

Considering counter narratives

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In this chapter I endorse the view that countering dominant and hegemonic narratives is the flip-side of being complicit. Rather than pitting one strategy against the other, I will argue that in narratives-in-interaction both are made use of to bring off and more intelligibly manage emergent identities. Consequently, the domain for analyzing counter positions is the social realm of interaction in which narratives are implemented rather than the stories *per se*. (*Counter Narratives, Master Narratives, Complicity, Narratives-in-Interaction, Positioning Analysis*)

When Molly Andrews originally approached me with the proposal for a special issue of *Narrative Inquiry*, I was very excited. For one, I consider the topic of counter narratives as extremely relevant since it brings narrative research closer to the field of practical applications and opens up the possibility of using narrative research in the service of liberating and emancipating agenda. The other, more personal, reason was that I had tried my own hand in the analysis of counter narratives a while back with a number of graduate students from my home institution (Bamberg 1997; Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg 1996), but had not been able to return to this issue. I encouraged Molly and was looking forward to reading the manuscripts. Little did I know about my involvement with this issue. Because when it came to eliciting the commentaries for the six articles that Molly had in hand, and when asking around among my friends and colleagues in the field of narrative research, I was surprised about the willingness and enthusiasm with which the articles were met. Many more commentaries poured in than I was able to accommodate in a single issue of *Narrative Inquiry*, and so we decided to publish the rest in the issue that followed. In addition, in order to keep the articles and all commentaries together, Molly and I had planned to edit them into a book in which readers had access to them as a unit. We also decided to give the original six authors the opportunity to answer the flood of comments that had hailed them. Fi-

nally, having all the contributions together, I couldn't help but collect some of my own thoughts and write them down in order to share them. And although I consider this chapter a kind of 'postscript', written as the final contribution for this volume, it does by no means lend conclusion to the topic of counter narratives. Counter narratives as a topic is certainly to be continued, and the chapters in this book as well as the commentaries and the responses all document clearly that we have made advances by entering this dialogue, but that more is needed.

Our earlier work with counter and master narratives (Bamberg 1997; Talbot et al. 1996) is an exemplar of a good number of proposals that brought discourse-analytic psychology to the study of narratives. It was a fine-grained analysis of the discursive claims of two women making an attempt to come across as responsible and 'normal.' More specifically, we went out to tackle the two questions: "(1) What is the source of identity claims that resist dominant discourses, and how can such claims be recognized in personal accounts? (2) How are these counter claims put to use? (Talbot et al. 1996, p. 226). And with regard to this latter issue, we argued, "we seek not only to describe how such counter claims are appropriated and employed in situated discourse, but also to examine what specific purpose they may serve for the narrator" (ibid.). We also had stated clearly that "our study is a preliminary exploration of these questions; it is not intended to lead to definitive answers, but rather to stimulate further investigation of these and similar themes" (ibid.). Hollway (1984), Davies and Harré (1990), Riessman (1993), and an array of others had made more elaborate and highly successful advances in similar directions years before we started thinking along those lines. However, at least retrospectively, looking back from what we claim to know today, it seems as if our thrust in this direction was one of the few that tried to sketch the possibility of comprehending alternatives that run counter to hegemonic ideologies as micro-discursive accomplishments. This was new at that time, at least to us in the discipline of psychology; and exciting. Nevertheless, and again looking back from what we claim to know today, the 1996 article still appears very much caught up in the attempt to clearly delineate what counts as 'counter' in individuals' stories, ascribing to them a relatively stable fixity located in the narrator's individual consciousness. I now believe, however, that this was a simplification that may point in the wrong direction when it comes to do political consciousness raising. I will return to this point in my concluding remarks.

This chapter is designed to further the dialogue that this volume as a whole has opened up. It is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss the notion of narrative, particularly of master narrative, and how it forms the backdrop when

it comes to considering counter narratives. Here, I will foreground the principled openness for the perception of different possibilities and for improvised courses of actions and events in the telling of stories. This will, I hope, prepare the ground for the integration of stories into the *real* world of everyday interactions, where they come to existence, that is, in the social realm of interaction. In my second section, I will consider how we can think more productively about the construction of counter claims by viewing them as the flip-sides of master narratives, especially in how participants bring off and manage claims about themselves. Looking at narratives-in-interaction, we may be better off to see how complicity and countering are activities that go hand-in-hand, making it difficult to specify a *tout court* distinction between them. Then, in a third section, I will elaborate on the interactive realm as the territory where counter as well as master narratives emerge in co-presence and as discursive *process*. It is here, where I will briefly present *positioning analysis*, as a way to analyze counter narratives in their proximity to master narratives.

Narrative and claiming a sense of self

I would like to start with a question that in most of the contributions to this volume seems to have been taken for granted but in my opinion requires a bit more dialoguing: 'Why narrative?' What is special about 'narrative' that potentially elevates *counter narratives* to an interesting and probably even important topic of inquiry? Is narrative in any way a privileged genre that makes the inquiry into how it can function to draw up positions that can be characterized as 'counter' special? And furthermore, what is our fascination with *counter* narratives? What is it that is countered, and why? And why is countering (potentially) more interesting than complicity? – Starting with the latter question, investigations of counter strategies seem to be guided by a deep concern with power and hegemony. If it is possible to delineate more clearly where and how discourses that run counter to hegemonic discourses emerge, and if it is possible to describe the fabric of these counter discourses in more detail, we should be able to make headway in designing alternative strategies to public, institutionalized power relations, resulting in more egalitarian reciprocity and universal moral respect. But how can narratives figure productively in this?

A brief look at the exchanges between the original authors and commentators and the differing approaches to 'narrative' yields the possibility of different answers. Indeed, in my own theorizing about narrative I have taken the typical ambiguous route around answering these kinds of questions (cf. Bamberg

1999a, 1999b, 1999c): Narrative is *not* a privileged discourse genre when compared to other discourse genres used in everyday interactions. It stands as one genre among many others (such as descriptions, argumentations or explanations) and can be analyzed according to the ways the 'narrative format' differs or (functionally) overlaps with these other speech genres. In ordinary, everyday discourse we employ narratives just like any other discourse genre in the attempt to make sense and signal this 'sense' to others. As such, there is nothing special to narratives that lends 'extra strength' to the possibility of designing counter strategies to hegemony and power.

Looking at narrative from a different angle, however, there seems to be something special to their implementation, even at the level of mundane, conventional everyday interactions, because narratives order characters in space and time and, therefore, as a format, narrative lends itself not only to connecting past events to present states (as well as imagined, desired states and events) but also to revealing character transformations in the unfolding sequence from past to future. In other words, narratives, as a particular speech genre, may be able to offer something to the presentation of selves (and others) that other speech genres don't do so eloquently and directly. As such, narratives provide the possibility of a format that has become the privileged way of fashioning self and identity, at least in 'modern times,' which is open to a certain fluidity, to improvisation, and to the design of alternatives.

It is clear that the 'turn to narrative' in the social sciences is grounded in this second assumption. It is built on a number of analogies between story, biography and life. And although lives are lived, and stories are told, and although there is in general an open-endedness to lives, 'narrative coherence' is seen as providing the guiding post for the living of lives (Ricoeur 1992). It serves as a structure that is added on to life (White 1981), enabling the self to locate oneself in a 'narrative whole' with a beginning, a middle and an end (MacIntyre 1981). This analogy between story and life has enabled social scientists, and I think in a number of very interesting ways, to start innovative investigations into the fabric of lives and experience, and thereby into the construction of subjectivity. The 'life-story' and 'biographic' approach to how people draw up a sense of self and identity clearly bespeaks of this tendency. And although a host of these approaches work with the underlying assumption that a 'good life' is a life that can be told as a 'coherent life,' displaying a clear sense of one's past and future orientation, these approaches are apt, and often even designed, to reveal discrepancies between the told and the lived, and to reveal the fragmentations and the unknown in the narrative charting of self and identity.

However, this general orientation of bringing narrative and lives into closer proximity and analytic focus has come with some costs. Let me just mention a few. First, I think it should be noted the narrative design of one's past into what is currently relevant to 'the present' (and a potential, imagined future) is by no means an everyday, mundane thing to do. Rather, it is an exception, and, I would like to add, a very special exception: one that tends to stylize a particular notion of self and identity, because nobody stands in front of a mirror, addressing oneself (as one's audience) with the story of one's life. Not only do we not have time for this type of activity, but, in addition, what purpose would it serve? I only can think of two types of situations in which people come close to engaging in narrativizing their lives to themselves as (primary) audience: the literary author who sits down to write for an imagined, generalized readership (who is argued to represent a sense of the narrator's self by some literary critics), and the (research and/or therapeutic) interview that is supposed to reveal the storied sequence of events representing the lives of participants/clients. What these situations share is the design of the audience as co-operative in a particular way so that the interaction can result in bringing 'out' (in the sense of revealing) not only what happened, but also a somewhat authentic sense of the person who does the telling. This orientation seems to be tantamount to a privileging of the personal and confessional over the social-interactional; as if there is a layer *beyond* or *behind* the self as 'revealed' in everyday settings. I will return to this point later, but what becomes bleached out to a certain degree in this type of approach is the challenging and confrontational nature of everyday interactions in which stories are contested, followed by other stories that modify the claims made, shifts into new domains, and the like.

In addition, a position from which a narrator reviews all potential event-candidates for one's life story and picks out only those that are made relevant, and then begins to sequence and relate them in a cohesive (not yet necessarily coherent) way, is only possible from a very reflective vantage point. The sorting of events that leads up to a 'me' in the sense of "this is a sequence of 'I-positions' in the there-and-then, leading up to a 'me' as who I want to be understood", requires a somewhat *conscious* or at least *analytic* focus on consistencies across time, places, and actions in which the 'I' admits to have been agentively (or in a life of suffering and victimization: inagentively) engaged in. As Sartwell (2000) contests, and in my opinion correctly, this view of the subject as agent and experiencer underplays seriously the lived moment, the way lived moments are actually 'sensed' and experienced, and only counts moments that gain their 'quality' in light of surrounding moments which in concert add up to a meaningful temporal plot configuration. As such, it may be argued that

the attempt to compose life stories actually 'invalidates' life the way it is actually lived. One way to counter this all-too-reflective (and somewhat distant) narrator is the call for the charting of a 'narrative unconscious' in order to import the possibility of gaining access to 'unexplored' (Freeman, this volume) or 'deeper layers' (Brockmeier, this volume) of experiences. Again, although this is certainly a possibility, particularly relevant for therapeutic encounters, it detours around and circumvents what is happening in everyday storytelling, in situations where we seemingly "naturally" share stories with one another, where we contest and negotiate them.

As a third point, and this is closely connected with the previous points just made, 'small stories,' the ones we tell in passing, in our everyday encounters with each other (stories which I would like to consider the 'real' stories of our *lived* lives), become secondary to a degree that they appear irrelevant for the biography researcher who is interested (only) in what narrators pick to integrate into their life stories. This predilection has had practical implications for the kinds of analyses that, according to Ochs and Capps (2001), privilege certain possibilities of narrative dimensions and underplay others: (i) with regard to the dimension of 'tellership,' conventional narrative analysis has privileged 'one active teller' in contrast to 'multiple active co-tellers;' (ii) high 'tellability' has been over-explored at the expense of low 'tellability;' (iii) detached 'embeddedness' from surrounding talk and activity has been emphasized over a more contextual and situational 'embeddedness;' (iv) a more certain and constant 'moral stance' has been assumed as the default case in contrast to a more uncertain and fluid one; and (v) with respect to linearity and temporality, the closed temporal and causal order has been privileged over a more open temporal or spatial ordering. These, in my opinion unfortunate, tendencies – though not in any way caused by a focus of narrative inquiry on biographies and lives – nevertheless come in the wake of an otherwise productive inquiry into the study of lives through the use of narratives.

The argument that the employment of narratives as a somewhat privileged territory for drawing up selves and identities in life stories (or biographic accounts) comes with potential costs, should, however, not detract from the more central and relevant issue that narratives are employed (in everyday interactions as well as in institutionalized situations) to make claims about ourselves and our identities. First of all, this is relevant with regard to the possibility of grounding characters in a spatial and temporal origin and developing them in terms of "*their*" movement through space and time – up to the point that is relevant for why the story is shared at the time of interaction. Furthermore, to portray these characters as agents (agentively) or undergoers (inagentively)

opens up the possibility for the presentation of characters as 'becoming', that is, as undergoing processes of transformation – as for instance from being inagentive and passive at one location and time coordinate of one's life, to becoming involved and agentive with the crossing into new spatio-temporal territory (as in immigrating to a new country or becoming a father). The possibility of arranging the interplay of space, time and character transformations along these lines is a critical cultural and historical accomplishment, since it has opened up an opportunity to overcome epic ascriptivism and depict characters as in flux and searching; searching to fulfill desires, searching for a good life, searching one's <real> identity.

In addition, and on top of this spatio-temporal foundation of a storied world, characters are drawn up with plans and goals in relationship to other characters (who come with their own plans and goals), creating a social world within which individual characters emerge as protagonists versus antagonists, as good versus bad, as heroes versus villains. In other words, the perspective from where these characters are created as interacting with one another is not only always value-laden but presents characters as engaging in conflict and struggle over these values. Again, in narrative, the world of the characters is not written in stone, it appears improvised and is open to different interpretations. The story could have gone otherwise: if particular events had not happened, the here-and-now would look different; if a character had engaged in x, instead of y, the chain of events would have taken a different turn.

Consequently, a presentation of story characters with the potential to change over time and across different locales, as acting and interacting in a social world with others that is open to interpretation and variation, can serve as an excellent tool to present one's own claims as to what is valued and relevant to conversation partners in social interactions who share some but not necessarily all of one's own predilections. In other words, moving into the social realm of sharing narratives, where values and interpretations are in the process of being put together, gives excellent grounds to do rhetorical work of convincing others of one's own point of orientation, and of why one sees things this way. Stories do exemplary work in detailing stances and moral in the form of character deployments in interactive settings.

An excellent example is presented in Munsch's (1980) story of *The Paper Bag Princess* which leaves intact the sequence of events of the traditional heroic story line in which the protagonist saves *his* object of sexual desire, but switches the characters (the princess is the heroine and the prince the one 'being saved') and changes the ending (the heroine skips off into the sunset alone and the story ends with the words: 'They didn't get married after all'). According to

Davies and Harré (1990) this improvisation turns the traditional master narrative around and opens up a feminist reading. However, it should be noted that a story of male hegemony (for instance) does not automatically transform into a counter story by the simple replacement of male with female characters: The way characters are being positioned vis-à-vis one another in order to design an overall orientation that can be characterized as complicit with dominant narratives or counter to them is far more complex.

Up to now, I have deliberately avoided the possibility of narratives in which the speaker thematizes him- or herself as a character in the story as in what is often called 'personal narrative.' The reasons for doing this are simple: Primarily, I wanted to show that stories in principle are rhetorical tools for point or claim making, irrespective of whether they are 'revealing' personal and private issues about the speaker. By entering the narrative realm the point or claim that is under construction becomes contextualized in the form of exemplary actions by exemplary characters that are appropriated (from a narrator's point of view) to "act out" and make currently relevant the claim the speaker intends to convey for the here-and-now of the conversation. This principle holds whether the speaker talks about him-/herself or about others. However, inserting the self of the teller into the story line opens the door to the possibility of an 'I' that has been or even still 'is' in flux, is open to interpretation, and can be viewed from different angles. The conversational point of presenting different 'I's' at different times and places, subjected to different character constellations, can be highly effective in constructing a particular understanding of 'me' as speaker in particular conversational contexts. In other words, the sequence of I-positions in the story-world are the means to bring off a claim with regard to 'this is the way I want you to understand me,' here and now – 'the I as a character who has emerged in the story-world' is made relevant to the 'me as the speaker in the here-and-now.' This differentiation between the self as character in the story and the self as speaker (animator and/or author) is extremely important, because we all too often tend to collapse them too quickly in our analyses. However, although there is no principled difference between drawing up characters in a story world in which the self of the speaker figures as character from drawing up story worlds in which he/she is not, I would like to concede that the former usually has more at stake in terms of anticipating and preventively fending off potential objections by the audience.

In sum, narratives always *reveal* the speaker's identity. The narrative point-of-view from where the characters are ordered in the story world gives away – and most often is meant to give away – the point-of-view from where the speaker represents him-/herself. By offering a narrative, the speaker lodges a

claim for him/herself in terms of who he/she is. In narratives in which the speaker talks about or even thematizes him/her-self, this is no more nor less the case. However, constructing a self as a character in the story world and entering this construction as a claim for the self of the speaker requires 'additional' rhetorical work in order to be heard 'correctly'. It is this 'additional rhetorical work' that elevates 'personal narratives' into the realm of interesting data, and not the fact that speakers are revealing something that counts as more intimate or 'personal.' It is along these lines that I would like to argue that narratives told in everyday interactions always lodge claims about the speaker's self, and in their attempts to convince and make these claims intelligible, speakers incorporate counter claims vis-à-vis what they think could constitute possible misunderstandings.

Narratives and counter claims

One of the hot spots of the dialogue between the original authors and their commentators, flaring up again in the responses to the commentators, is the question concerning what it is that is actually 'countered', when considering counter narratives. The dialogue made apparent that there are assumptions lurking in the background concerning notions of 'dominant' or 'master narratives' (also variably called plotlines, master plots, dominant discourses, or simply story lines or cultural texts) that are taken to provide the social locations where and how subjects are positioned (Hollway 1984; Davies & Harré 1990; Harré & van Langenhove 1999). In this section, I will briefly discuss (a) what master narratives are, that is, how they are taken to function as the backdrop against which counter narratives can be drawn up; and (b) how these master narratives can be invoked by speakers and set up against what counts as 'counter.' An additional issue that I will touch on is the role played by *narratives* (and *narrativizing* – as the activity of engaging in narratives) in this process of countering master narratives.

Master narratives

In a general sense, there seem to be two different interpretations of the term 'master narratives'; one claiming (in a more narrow sense) the existence of master narratives that delineate how narrators position themselves with their story; the other arguing in a much broader sense that speakers are principally subjected to grand récits and metanarratives from which there seems to be no

escape. General cultural expectations of what constitutes a 'normal pregnancy' (Throsby, this volume, Talbot et al. 1996), of mothers being blamed by their children (Andrews, this volume), or of older people as asexual (Jones, this volume), seem to be master narratives of the former kind. They are 'frames' according to which courses of events can easily be plotted, simply because one's audience is taken to 'know' and accept these courses. Countering these expectancies is not necessarily an easy accomplishment for those affected, but there seems to be nothing that prevents us from viewing certain event chains (story lines) as simplified, idealized or simply not holding universally, particularly when it comes to one's own specific case or experience. In addition, these so-called culturally accepted frames most often are fragmented and come in ways that make it easy to set them up as problematic and not at all conclusive or consistent. Thus, one possible strategy to counter these frames is by way of appealing to other frames that are contradictory, and to presenting one's own experience along those lines.

However, when it comes to the grand récits or metanarratives, the way they are evoked by Bauman and Briggs (2003), Latour (1987, 1993), or Lyotard (1979) in order to explain how much the modern mind is engulfed in pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation, it is not as easy to simply point to the historical genesis (and cultural specificity), and the openness to change and potential contradictoriness of such récits. The answer to the question whether (and more importantly, how so) the subject can resist Foucault's 'regimes of power and knowledge,' where subjectivity is the outcome of discursive practices, or oppose and subvert Bourdieu's 'habitus,' with its implications of a 'grammar of actions without a subject,' is not straightforward. Here, it is impossible to 'simply' point to *my* personal experience that doesn't match up with these kinds of master narratives.

This situation becomes more complicated in two ways. First, master narratives are setting up sequences of actions and events as routines and as such have a tendency to 'normalize' and 'naturalize' – with the consequence that the more we as subjects become engaged in these routines, the more we become subjected to them. In this sense, master narratives surely constrain and delineate the agency of subjects, seemingly reducing the range of their actions. At the same time, however, it should not be forgotten that these master narratives also give guidance and direction to the everyday actions of subjects; without this guidance and sense of direction, we would be lost. It is in this way that master or dominant narratives are not automatically hegemonic and that complicity with them does not automatically result in being complicit with or supportive of hegemonic power-knowledge complexes.

As a further point of complication, those smaller, everyday-employed master narratives are part of the fabric of such grand récits, and vice versa. They do not come clear-cut in these two categories, but are thoroughly interwoven with each other. The question lurking behind this concerns the nature or fabric of the master narratives (the way they present themselves as ideologies, plot constructions, story lines, and discourses), as well as the social and individual forces that have the force to change master narratives. Of particular relevance is the problem of resources that enable the individual subject to draw up positions that contribute and ultimately lead to (historical) change. Central to this discussion is the problem of how dominant and powerful such master narratives are, and how locally situated narrating practices are either forced to be complicit or able to open up territory to bring about any liberation and emancipation from them – which some have considered as just ‘a hope’ or even ‘a nostalgic leftover’ of the master narratives of Modernity, with only small local ‘rupturing effects’ being possible. In my opinion, there are two options to viewing the subject vis-à-vis these master narratives, that is, *not* as swallowed and absorbed by them: Either, we consider the subject as ‘rational’, equipped with the ability to step outside its own practices and potentially becoming reflective, critical, countering and subversive; and as a consequence we can begin listing the (contextual) factors that turn this ability on and into an ‘awareness’ of being subjected and constrained. Or, and this is the option I have already hinted at and will elaborate further below, we build ‘*doing* being critical’, countering and even being subversive more directly into the fabric of our daily interactions.

Invocations of master narratives

I would like to catch up with the concession that speakers constantly invoke master narratives, and that many, possibly even most, of the master narratives employed remain inaccessible to our conscious recognition and transformation. Master narratives structure how the world is intelligible, and therefore permeate the petit narratives of our everyday talk. If this is true, it follows that speakers generally and principally are compliant and only rarely engage in resisting or countering the grid of intelligibility provided by what is taken for granted. The question then, of when and why we engage in counter narratives, is extremely relevant, and I wish I could contribute more to an answer. However, the examples compiled in this volume as well as my earlier work (Bamberg 1997; Talbot et al. 1996) remain largely descriptive by delineating and outlining in fine-grained detail the processes of how master narratives are invoked so that counter narratives can come to existence, that is, to describe these processes as

they invoke potentially liberating and emancipating agenda. Consequently, any possible answers to the 'why-question' have to await more refined observations and descriptions of the minutiae of engagements in countering practices.

Let me, nevertheless, reiterate how characters in local stories can be repositioned to transform a stereo-typical dominant narrative of the heroic male prince who battles the dragon to save the beautiful princess so that he can possess her. This hegemonic plot line is employed so it can be countered and transformed into a feminist reading. In *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch 1980; discussed in more detail in Davies & Harré 1990); Elizabeth, originally introduced as "the beautiful princess," undergoes a transformation into a dirty, 'normal' girl (the girl dressed in a *paper bag*), who outsmarts a dragon in order to save her prince. But at the end she decides not to marry 'her prince,' because he insists on maintaining his male, hegemonic gaze of her as 'his beautiful princess.' As I had mentioned, the sequence of events is kept intact, although minor changes had to be adopted and they had to be carefully crafted to keep the character in line with other master narratives (e.g., girls as non-violent) and maintain intelligibility: for instance, the dragon was not defeated by physical force but by the force of artful smartness. Overall, *The Paper Bag Princess* documents nicely, how existent (master) plot lines can be appropriated and transformed by inserting 'counter characters,' that is, characters that traditionally had to fill slots in 'subordinate roles.' However, these counter characters have to be brought off and carefully managed in order to leave intact, and be complicit with, other existing (master) plot lines.

A similar strategy is to counter the dominant narrative with personal information that only the speaker has access to as in the strategy employed by Mary in the work I alluded to earlier (Bamberg 1997; Talbot et al. 1996). Mary characterizes the expert physicians as narrow-minded and ultimately not knowing what she knows. She characterizes herself as knowing-best so that she can successfully lodge the claim of a rational and responsible identity: one who is doing the right thing in being pregnant, countering the medical master narrative through which she is defined as putting herself (and her unborn fetus) irresponsibly at risk. In analogy to *The Paper Bag Princess*, Mary brings off and carefully manages characters (here herself and her best friends who support her) who counter the characters traditionally in charge of the sequence of events. This way, Mary succeeds in reorienting her audience to an alternative reading. Her recourse to 'the personal' as something only she has access to, is carefully managed, since it can potentially incriminate herself. The positioning of herself as a woman in charge (of the sequence of events) and as a responsi-

ble person rhetorically preempts and deflects possible counters to the hearable trouble such orientations may cause in her audience.

These two short examples, along with the wealth of examples presented in this volume, may suffice to show that there are always certain aspects of dominant stories that are left intact, while others are reshaped and reconfigured. Speakers never totally step outside the dominating framework of the master narrative, but always remain somewhat complicit and work with components and parts of the existent frame 'from within.' Since narratives provide a landscape for the perception of different possibilities, the presentation of the sequence of events leaves room for improvisation and a careful management of perspectives that is sensitive to possible counters from the audience. Speakers do not present a simple counter story but seem to be juggling several story lines simultaneously. It is in this sense that counter narratives always operate on the edge of disputability and require a good amount of interactional subtlety and rhetorical finessing on the part of the speaker.

Analyzing counter narratives

In the previous two sections I have tried to subtly change the consideration of counter narratives from a clear-cut way of identifying master and counter narratives as oppositional stances to a more complex, though, as I hope, analytically more interesting and challenging, territory. The questions are no longer whether speakers are complicit with existing master narratives or whether they are countering them. Neither is the question whether they actually engage in countering, and if so, to what degree and from whose perspective, the analyst's or the participant's? I have gradually tried to replace these questions by how speakers employ narratives to juggle claims as to who they are that are hearable *both* as complicit with and as countering. In other words, the question has shifted to *how* they create a sense of self and identity that maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one's actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one's agency. It is with this slightly different orientation that I want to discuss issues of narrative analysis that are sensitive to counter narratives.

Where (and How) do counter narratives emerge?

Before discussing analytic issues regarding counter narratives, let me briefly bring up the problem of going out and finding or eliciting counter narratives.

Again, I want to return to and discuss in a bit more detail (so I can critically reflect on), our original study published in 1996 (Talbot et al. 1996). As we made clear in our introductory remarks of the article, the interviews conducted with expectant mothers who had been diagnosed with medical conditions (that placed them and their unborn children at risk during their pregnancies) were research interviews. They were conducted by a female interviewer in her late twenties and took place in the context of a larger project on "Normal and High Risk Pregnancies." And since the interviewees had already successfully (though with complications) given birth before, but were pregnant again at the time of the interview, they were expected in their claims to oscillate between master and counter narratives, or, as we called it then, "being 'caught' within this process of self-reflection and self-reconstruction" (1996, p. 228 [Footnote 4]). Thus, it would be fair to say that these agenda, which are clearly 'research agenda', were on the table, so to speak, for both interviewer and interviewee. And it would also be reasonable to expect that these agenda were 'attended to' not only in the way the interviewer moved into the topic of pregnancy and diabetes and the interviewee as following up on this interest, but also in the way event sequences were chosen and arranged and characters positioned vis-à-vis one another, because they 'needed to do their job.' In other words, the stories shared and the way they addressed what can be assumed to be 'master' and 'counter' are reflective of those research agenda that governed the local conversation.

In spite of the fact that we as authors alluded to this issue, it is remarkable how little of our original analysis actually attended to it. Instead of analyzing how interviewer and interviewee 'co-produce' – what is considered a 'participant creation' that falls under the header of 'politics of enunciation', and is part of the 'discursive accomplishment of situated identities', to use the terminology of Bell, Coombes & Morgan, Rich, and Murakami (all this volume) – we focused on rather decontextualized excerpts as if they simply reflected the interviewee's claims in the form of pre-existing meanings, beliefs, and practices that were teased out by a skilled interviewer and expressed by the interviewee in the here-and-now of the local interview. Unfortunately, analyses like ours may have contributed to the (erroneous) assumption that counter narratives (or complicit narratives) are orientations that people 'have', and when in the right situation, such as research or therapeutic interviews, these counter orientations pop out as confessions and can be taken as reflective of the authentic selves of the interviewees.

Frankly, if we were to go back to the same data and do a thorough re-analysis, it should be possible to show in detail how the challenges to the in-

interviewee's claims are not only working from existing master discourses as represented macro-structurally, but become 'real' in the interactive situation. It is within this local interaction, that institutional research agenda are forcing their way into the structure of the situation, in order to become 'attended to' by the participants of the interaction. Please note that this is not meant to deprive the interviewer of her interview skills. Even if the interviewer has (successfully?) moved out of her research role and attempted to slip into a co-conversationalist role, and in spite of the ethical issues that are lurking in this kind of practice (see Bamberg 1991; Bamberg & Budwig 1992), the claims of the interviewee will still be hearable as preempting and resisting potential interpretations on the interviewer's part. The interviewee's oscillation between being complicit with and countering aspects of the master narratives of pregnancy and (Western) medicine is her way of carefully preempting and deflecting possible counters from the interviewer. Not only does the interviewee construct herself as the responsible woman who knows, but also the interviewer as the (young) woman who does not know (yet) but ought to know for her own good as a woman and future mother. Showing how these identities emerge in the data as part of 'doing' complicity *and* resistance as interactive accomplishments would clearly do more justice to the data than we did in our original analysis in 1996.

As such, I am not disputing the right to use interviews (or focus-group-like group discussions) to 'elicit' counter narratives because they may be open to the charge of 'importing' research agenda that are reflected in the stories reported. And although it would be favorable to have more data on the emergence of counter narratives in every-day talk, as in private conversations and public meetings, there is nothing that prevents us from using interviews as elicitation techniques and analyzing them as interviews. Of course, interviews, just like any other talk-in-interaction, are no innocent windows into participants' interiors. Rather, they are in need of being analyzed as interactive, social, and cultural practices, which entails a close scrutiny of how such responses are put to use, as opposed to speculating about the attitudes that they putatively reflect. Rather than seeing master and counter narratives as mentally held properties or convictions, either/or, and slow to move, I propose to view them as talk's business, in and outside of interview settings. As a result, we are fully interested in the inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities that arise as our interviewees try to find ways to mitigate the interactive trouble of being misconstrued. Rather than seeing these inconsistencies and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, they are exactly what are most interesting. They offer a way into examining how interviewees are bringing off and managing their identity claims (Bamberg, in press). Seen this way, they no longer appear as contradic-

tions or inconsistencies, but rather as openings into which we as analysts can delve and discover how such attending to multiple story lines and rhetorical finessing between them is used to work up identity claims that do not appear immediately obvious, naïve, and challengeable.

Positioning

For the purpose of analytic work with narratives, I had begun to apply in some of my previous work the concept of 'positioning' (Bamberg 1997, 2004; Talbot et al. 1996). This concept has gained current relevancy in theorizing identity and subjectivity, where 'positions' are typically conceptualized as grounded in master narratives but opening up and conserving some territory for individual agency. Elaborating on Butler's (1990, 1995) notion of performing identities in acts of 'self-marking,' I have tried to advance a view of positioning that is more concerned with self-reflection, self-criticism, and agency (all ultimately orientated toward the possibility of *self-revisions*). In so doing, I suggest that we clearly distinguish between the 'being positioned' orientation, which is attributing a rather deterministic force to master narratives, and a more agentive notion of the subject as 'positioning itself,' in which the discursive resources or repertoires are not a priori pre-established but rather are interactively accomplished. 'Being positioned' and 'positioning oneself' are two metaphoric constructs of two very different agent-world relationships: the former with a world-to-agent direction of fit, the latter with an agent-to-world direction of fit. One way to overcome this rift is to argue that both operate concurrently in a kind of dialectic as subjects engage in narratives-in-interaction and make sense of self and others in their stories.

In taking this orientation, the 'who-am-I?' (identity) question does not presuppose a unitary subject as the ground for its investigation. Rather, the agentive and interactive subject is the 'point of departure' for its own empirical instantiation (Butler 1995, p. 446) – as a subject that is constantly seeking to legitimate itself, situated in language practices and juggling several story lines simultaneously. The analysis of how speakers actively and agentively position themselves in talk starts from the assumption that the intelligibility of their claims is situationally and interactively accomplished. However, since this intelligibility is the result of what is being achieved, and therefore inherently oriented to, we begin our actual narrative analysis by paying close attention to the ways in which the represented world of characters and event sequences is drawn up. Here we attempt to spot descriptions and evaluations of the characters and analyze the time and space coordinates in the way that these relate to social

categories and their action potential. From there we move into a closer analysis of the way these referential and representational aspects of story construction are assembled in their sequential arrangement among the participants of the conversation. The assumption that governs this step is that particular descriptions and evaluations are chosen for the interactive purpose of fending off and mitigating misinterpretations. The descriptions and evaluations rhetorically function to convey how speakers signal to their audience how they want to be understood.

In working from these two levels of positioning (one with respect to the content of what the story supposedly is about, the other with respect to the coordination of the interaction between speaker and audience), we are better situated to make assumptions about the ideological master narratives within which the speakers are positioning a sense of self, that is, as signalling complicity in order to mark off segments that can be countered. The analysis of the first two positioning levels is intended to progressively lead to a differentiation of how speakers work up a position as complicit with and/or countering dominant discourses. It is at this juncture that we come full circle by showing how subjects position themselves in relation to discourses by which they are positioned. In other words, analysing talk in interaction along these lines enables us to circumvent the aporia of two opposing subject theories, one in which the subject is determined by existing narratives, the other in which the subject is the only ground from which narratives are constructed.

Ironically, this way of analysing talk-in-interaction for the purpose of gaining an understanding of how interactants establish a sense of self (*in stories-in-interaction*) resembles closely what in developmental theorizing is termed 'microgenesis' (see Bamberg, *in press*). This approach focalizes the momentary history of human sense-making in the form of emergent processes. It assumes that developmental changes (such as *learning* or *better understanding*) emerge as individuals create and accomplish interactive tasks in everyday conversations. In the empirical data discussed in this volume, the interactive space between the participants, whether situated in interviews or other social locations, is the arena in which identities are micro-genetically performed and consolidated and where they can be micro-analytically accessed. Here I am borrowing from developmental (Bamberg 2000; Catan 1986; Riegel 1975; Werner 1957; Werner & Kaplan 1984; Wertsch & Stone 1978), conversation-analytic (Schegloff 1982; Sacks 1995; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), and 'communities of practice' approaches (Eckert 1989, 2002; Hanks 1996; Wenger 1998) to analyze the sequential and relational structure of narratives-in-interaction, for the purpose of inquiring not only into the developing sense of self and others,

but also into what is shared as the cultural background of sense-making. This does not imply that such 'senses' of self, other and generalized other (culture) do not exist previously to or outside the discourse situation. However, for analyzing narratives-in-interaction, I am suggesting the bracketing out of these categories so that we can be open to the analysis of what the participants make currently relevant in the interactive setting. In entering this orientation from a socio-linguistic and ethnomethodological vantage point, I am proposing considering counter narratives as brought off and carefully managed in the social realm of interaction rather than as stories that have a previous existence in the mind or the life of speakers.

Concluding remarks (to open up)

By imposing my own view on how to work with master and counter narratives upon the implied reader, and having the opportunity to do this in the concluding chapter of this volume, I did not mean to close the dialogue that has been facilitated so wonderfully by the original six contributions and picked up in the numerous commentaries and the answers to them. Rather, I understand my attempts to demystify master narratives (as automatically hegemonic) and personal narratives (as automatically countering) as a potential revival of the dialogue and the controversies that ensued in the course of this volume. In pursuit of this very same plan, I would like to pick up on and make relevant the distinction that was recently advanced by Avril Thorne (2004). Thorne characterizes the kind of proposal for identity construction that I have tried to advance in this chapter as working within "a highly proximate framework", one that potentially washes out "the personal past of the speakers, the complexities of their current concerns, and their hopes for the future" (Thorne 2004, p. 3). And she continues by contrasting my approach with McAdams' (1993) and Hermans' (1996) theories which "both emphasize that identity-making is a process of reflecting upon multiple facets of an individual's experience rather than by positioning one's own experience vis-à-vis others who are physically present in a setting. Identity [in McAdams and Herman's approach] is primarily conceived as developing through self-reflection, not social discourse" (Thorne 2004, p. 3).

I think that Thorne's distinction helps tremendously in depicting the shortcomings of the view I have proposed in this chapter. In order to crystallize what is going on in situated interactions, and working with the assumption that even total strangers can make sense of each other in short, brief segments

of interactions, I am reducing these interactants in terms of their histories of (personal) experiences. I am asking the analyst to disregard any considerations along those historical lines, at least for the moment, even if they should be available through other sources. The attempt to remain analytically unbiased and admit into the analysis only what is made relevant or 'demonstrably attended to' by the participants of the interaction strips individuals of their history. And whether it will be possible to bridge 'personal approaches to identity' of the kind of McAdams and Hermans with 'situated approaches' of the like I suggested, is an open question, requiring more dialoguing.

Another orientation to open up for more dialogue could follow Amy Shuman's suggestion to explore the highly under-researched dimensions of empathy and entitlement in story-telling practices. Positioning analysis (at least thus far) has not addressed how characters in the story world are coordinated in ways that result in feelings of empathy, in the sense of "conveying a true understanding of human experience" (Shuman, in production). This process of "transvaluing the personal to the more-than-personal (human, shared, universal)" (Shuman, *ibid.*) is something that remains largely covered up by 'situated approaches' to narrative analysis of the like I have proposed. Shuman goes on to argue that empathy also has the potential to destabilize "meaning from the personal to the allegorical," so that allegorical understandings can become challenged. These processes of recognizing oneself in the stories of others, and how this kind of recognition of self in others comes to existence, are excellent candidates for contributing to innovative and better understandings of how the personal and social is intersecting with being complicit and countering. – This dialogue definitely needs to be continued.

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