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Countering master narratives with narratives of persistence: A liberation perspective in career counseling

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Abstract

As of 2019, the global youth population between the ages of 15 and 24 was 1.2 billion and growing (UNDESA, 2019). A sizable number of youth face discrimination and marginalization daily, often based on their social identities and related interlocking systems of power and oppression (Brewster & Molina, 2021). Minoritized youth, particularly, find themselves trapped in culturally manufactured master narratives that serve to reproduce the very systems of privilege that exist in their country (Liu, 2017). Considering these master narratives can be a significant step in our work with marginalized youth. Building on the contributions of leading scholars in career counselling, as well as other historically influential scholars in fields such as philosophy, education, and literature, we propose using narrative counselling and its related concepts to dismantle master narratives. In doing so, open spaces can emerge for alternative stories for the hopes, dreams, and futures of marginalized youth.

Key Words: Career; Master Narratives; Narrative Career Counselling

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Introduction

The global youth population between the ages of 15 and 24, as of 2019, was 1.2 billion and growing. A 62% increase is expected among youth populations in the “poorest” countries by 2050 (UNDESA, 2019). These global facts make it clear that education and employment of the youth, particularly marginalized youth of the world, will be an important task for those of us in the field of career counselling. While we are writing from our own cultural vantage points as counsellor educators in the United States, our aim in this manuscript is to suggest ways to better serve minoritized youth in general. Building on the contributions of leading scholars in our field, particularly related to narrative career counselling, as well as other historically influential scholars in fields such as philosophy, education, and literature, we propose using narrative counselling and its related concepts to dismantle master narratives that often constitute an oppressive force in the lives of marginalized youth. Master narratives are socially manufactured stories about groups within our societies, that often have little to do with who we are and/or our hopes, and dreams. Master narratives can be both threatening and constraining, particularly for marginalized young people, as they chart the course for their future. Despite their critical importance, master narratives have not received proper attention from career counsellors, perhaps because they have been the subject of inquiry in other fields, such as sociology, literature, and philosophy. The aim of this manuscript is to use narrative means to increase youth’s socio-political awareness and critical consciousness, so that the dismantling of oppressive master narratives can commence. We also propose examination of the lives of exceptional models, who successfully circumvented the master narrative and created their own personal narrative highlighted with resilience and success. In doing so, we invite the emergence of alternative stories, to better reflect the hopes, dreams, and futures of the youth we serve.

Career Construction with Marginalized Populations

In the mid-20th Century, the Civil Rights movement brought diversity issues to the forefront of numerous professions within the United States. The field of career counselling was no exception. Since then, various authors have rightfully claimed that a large number of career counselling theories are applicable mostly to college-educated, middle class white men (Blustein, 2013; Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994; Richardson, 1993). As this and other realizations transpired, direct application and appropriateness of theoretical concepts such as career maturity were called into question for certain cultural groups (Lee, 1984). Examination of cultural, contextual, historical, and political factors, including their impact on the career development and success of diverse groups have followed (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006; Blustein, 2001; Chung, 2003; Cook, Heppner, & O’Brien, 2002, Fouad 2001; Hartung, 2002; Ponterotto, Rivera, & Sueyososhi, 2000; Pope, 2003).

Questions regarding universality of Eurocentric career counselling approaches have been raised by international scholars as well (Maree, Ebersöhn, & Molepo, 2006). As emic approaches that focus on specific cultural/social groups, such as LGBTQ+ (Lidderdale, Croteau, Anderson, Tovar-Murray, & Davis, 2007), women (Chung, 2003; Cook, Heppner, O’Brien, 2002) African Americans (Walsh, Bingham, Brown, & Ward, 2001), Latino/a (Berrios-Allison, 2011, Flores & O’Brien, 2002), Native Americans (Thompson, 2013) emerged in the literature, a number of career counselling professionals became more conscientious of different cultural worldviews and social justice issues impeding the career development of marginalized individuals (Luginbuhl, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2016; Olle & Fouad, 2015).

Although the foundations of career counselling are embedded with elements of social justice (Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Pope, Briddick, & Wilson, 2013), these issues have not taken centre stage in the United States, until recently. In 2015, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MCSJCC) were developed (Ratts, Singh, Butler, Nassar-McMillian, & McCullough, 2016) and endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD). Other organizations such as the National Career Development Association (NCDA)

and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) have integrated a social justice perspective into their ethical standards. School counsellors, for example, are charged with examining critical data (including data associated with academic attainment and disciplinary referrals) to identify and address equity issues that create achievement, attainment, and opportunity gaps among different student groups (ASCA, 2016).

A social justice perspective is particularly critical when working with marginalized youth, who often face structural, interpersonal and other types of discrimination that materialize in the form of a threat to their social identities, sense of self, wellbeing, and success (Rapa, Diemer, & Bañales, 2018). The occurrence of such discriminatory experiences is unfortunately common and a universal phenomenon. For example, one study revealed that 97% of African-American youth experienced at least one incident of discrimination within a 2-week period (Seaton & Douglas, 2014). Given the prevalence of social justice issues and their impact on the well-being of marginalized youth, it has become essential for counsellors to adopt counselling approaches that will allow critical examination of the social/political/historical factors affecting youth. Thus, several scholars (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016; Gaylord-Harden, Burrow, & Cunningham, 2012; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999) extensively discussed the importance of helping youth to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1990) as a protective and resilience-building factor. Authors such as Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) created programs to facilitate youth's ability to recognize and successfully navigate the sociopolitical factors that marginalize them.

This manuscript aims to expand the earlier work of Maree, Ebersöhn, and Molepo (2006) whose work focused on the use of postmodern narrative career counselling with marginalized South African youth. Similar to them, we believe that narrative counselling (White & Epston, 1990) provides a conceptual framework and lens to enhance our understanding of the intricacy of and discourse to address discriminatory experiences of young people. We propose the examination of what writer Toni Morrison defines as master narratives (Morrison, 1990) to increase the sociopolitical awareness of youth. We believe that examination of master narratives is the first step in raising the critical consciousness of youth, a concept emphasized by "psychologies of liberation" (Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero, & Sonn, 2009). Along with raising awareness, we propose the introduction of narratives of persistence, essentially stories of well-known figures who successfully found an "escape route" (Maree, Ebersohn, & Molepo, 2006, p.56) from the constraints of the oppressiveness of master narratives. We hope that examination of these escape routes will open up narrative spaces nurturing hopefulness and a sense of agency for youth.

Master Narratives: Widely Held Cultural Impressions about Social Groups

French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) coined the term master or grand narrative (cited in Stanley, 2007). American writer Toni Morrison defined a master narrative as an "...*ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else*" (Moyers, 1990). Similarly, Collins (1989) explained master narratives as widely held social scripts about various cultural groups in our country.

The word *imposition* in Morrison's (1990) definition is quite significant. It suggests a power differential between those imposing the narrative and those upon whom the narrative is being imposed. These narratives are often communicated via the media and implemented in social institutions like schools. Many times, those with power do not question the accuracy of these narratives and end up playing a significant role in their perpetuation. Social scientists and others have introduced the concept of implicit/explicit biases to increase our awareness of this process with the hope that such awareness will prevent us from engaging in discriminatory practices. However, current statistics reveal that such discriminatory practices are common and result in serious consequences for youth.

Consequences of Unquestioned Oppressive Master Narratives

Often adults communicate their biases in insidious ways. Michelle Obama (2018) in her autobiography *Becoming* describes a brief exchange with a college counsellor more than 30 years ago. Obama states: “because rightly or wrongly, I got stuck on one single statement the woman uttered. ‘I’m not sure’, she said, giving me a perfunctory, patronizing smile, ‘that you are Princeton material.’ ” The long-lasting impact of such discounting interaction is evident in Ms. Obama’s description. Decades later, she not only remembered the exact words but also the disparaging manner the counsellor chose in delivering her message. While Michelle Obama’s future seemed unharmed by that interaction, the same is not true for a significant number of marginalized, vulnerable youth.

Expulsion rates, for instance, demonstrate how race plays a role in the rights of children and youth to receive a decent education in US public schools. African American students, regardless of their gender, are expelled from K-12 schools at a much higher rate than their White classmates (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Similarly, such severe disciplinary action is found to disproportionately impact Native American and Latino/a students as well. Even in our preschools we see a racial disparity with regard to expulsion rates. Gilliam (2005) found that African American pre-schoolers were expelled from preschool 3.2 times more than other pre-schoolers.

Gender is another social construct that appears to create a structure of exclusion impacting one’s career aspirations. For instance, girls and young women are often discouraged from pursuing careers in STEM fields for various reasons, including the belief by some in their limited potential to succeed in STEM professions. Although disproven repeatedly, this belief has real-life implications as shown in recent workforce analysis. Despite all initiatives, women still constitute only 29% of STEM specialties (Khan, Robbino, & Okrent, 2020), although 51% of the US population are women (US Census, 2019). Extensive literature related to these matters continues to show how various blunt and/or stealthy biases held by others create significant barriers for women’s full participation in these fields.

One of the most dangerous aspects of master narratives is their potential to be internalized by children and youth. Paulo Freire, the author of *Pedagogy of Oppressed* (1970) suggested that marginalized individuals internalize the oppressor’s consciousness and act in ways to validate it unless they develop critical consciousness (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Such internalized oppression, along with various marginalization processes, can lead to a deep sense of worthlessness and powerlessness in people (Freire, 1970). The words of Warm Springs, Oregon Councilwoman Carina Miller support Freire’s (1970) assertion, as she described the impact of systemic, continuous marginalization of our Native American students in schools. The Councilwoman explained how as a student she “felt worthless like I wasn’t worth the effort or patience to understand who I am or my history” (Clarren, 2017).

We, the authors, witnessed this sense of hopelessness and impaired sense of agency in marginalized youth in our work as counsellors, counsellor educators, and/or supervisors. One of us distinctly recalls an adolescent from a family with limited financial means. Although the student had considerable promise to graduate from a 2- or 4- year institution, their future aspirations were modest and limited to holding a steady job at a fast-food restaurant. They quickly discounted compliments about their academic abilities and resisted discussions of future possibilities. We wondered why *their dream* did not include certain other elements found commonly among youth with considerable resources. We were curious as to whether this student and classmates who were likewise marginalized, could benefit from stories of others like Emil J. Freireich, who despite an impoverished childhood became a major figure in the treatment of childhood leukaemia (Gladwell, 2013). We have witnessed students from challenging backgrounds engaged and inspired by presentations focused on the topic of resilience and resilient individuals, who forged an alternative path to a more fulfilling life for themselves. To our surprise, we realized that narratives of inspiring models can remain as subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980) and/or

be treated as rare exceptions with no real-life implications for a number of individuals. This prompted us to consider a contemporary approach that harnesses the power of these narratives and ways to utilize them. Such an approach can be described as both liberating and transformative (Wink, 2005) as it deals with hegemonic discourses that perpetuate marginalization, inequality, and impedes experience of life purpose (Maree, 2020). We understood that in order for these narratives to have a transformative impact, they needed to be carefully and deliberately introduced. We also realized the need to be prepared to assist youth in deconstructing the master narrative associated with their social groups first and foremost, so that they may feel free to consider themselves as agents capable of creating alternative narratives.

Dismantling the Oppressive Master Narrative

Gergen and Kaye argued that therapeutic interactions often do not include an attempt to “confront the deeper origins of the problem or complex ways it is sustained” (1992, p. 167). The initial reaction of the individual working with the aforementioned adolescent was to utilize cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) to work on their low self-esteem, by identifying various cognitive distortions the student was engaging in. Although it is indeed an effective intervention, it does not provide a systemic approach that invites both clients and counsellors to examine problems within a historical and sociological perspective. By not doing so, it can leave the client with the impression that their presenting issues are a product of their own doing.

Somewhat different from traditional counselling approaches, narrative therapy provides a discourse that allows a process of examining the impact of clients’ problem-saturated narratives on their identities and their perception of future possibilities. Thus, a narrative approach avoids “blaming” clients for their difficulties and encourages their collaboration in reducing the impact of problem-saturated narratives in their lives. Where such an approach may fall short though, is in helping clients realize that the oppressive narratives in their lives are the by-products of master narratives imposed on them; principally because of their social identities. This perspective is particularly critical in working with marginalized youth as it allows them to note various marginalization processes that serve the purpose of creating and maintaining these master narratives. The following are examples borrowed from different fields demonstrating ways in which clients have been invited to critically examine the oppressive master narratives and the various ways with which they are perpetuated in their lives.

A systemic approach that conceptualizes psychological problems as by-products of social realities has been successfully used in the treatment of disordered eating. Understanding the interaction between the idealized body image broadcasted widely by the media and disordered eating (Becker, et al., 2002, Field et al., 2001), counsellors specialized in this particular disorder are advised to spend a considerable amount of time with clients in 1) increasing their awareness of media messages, and 2) identifying individuals in their immediate environments (such as their family members, friends, coaches, etc.) sometimes referred to as an audience, who perpetuate these messages. As the susceptibility of children and adolescents to media messages has become widely recognized (Morris & Karzman, 2003), the American Academy of Pediatrics (1999) encouraged mental health professions to use media literacy or media education with young clients. The main purpose of these psychosocial programs is to increase the critical consciousness of youth, so they can develop the skills necessary to evaluate mass media messages objectively and resist the attempts to impose an impossible body image and associated psychological characteristics (e.g., lack of self-control) on them.

While challenging master narratives related to body image happens in the present, challenging other master narratives, embedded in historical atrocities, requires a critical examination of commonly held historical “facts” and replacing them with truthful accounts of what actually transpired from the perspective of those exposed to oppressive actions. Postcolonial distress (Hartmann & Gone, 2014), previously known as historical trauma (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2011; Duran & Duran, 1995) is a

psychological construct that is used predominantly by Indigenous scholars. Postcolonial distress describes the traumatic and damaging psychological consequences of “years of colonization, cultural suppression, and historical oppression imposed on Indigenous people in Northern America” and the ongoing structural violence that they have been exposed to (Kirmayer, Gone & Moses, 2014, p. 299). The construct is critical due to its recognition of past atrocities and current social inequities as the origins of the psychological distress, rather than medicalizing it as we often do with mental health concerns (Kirmayer, et al., p.310). Consequently, the remedy for this syndrome is to increase one’s awareness of the impact of historical injustices and current structural inequities imposed on them. Likewise, recognizing the resiliency of Native American communities by understanding unique ways they have successfully resisted colonization and current discrimination is equally as important (Denham, 2008).

In conclusion, we agree with Stephen Biko (1978), a South African activist, that unless we encourage youth to develop a socio-political-historical perspective necessary to identify and critically examine master narratives, internalized oppression associated with various social identities will continue to undermine their sense of self, resiliency, and hope of marginalized youth. Thus, developing critical consciousness is the first step in dismantling oppressive master narratives.

Developing Narratives of Persistence

Although raising critical consciousness is important in dismantling the master narrative, it is equally important to invite youth to examine narratives of individuals who may have had similar struggles in life but were able to find an escape route to a more fulfilling life. Maya Angelou in an interview with Oprah Winfrey aptly referred to these narratives as stories of endurance. The power of these stories lies in revealing the complex *process* of endurance that is filled with intermittent periods of disappointment, pain, triumph, and above all an unyielding persistence with which one struggles to resist adversities. These are the very stories of personal strength and resilience that can successfully dismantle the deficiency perspective commonly used to describe marginalized people and their lives. Career counsellors may consider inviting their clients to study these narratives to bolster their belief in themselves and in the possibility of reaching their own dreams instead of feeling trapped in an impossible master narrative. Inspired by Maya Angelou we describe such stories as narratives of persistence.

Examining Exemplary Models and Their Narratives of Persistence

Various authors have discussed the importance of models in youth development in general and career development in particular. Social learning theory (e.g., Bandura 1977, 1986) proposed that people learn from observing others. It has been noted that role models may be influential in people’s career decisions (Pleiss & Feldhausen, 1995), their attitudes toward non-traditional occupational choices (Greene, Sullivan, & Beyard-Tyler, 1982; Heckett et al., 1989; Savenye, 1990) and, educational aspirations and choice of a college major (Hackett, Esposito, & O’Halloran, 1989). Hackett and Byars (1996) argued the importance of models particularly for marginalized youth, as they may learn effective coping mechanisms from them, to deal with various forms of discrimination.

The narratives of persistence introduce youth to other types of role models. We prefer the term exemplary models, to refer to those individuals who successfully resisted a master narrative’s defining impact on their identities and future possibilities. Often youth hear generic advice, such as “work hard to reach your goals,” from adults as a success formula to every challenge that they face. Such advice, although helpful, does not take into consideration structural inequities and lack of support structures that can undermine marginalized youths’ ambitions and desire to formulate and/or reach future goals. Consequently, it is valuable for youth to learn about effective strategies to successfully resist discriminatory practices that can thwart one’s drive to actively shape their future. Michele Obama, for example, considered the aforementioned counsellor’s behaviour as a “punch” directed at her because

she was a Black girl from South Chicago. In her case, rather than internalizing it by believing that she was not Princeton material, she used it to strengthen her determination to attend Princeton and prove the counsellor wrong. A marginalized young woman and aspiring STEM scholar might benefit from learning about Madame Curie, who received a Nobel Prize twice during an era where women were encouraged to focus only on domestic responsibilities. She achieved this success by not only working hard, but also successfully challenging master narratives regarding a woman's place in society. She had to leave her home country, due to lack of educational opportunities for women, to earn an advanced science degree in France. She navigated various challenges as an immigrant woman/student before securing a lab where she could work. Today we would say, "She persisted." Hers is an example of a narrative of persistence.

The processing of these narratives is important. The focus should not necessarily be on the outcome but rather on the process that an exemplary model went through to reach their goals and dreams. Inquiry could centre on considerations such as the model's coping mechanisms, source or sources of their personal strength, and personal characteristics of the model that youth find admirable. What is a youth's perception of the model's success formula for navigating through challenges? How is a youth's situation similar to the model's situation and how is it different? Discovering one or two things a young person learned from the exemplary model and their narrative can likewise be valuable. For instance, Maya Angelou's poem entitled *Still I Rise* (Angelou, 1978) acknowledges the historical oppression imposed on Black people in the US as well as their resiliency. The poem powerfully explains her determination to rise above all challenges. Her words signal a special bond she has with history and her ancestors as sources of her personal strength and endurance. Her determination could be viewed as a promise she made to her ancestors that she will continue their commitment to create a better world. Similarly, a young person may find Maya Angelou's deep connection to her ancestors relevant to their own life and life struggles.

Narratives with hallmarks of resilience and endurance and their exemplary models are common and available via libraries, video streaming services, and the internet, providing individuals with considerable opportunities for discovery. Wallace (2007) offered an excellent example of possible models in the use of career narratives of "eminent people" within the field of education. These narratives profiled prominent individuals, who demonstrated resilience and success in overcoming various obstacles and difficulties. This same method could be followed in gathering narratives that are more appropriate for a younger population of clients. With Wallace's example in mind, personal narratives could be gathered more locally, by those working with youth (i.e., school counsellors, teachers, etc.). Most every community has successful people, who have had to overcome a great deal to reach their present place in life. Professionals working with youth populations might be able to get local individuals who are willing to share their narratives to visit classrooms in person, virtually, or to share their story via video or in printed form, perhaps deepening the connection between a narrative's author and an audience of young people.

Before concluding this section, clarification is necessary in our use of the term exemplary model. An exemplary model differs from the concept of role model used in career construction theory. Role models within career construction theory are most often selected by individuals before age 10, and have a different function, serving as a blueprint in constructing one's self (Savickas, 2006; Briddick & Sensoy-Briddick, 2012). Savickas (2006), highlighting the significance of this construct, stated "If I can only know one thing about a person, I love to know who their role model was when they were growing up, because it is the solution to the problems they faced in growing up." We prefer the term exemplary model in this manuscript rather than role model to distinguish them from our earliest choices in self-construction found within in career construction theory. Use of exemplary models can introduce youth to elements of resistance and perseverance, while assisting them in developing critical consciousness. Our recommendation of using exemplary models with youth does not discount the use of role models but rather seeks to be useful in yet another way.

Supporting Emerging Narratives of Persistence Via Audience

Examination of narratives of exemplary models often reveals that they had someone who was supportive of them and who believed in their potential and abilities. Even an audience of one could make a difference. Michele Obama (2018) in her autobiography talked about the support of her mother, brother, and some of her teachers and mentors. Maya Angelou discussed the importance of The Harlem Writers Guild in her career as a prominent poet and writer. A supportive audience is a critical aspect of resiliency work with marginalized youth.

Winslade and Smith (1997) succinctly noted the significance of audience in supporting and sustaining emerging narratives that bears relevance to those of persistence. They note, “A good story needs an audience before it can be appreciated as a good story. A counselor may be the first audience. But there is a need for the deliberate searching out of wider audiences” (p. 189). One consideration for career counsellors is to take enough time to talk with youth about the concept of audience and its importance in supporting narratives of persistence. Many times, youth encounter those who intentionally and/or unintentionally support the master narrative and thus become either witting or unwitting accomplices of these narratives.

Savickas (2011, 2015, 2019a,b) has made considerable reference to the significance of an individual’s audience as it relates to one’s career construction. The present authors explored the concept of audience and how it might be utilized in career counselling, including sample questions used in exploring a client’s audience and recruiting new members (Briddick & Sensoy-Briddick, 2013). For instance, with identified, current audience members that are recognized from our conversations we might ask a young person, “Grandma has been supportive of your studies for as long as you have been in school. What might she say you could do to overcome your doubts and fears about pursuing a college degree?” Or, we could use Madam Curie as an introduced audience (Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995) and ask the young person who is hesitant to leave their town to go to another state “What might Madam Curie think about you leaving your comfort zone?”

The previous work of other scholars on the topic of audience (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 1992, 1993; White & Epston, 1990) or variations of the concept might be useful in career counselling as well (Briddick & Sensoy-Briddick, 2013). Our hope remains that the concept of audience can be recognized as potentially useful in the work we do with our clients in career counselling.

As counsellors we are not called to be a spectator to ongoing systemic injustices impacting our marginalized youth. We are called to promote action, encourage advocacy, and facilitate change. As we conclude we seek to be clear that in no way do we want to leave the impression that the exploitation, systemic oppression, various inequities, etc. that support master narratives and their proponents, should go unchallenged in our work with clients. There is so much more to be said about advocacy, social justice, and confronting the aforementioned forces. It is likely in itself a separate scholarly contribution, perhaps an entire special journal issue, and likely much more as so much remains to be done.

Conclusion

In recent years, mental health professionals started to emphasize the importance of consistently “appraising moral implication of our work” (Prilleltensky, 1997, p. 517) to determine whether our interactions and interventions undermine and/or strengthen the sense of agency and resiliency of our clients. In assisting marginalized youth, it is our ethical obligation to consider the impact of contextual factors that limits one’s belief in their ability to achieve their dreams. Unquestioned master narratives are the social mechanisms that lead to self-regulation and self-discipline to maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1980). One of the most effective ways to liberate youth from these oppressive mechanisms is to introduce them to alternative narratives of other marginalized individuals, who explain how they have survived, thrived,

and been able to overcome challenges. Otherwise, these individuals, their escape routes, and resistance stories will remain as “subjugated knowledge” in our schools and in our culture (Foucault, 1980). We can help young people discover the stories of individuals who were deeply aware of structural oppressions affecting them and were able to resist their potential control over their lives. Our aims fulfilled, those we serve can discover their dreams and then believe in their ability to create a fulfilling life, a story that is attainable and that can be well lived.

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