

Challenging the Master Narrative in Social Work to Create a Philosophy and Practice of Resistance

Michael Reisch, Ph.D., LMSW

**2010 Joint World Conference on Social
Work & Social Development**

Hong Kong, June 13, 2010

Overview of Presentation

- **Nature, Role, & Impact of Master Narratives**
- **Social Work's Master Narrative: Its Impact and its Implications**
- **Counter-Narratives**
- **A Counter-Narrative of Resistance**

Master Narratives

- Reflect ideology of the dominant culture
- Adapt individuals to their social function
- Construct assumed “normative experience”
- Engage people at realm of lived experience
- Derive their power from internalization of views
- Influence “local narratives”
- Acquire power of universal unquestioned truth
- Mutually reinforce institutions they produce

Impact of Master Narratives

- Exclude incompatible ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions
- Define “normal” behavior and produce individual and group conformity.
- Link their ideological components to prevailing dominant/subordinate relationships in society
- Reflect irrefutable internal logic
- Compel those who do not conform to create counter-narratives

Critique of Master Narratives

- They are not neutral. Their purpose is to make us “see the world as embodied in the story.”
- Fail to acknowledge the sources, purposes, and assumptions of narrators.

Pose Key Qs: Who does the telling?

Why is told the way it is?

What required this form of narrative?

What does the narrative invite us to ‘see’?

Master Narratives & Social Work

- Express how society works & contain views of role of government and social welfare system.
- Ensure that rights & duties conform with dominant values and behavioral norms.
- Image: “Value-based” profession & “conscience of society” yet ambiguity of professional vocabulary
 - Fails to acknowledge rhetoric’s implications & contradictions between rhetoric and reality.
- Result: Rhetoric is change-oriented while practice focuses largely on adaptation.

Social Work's Master Narrative

- Linked to societal/political master narratives.
- Purpose is self-maintenance, not change.
- Institutionalized by professional orgs. and culture
- Accepts institutional parameters as givens and channels client needs & workers' acts w/in them.
- Masks social control function thru SJ rhetoric
- Influences local narratives, such as SW's mission.

Impact of Social Work's Master Narrative

- Major bulwark of professional status quo
- Shapes profession's interpretation of its past
- Infuses all aspects of SW theory & practice
- Shapes perceptions of self and others.
- Shapes views of reason, science, values, and knowledge.
- Silences or marginalizes counter-narratives
- Makes social work increasingly apolitical

Implications for Theory

- Linearity of bio-psycho-social & spiritual needs
- Universal, static hierarchy of needs pursued rationally. In the West, “disorder” = “other”
- Centrality of satisfaction of individual needs;
- Benign individual-environment relationship;
- Fixed boundaries of environmental systems
- Well-being is natural state of people & orgs.
- Equality of opportunity to shape life chances
- Neglect of influence of history

Implications for Research

- Rationalizes current emphasis on EBP
- Self-preservation in neo-liberal context
- Reflects a deterministic version of rationality
- Undermines professional judgment/discretion
- Affirms structural status quo
- Definitions reflect unacknowledged biases (e.g., “evidence,” “knowledge,” “knowing”)

Implications for Practice

- Uses expertise to control worker/client relationship.
- Devalues knowledge based on experience (private);
Labels knowledge based on observation “science”
- Individualizes & restricts problems to private domain.
- Increases likelihood of blaming people for their problems.

Counter-Narratives

- Forms of resistance to the dominant culture
- Reflect & validate alternative view of reality
- Exist in relation to master narratives but are not necessarily in opposition to it
- Deliberately disruptive of accepted “stories”
- Pose fundamental Qs:
 - Who benefits from the establishment and preservation of the master narrative?
 - In what ways?

Counter-Narratives: Their Critique

- Impedes development of critical consciousness
- Covers up lack of critical consciousness with “buzz words”:
 - distortion of “freedom” in liberal West
 - equation of “empowerment” in social work literature with ability to demand or obtain access to existing services.
- Consequently, there is meaning within the master narrative and there is also “real meaning”

Counter-Narratives in Social Work

- Alternative to charity model based on justice
- Environmental explanation for poverty
- Democratic conception of service relationship
- Superseded by master narrative consonant with structure of US political-economy
- Impact: Most critical theory work in social work is being done outside of U.S., and within the U.S., outside of social work.

Components of a Counter-Narrative of Resistance in Social Work

- Reorienting SW's goals towards elimination of oppression & creation of more egalitarian society
- Challenging prevailing assumptions
- Developing alternative frameworks & theories
- Posing different research questions
- Clarifying ambiguous concepts and vocabulary
- Forging new alliances & creating new SW roles
- Partnering with clients to pursue social justice.

Challenge: How Can the Master Narrative be Adapted or Changed for the 21st C. ?

- Resistance at intellectual & practice levels:
 - Helps people survive, find meaning, become aware of injustice and work for justice.
 - Helps those who are oppressed exercise dignity & agency in dehumanizing circumstances.
- Short-term: Use existing narrative to influence policy & practice in pursuit of clients' interests
- Long-term: Forge “a new social discourse ... within which the new stories make sense and resonate with policy makers' expectations and experiences” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009).
- Reframing our analysis, alternatives, & actions is more than just replacing one rhetoric with another.

References

- Andrews, M. (2002). Introduction: Counter-narratives and the power to oppose, *Narrative Inquiry*, 12(1), 1-6.
- Dominelli, L. (2002). *Feminist social work theory and practice*, New York: Palgrave
- Elkins, J. (2005). *Master narratives and their discontents*, New York: Routledge.
- Fox, J. and Stromquist, S. (eds.) (1998). *Contesting the master narrative: Essays in social history*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. Get titles of Crocker and Laslett essays
- Grivil, R. (2001). Introduction, in *Master narratives: Tellers and telling in the English novel* (pp. 1-8), Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Reisch, M. & Andrews, J.S. (2001). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*, Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge.
- Sandlin, J.S. & Clark, M. C. (2009, April). From opportunity to responsibility: Political master narratives, social policy, and success stories in adult literacy education," *Teachers College Record*, 111(4), 999-1029.
- Trinder, L. (2000). Reading the texts: Postmodern feminism and the 'doing' of research, in B. Fawcett, et al (eds.), *Practice and research in social work: Postmodern feminist perspectives* (pp. 39-61), New York and London: Routledge.
- Wenocur, S. & Reisch, M. (1989). *From charity to enterprise: The development of American social work in a market economy*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press

Thank You for Your Attention