

IT'S COMPLICATED

THE COMPLEXITY AND POWER OF LINDEMANN'S NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

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IT IS NO SURPRISE that it is difficult to get oppressors to take up a counterstory, that is, to replace a picture of the world in which the social organization that generates their privilege is natural and justified with one that recognizes its injustice. While the *motivations* for those in privileged positions to hold on to an oppressive master narrative may be obvious, the *mechanisms* by which these narratives are maintained are less so. It is this timely and important matter that Hilde Lindemann explores with characteristic force and clarity in “Countering the Counterstory,” which considers in detail how master narratives keep the counterstories that challenge them from getting traction.¹

Lindemann begins by laying out some of the reasons it is difficult for counterstories to emerge as challenges to master narratives in the first place—the fact that master narratives are organic ensembles, that they constitute a worldview, and that they are epistemically rigged, naturalized, and/or privatized. The bulk of her paper, however, is devoted to explaining why it is that even when a counterstory is able to emerge as a challenge to a master narrative, it is likely to flounder on the master narrative’s ability to “assimilate opposition,” and so faces an uphill battle in finding uptake.² Lindemann discusses several tools of assimilation: making the language pretty, playing devil’s advocate, playing “What about Me?,” requiring victims to be blameless, and changing the subject. In each case she supplies a compelling account of how the mechanism works and convincing examples of what it looks like in action. Despite the formidable obstacles for those trying to launch a counterstory, however, Lindemann ends with a ray of hope. Counterstories can and do get taken up, and change does occur. The #MeToo movement is her example of this possibility. While the battle is by

1 Lindemann, “Counter the Counterstory.”

2 Lindemann, “Counter the Counterstory,” 291.

no means won, Lindemann says, there is reason to think that the counterstory about women that #MeToo offers is taking hold.

The analysis offered here is forceful and inspiring, and I have little to add to what Lindemann says about the mechanisms for assimilating counterstories. I will therefore use my commentary to drill down a bit on the message of hope she offers at the end, which is somewhat less fully developed. While the possibility of finding uptake for a counterstory is urged with great conviction, and the example of #MeToo is convincing, the description of the assimilation mechanisms available to master narratives is so powerful that one does wonder just how they can be overcome. In providing her concluding words of inspiration, Lindemann tells us that the “reason why any counterstory has a chance of succeeding, despite whatever defenses a master narrative might set up against it, is that oppressive master narratives are always *false*. That means there are always cracks in the story” and that “if you shoot enough counterstories” at such false narratives the cracks will show and the narrative will ultimately break apart.³ This sounds right, but what we have seen in the pages before is a powerful account of all of the mechanisms master narratives have at their disposal for smoothing over and patching these cracks as they appear, thereby keeping the truth at bay. There is thus some need to consider how having “enough” counterstories will ultimately allow the truth to prevail. What I will offer here is not any kind of answer to this question, but only preliminary reflections on some of the complications involved in trying to provide one.

One obvious way to approach the question of how a counterstory can succeed is to look at the example of the #MeToo movement offered in the paper and consider how it managed to gain traction. The story about women it counters was *always* false, after all, and it is not as if counterstories to this narrative had not been offered before, so why did this one get taken up? There are undoubtedly important lessons to be learned by looking at the particular circumstances surrounding this movement. A great many things might be said about the political moment in which it occurred, or about celebrity involvement, the use of social media, and many other factors. Crucially important as I take this project to be, here I am going to take up the different, and somewhat more abstract, question of just what uptake of a counterstory consists in, in the case of #MeToo but also more generally.

This turns out to be a complicated matter, worthy of far more attention than I can give it here. If we are to understand how the assimilation mechanisms outlined in the paper can be overcome, it is necessary to know what it means to overcome them, what success looks like. Thinking even briefly about this ques-

3 Lindemann, “Counter the Counterstory,” 297.

tion reveals that there are many facets and kinds of success, and that keeping this in mind is likely to be crucial in appreciating all of the tools that might be deployed in getting traction for a counterstory. In what follows I will merely note some of the questions and complications that arise without taking a position on any of them. The idea is to point to a fruitful research program implied in Lindemann's paper, rather than to begin carrying it out.

One natural way of thinking about what it is for a counterstory to get taken up is for a significant number of those who hold the master narrative to come to see the world through the lens of the counterstory instead. But if we try to think about what, exactly, that would mean it immediately becomes evident that there is not going to be a simple and straightforward answer to this question. Those who hold the master narrative do not constitute a monolithic group, and the counterstory is not a single thing. To begin, the ways in which those who subscribe to the master narrative opposed by #MeToo do so is going to be diverse. There will be those who are actively and deeply invested in its picture of the world, those who are at some level uncomfortable with the privilege it affords them but distract themselves from these worries using methods of assimilation, and those with infiltrated consciousness who are harmed by it but hold it anyway.

Lindemann makes it clear that the notion of a narrative as it is used in this context is also diffuse. Narratives, she says, are as "capacious, as cluttered and untidy as a Victorian attic."⁴ She tells us, further, that

talk of *a* master narrative is really just a manner of speaking, because the term does not designate a single story with a specific plot and a fixed cast of characters. Instead, they are ensembles of repeated themes that take on a life of their own. Fragments of history, biography, film, fables, jokes, and similar narrative forms ring changes on the theme, as do proverbs, music, advertising slogans, and other cultural artifacts.⁵

Something similar is presumably true of counterstories. Indeed, this seems clearly the case when we think about the #MeToo movement, which is made up not of a single story, but of the many stories of the individual women who use the platform to share their experiences. These are stories that can and do differ in sometimes radical ways. It would be difficult and distorting to extract a single narrative about women and their circumstances from these individual stories, and I know of no one who has suggested that we should.

Given these degrees of freedom, it seems clear there is no single, simple outcome that constitutes the uptake of the #MeToo counterstory by those who had

⁴ Lindemann, "Counter the Counterstory," 289.

⁵ Lindemann, "Counter the Counterstory," 288.

held the master narrative. This suggests that the strategy for getting those who hold this narrative to change their perspectives will likely vary depending upon which part of this space of possibilities we find ourselves in. From this recognition several further observations arise.

To begin, we can probably assume that there is some group of those currently holding the master narrative who will never take up the counterstory no matter how many times the truth is spoken to them or how forcefully. In her paper, for instance, Lindemann mentions Paul Elam, founder of A Voice for Men, who has said publicly that he would always acquit if he were a jury member for a rape trial, no matter what the evidence.⁶ If one's goal is to get as many people as possible who hold the master narrative to take up the counterstory instead, it seems reasonable not to expend too much effort on this group.

Those who are guiltily enjoying privilege and rationalizing to enable themselves to keep holding the master narrative seem a more promising target for change. Nevertheless, some difficult and fraught questions arise about the best strategy for addressing this group, questions that are in part possible because of the imprecise nature of the counterstory itself. On the one hand, we might think that the project of getting those in this group to take up the counterstory should proceed along the lines of an intervention, in which the defense mechanisms of assimilation are challenged through repeated confrontation with undeniable truths that speak against the narrative. If this is the strategy, it might seem best to focus on stories without ambiguity, those that make the mechanisms of assimilation most awkward to apply. The cases of Aziz Ansari and Al Franken, for instance, may be easier for many people who hold the master narrative to assimilate than those of Jeffrey Epstein or Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein. Some have therefore argued that in launching a counterstory the movement should focus on the more extreme cases, which are especially difficult to explain away using the mechanisms described in Lindemann's paper. Bringing in cases that are easier to assimilate, it is suggested, risks backlash and disagreement that will only make the master narrative more entrenched.

There is, however, also a great deal to be said against this strategy. Plausibly, focusing only on cases that many of those holding the master narrative will have to recognize as egregious and downplaying those that might be perceived as ambiguous or assimilable under the category of "boys will be boys" in fact makes maintaining the bulk of the master narrative all too easy. It allows those who hold the master narrative to denounce obviously criminal behavior, believing that they have listened to reasonable challenges to their worldview, without forcing them to confront the widespread existence of arguably more subtle

6 Lindemann, "Counter the Counterstory," 293.

but equally damaging forms of oppression. The whole point of a *counterstory*, as opposed to a mere list of bad behaviors, one might argue, is that it shows that the behaviors that many of those who hold the master narrative acknowledge as unacceptable are not only more numerous and widespread than they might have thought them to be but are also, crucially, directly connected to attitudes and behaviors they are willing to dismiss as relatively harmless. Disagreement between these two strategic positions has been expressed in many venues as the #MeToo movement has gained steam, and while these disputes are messy and painful, there is reason to hope that in the end they will bring important issues to the fore and lead to real progress.

Things are perhaps more straightforward in the case of those with infiltrated consciousness who have bought into the master narrative despite being disadvantaged by it. For many in this situation, seeing their own circumstances described in ways that resonate clearly and make vivid to them what they are already experiencing might be all that is needed to quickly change their gestalt. A vocabulary for thinking about one's experience and validation that others see things in the same way may well be enough to get this group to take up the counterstory.

There is thus a great deal of complexity concerning the question of what it means to get those who currently hold the master narrative to take up a counterstory. Beyond this, however, it is plausible to assume that a counterstory does not get traction only, or even primarily, through this kind of change. Another way of thinking about what it means for a counterstory to get traction is that it does so by making the voices of those who already see the world through its lens more audible and impactful. What makes the master narrative the master narrative, after all, is its dominance and influence. A movement like #MeToo, by collecting and telling individual stories in a highly visible way, ensures that these stories and the more general picture they paint will play a role in the public discourse that a smattering of isolated stories without this kind of platform likely would not. Here it is not in the first instance a matter of directly convincing anyone who does not now accept the counterstory to see things differently, but rather of diluting the voice of the master narrative with an alternative. Especially important, perhaps, is the way in which the audibility of counterstories can impact those whose worldviews are just being formed. Those who grow up hearing the counterstory robustly expressed are, it is to be hoped, less likely to be easily led to see the world exclusively in terms of the existing master narrative.

While this picture of what it means for a counterstory to get uptake is somewhat simpler than that of convincing those who currently hold the master narrative to change their minds, questions still arise. One concerns precisely how

we are to think about the role of truth in this dynamic. Lindemann makes it clear that the ultimate destruction of master narratives rests on their falsity and, presumably, counterstories prevail in the end because they are true. In the mechanism just described, however, the uptake of counterstories is a matter of having the narrative sufficiently present in the public sphere to influence conduct, judgments, and the outlook of future generations. This seems to imply that it is the frequency and centrality of the telling of the counterstory, rather than its more legitimate claim to truth, that gives it traction.

This description of the situation is, of course, overly simple. There are many ways in which questions of truth could play into this general picture of how counterstories are taken up. One might argue, for instance, that the reason there are so many instances of the counterstory is precisely because it is true, and so that it is the truth of the counterstory that allows it eventually to drown out the master narrative. Another place in which questions of truth might enter into this picture is in explaining the impact of the counterstory on future generations. Here the idea would be that, once the story is out there to be heard in a way that allows real comparison with the counterstory, the master narrative's falsity will be obvious to those who have not already been socialized into seeing it as true via the mechanisms outlined in Lindemann's paper. Still, there seems to be an underlying question about exactly what falsity amounts to on this picture. We have an intuitive idea of what it is to have a false narrative about others that is natural to apply here, but it is not evident just how it interacts with the strong role of social factors in constituting identity that is at the heart of Lindemann's view. There are many possibilities, of course. A true narrative might be one that maximizes flourishing, or one where there is optimal harmony between one's narrative about her own identity and the narratives of others, or it might be one that is most internally consistent or, most likely, some combination of these and other factors. There are many important resources in Lindemann's works and beyond for making the relevant notions of truth and falsity more precise, and this seems to me important work well worth undertaking.

These, then, are some of the questions and complications that arise as we try to think about what it means for a counterstory to get traction and how this is achieved. As advertised, I have drawn no actual conclusions about what uptake involves. I hope to have provided a sense of just how complicated this framework is and, in particular, how much remains to be investigated in thinking about how counterstories can be allowed a fair hearing. This is by no means intended as a criticism of the view presented here, or a complaint that it is incomplete. To the contrary, it is meant to display its power. What seems evident is that there is no one thing that is *the* counterstory to a master narrative, nor a single circumstance

that counts as its uptake, and this is exactly what Lindemann's view suggests. It is precisely the diffuse, dynamic, and organic nature of master narratives that makes them so pervasive and difficult to counter. But these same features provide counterstories with a wide range of tools for combating these narratives, and different places and ways for them to start taking hold. This is what those who would counter these narratives need to recognize and develop, and this is what Lindemann displays so beautifully. Her message of sober realism infused with hope is timely and welcome.

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REFERENCES

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