narrative practice approach (cf. Bamberg 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2015) as a particularly integrative methodology for empirical work with narratives, applicable to individuals as well as institutions, big stories, small stories, and even when no story is told at all (cf. Bamberg, 2011). Central to this approach is a shift in the unit of analysis from speakers’ subjective interiorities, to the ethnographic interactive context through which stories emerge and are exchanged for social, relational purposes. In contrast to traditional approaches to narrative analysis, which utilize ‘elicitation techniques’ attempting to ‘uncover’ speakers’ personal narratives, the narrative practice approach considers the situated, mutual positioning of self and other as the analytic ground for work with narratives. Moreover, narrative form and content are highly contingent upon the particular space and time in which a story is told, which plays a significant role in forming narratives vis-à-vis contextual expectations and local dominant discourses (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2013). Therefore, as narratives vary according to circumstance, it is better to say that people *tell* stories, not *have* them, and certainly not *are* them – or in other words, people can never be reduced simply to narrative. Additionally, as narratives are often in a continual process of shifting, testing, and re-scripting, the narrative practice approach privileges narratives as dynamic, open-ended processes rather than textual products (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2006).

Similarly, the position of a narrative as ‘master’ or ‘counter’ is contingent upon the organization of social, cultural, and political power of an interactive location. Speakers must draw on background assumptions in order to make sense in storytelling activities (Searle, 1995, 2010). Counter-narratives are uniquely distinguished by an illocutionary force intended to counter background assumptions that support another alternative narrative. Additionally, considering counter-narratives as narratives distinguished by a characteristic temporal contour carries with

it the benefit of revealing the temporally embedded process of how meaning is interactively negotiated in and through storytelling contexts.

Bearing in mind that local environments exert a significant formative force over speakers' storytelling activities, that master and counter-narratives are identified through situationally dependent illocutionary criteria, and that the narrative practice approach emphasizes speakers' situated embeddedness in the interactive storytelling context as the starting point for critical analysis, we argue that the narrative practice approach may occupy a privileged position for empirical investigations of master and counter-narratives. By investigating how storytellers mutually position and co-constitute one another by drawing on master narratives and supporting background assumptions, we hope that this approach may illuminate the social process of how power is interactively negotiated, maintained, and countered as a practice catalyzing social change.

Notes

- 1 It is remarkable that the elicitation techniques are attempting to suspend everyday, mundane conversational conditions and generate a state of mind that enables participants to 'deep-reflect' – as in "getting in touch with their authentic interiority". Illouz (2008) has criticized these assumptions as upshots of 'the therapeutic ethos' that successfully penetrated and infested our modern discourse about self and identity ever since Freud and Jung gave their Clark University lectures in 1909.
- 2 For instance, in spite of *knowing* that the Earth rotates around the Sun, we still seem to *believe* that the sun *rises* in the morning and *sets* at night.
- 3 Hyvärinen (2017) pushes this point of 'running against audience expectations' one step further, and making it more central to storytelling activities. However, we wonder about its relevance for counter-narratives, because the mere fact of 'being counter' may suffice as the tellability criterion; no need to thematize additional plan-breaks.

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