

# Women – Voicing Resistance

Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. LaFrance (eds)

Reviewed by Irene Levin, Professor emeritus, Oslo University College, Norway

“Women – Voicing Resistance” is an edited book by Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. LaFrance in the series Women and Psychology. The series’ editor is Jane M. Ussher. The stated aim of this series is to bridge the gap between abstract research and a distant understanding of science and the social reality of women’s lives by integrating theory and practice, research and policy. The cover page of this volume also indicates that each book addresses a “cutting edge” issue of research. Previous issues have covered areas such as: The menstrual Cycle, Women and Aging, Understanding Depression, Managing the Monstrous Feminine, Gender as well as Language and Discourse – to mention some.

*The present book is about stories – women’s stories. And it is about more than that. It is about individual, social and political influences shaping what women can do with stories and the consequences of these stories for their lives. At its core, this book is about women’s attempt to re-story or counter-story their lives when prevailing discourses and dominant narratives are unhelpful or, indeed, harmful. As such, it is an exploration of women’s agency and resistance* p. 191.

This is how the editors sum up the idea of their project and the book itself, which consists of a number of studies where women tell of their personal experiences and life projects. These stories are not within the master narrative; they are countering the master narratives. The term – “counter” stories is a shared refrain throughout the whole book. However, this book is much more than a collection of a number of ‘counter-stories’. It has two introductory chapters focusing on theory as well as a final chapter comprised of a theoretical and analytical summary. As I read the book, the counter stories served repeatedly like eye openers telling me what this project was all about. When all the counter stories are gathered together, they form an arena of possibilities and challenges – both those within each story as well as among all of them understood as a collective entity. Let me start with my conclusion: I am very impressed by the book and its project focused on counter-stories and I will try to explain why:

First, even though this book is an edited anthology, it differs from many others by being very thoroughly edited and integrated around the central theme of counter-stories. Every chapter takes up the main questions raised by the editors in their introductory chapter – *.Women*

*counter storing their lives*. There the theoretical outline of the book is presented and one can read each chapter as an example of this outline.

In presenting stories written by different women authors, a book could easily have become a collection of diverse narratives. In this book, however, the editing is done in such a way that each counter-story relates to the editors' project in an integrated analytical and theoretical way rather than a final chapter trying to integrate and sum up as is often done in multi-authored books. In this book, the final chapter by the editors strengthens the impression one has gained of this work as being *one* book.

A second point has to do with the title. When I first read the book *Women Voicing Resistance*, I wondered why the title did not include the term counter-stories since this is used in all the chapters as a common reference point. My first thought was that this term should have been part of the book's title. As I continued reading, I understood that the author's project was not descriptive but analytical in the sense of not only exploring but even moving a field. They wanted also to be political. A counter-story is a contrast to something, but it is still within the hegemonic story. The counter-story contradicts while continuing to be deviant. Nevertheless, to call all these counter stories as ways of "resisting" is to take the project a step further and the women then become more like *agents* in charge of their own lives. Resistance is a term from the battlefield and war. Resistance is connected with a battle *against* something. In this book, the authors become like resistance fighters in a kind of war against a certain framing of social reality. The women's stories all ask: Which social reality are we talking about and who is going to be included?

In order to make my third point on why this book is important, a longer discussion and some new headers are called for:

#### *Counter-stories as methods and with potentials*

Reading the book gives one the impression that its focus is more on the meaning making of identity for the individual woman or group than on the political or of social importance. By telling the story, each woman gains legitimacy for herself as her story is told to someone else. In so doing, her experience becomes visible for more than herself. Before the story is told, it is like an elephant in the room – present but not talked about (Zerubavel, 2006). When stories are told, they are not only present, but they are present with several possibilities. For the individual, the story can be a first step towards the process of self-awareness. For a group

these stories become powerful and possess potentials. For the society, these stories can open avenues for gaining new knowledge as well as political possibilities.

After reading this book and being introduced to counter-stories, one cannot use master narratives anymore nor treat them as universal. Questions like: How is it for the LGBT population? How is it for women who have experienced rape? How is it for the premenstrual female? How is it for the depressed? How is it for women and childbirth? What about women experiencing sex? Just to mention some. All the counter-stories in this book challenge the master narrative's hegemonic position just by the fact of being told. It is as if these women authors have raised their fists and shouted towards the master narrative: "Your story is not universal! I have another story and therefore yours is not valid for *everyone*." In this sense, the book may be thought of as 12 sets of fists raised while shouting out counter messages.

However, it is a long road from women raising their fists until their views become incorporated into a new grand truth or master narrative. Understood in this way, the counter-stories become a *method* to challenge the hegemonic theories. Often such stories are treated as results only. Then the story adds to existing knowledge. Of course, that is of great importance, but I also see that such stories are like methods opening up new potentials and that they should not be treated solely as results. Counter-stories represent *potentials* for liberation and may *contribute* to policy change. Such narratives challenge and have importance for practice.

By emphasizing the book's potentials as challenges to the master narratives of social lives, its stories can be seen as contesting the universality and hegemony of the general theories we all take for granted and do not question. Without a challenge, the taken for granted knowledge could continue to live undisturbed and with the result that our general knowledge and understanding is kept narrowed and limited whilst other knowledge disappears or becomes lost. Here, I am not only talking about the importance of counter-stories presenting arguments for equality. It is, of course, imperative that women's rights need to be highlighted by counter-stories. However, counter stories also have an important role as a set of *methods* which in this way expand our theoretical as well as analytical knowledge.

### *Master narratives and silence*

In our culture, we apply numerous fixed and finalized narratives in our everyday social interaction. These narratives are often called master or canonical narratives or dominant discourses. Master narratives can be hard to see as such until you search for them under the surface or you contradict them. They are often understood as common sense and therefore are

invisible in our everyday life. They are like the air we breathe. Moreover, like air, it is more or less impossible to get a sense of if one does not do something with it. One can color it, add a smell to it or in one way or another highlight its existence. However, the air becomes a social object more easily when it no longer exists. If you are in a situation without 'air' you will be very much concerned about the lack of it. The women's voices and resistance in this book are a way of coloring "the air" in order to make it visible for us. The coloring of the air functions like a feedback mechanism alerting us to the hegemonic position of the master narratives in relation to how we live our lives.

Between the master narrative and our lived lives, there is an interval. The interval consists of silencing processes that keep the hegemony of what is a master narrative and what is a counter-story. When the counter-story is told, it has embedded silencing processes within it. Sometimes this silence is of vital importance and other times the silence is more connected to the fact that not everything can be expressed at the same time.

Silence is per definition not verbalized and therefore difficult to grasp. Silence becomes a social phenomenon when it no longer exists. It is the absence of silence that makes silence a social phenomenon (Levin, 2013a).

The silence discussed here is not the same as secrets. There are similarities since silence is an important part of secrets (Smart 2010, 2009). Secrets presuppose a silence and "silence and secrets are shelters for power, anchoring its prohibitions" (Taylor, 2009: 197). If a secret is not silence, it is no longer a secret. While secrets often are actively hidden stories or events separated from the family history, silence can be part of extraordinary events as well as our everyday life and just for different reasons is not talked about. For example, when we learned to eat with a knife and a fork, the learning activity was verbalized and thus not silenced. When the learning was over and we managed the task, it became silenced and incorporated in our everyday knowledge (Levin, 2013b).

The women's experiences in this book are not secrets in a direct way. However, the stories possess similarities to secrets since they consist of information challenging the master narrative as well as society's hierarchy and norms. In some instances, one could say that the silencing of women's experiences have similarities also to taboos. When one breaks a taboo, one is met with disapproval. To be silent about it and to keep it hidden or as a secret are all ways to avoid disapproval (Leira, 1990).

Silence is a separate phenomenon (or many phenomena) possessing both importance and power, but capable of becoming easily overlooked. This is because silence is not verbalized. It is overlooked until it disappears as a phenomenon. When we become aware of the silence, it is not silent anymore. Edward T. Hall points out in his book *Silent Language* (1959) that silence passes away and disappears within the narrative line of the story. This is part of silence's character, but this does not make it less important. If these stories were not told, it would have been easier to continue the silence about all aspects of social lives and to keep on with the taken for granted master narratives. The counter-stories of this book are part of processes that break the silence and help us visualize these processes.

In earlier writings, I have categorized silence according to whether it is connected to part of our everyday life or if it belongs to extraordinary events (Levin, 2013b, 2013a). As part of everyday life, experiences are not silenced in one period, such as learning multiplication tables or how to eat with knife and fork as mentioned earlier. When the learning process is over, the act becomes silent and belongs to part of the person's knowledge.

When it comes to extraordinary events such as different types of trauma (for instance, the Holocaust), silence is part of the whole phenomenon. There can be several reasons for not talking about these events. One has to break the order of everyday life and start to talk about extraordinary events (Smith, 1987). The feelings towards the extraordinary event can be manifold and complex and by talking about the event one has to interact with these different and complex feelings. Once the experience is narrated and also labeled, the situation becomes irreversible, final and more real (Levin, 2001). When silence is used as a characteristic of the individual, it is more like a diagnosis and blame (defense mechanism) as if it is her fault that she has not talked and kept silent about something. My point here is that silence is connected to the phenomenon the counter-stories play into.

#### *Master narratives and time*

By telling counter-stories, individuals present the master narrative with a new reality and it then cannot continue as if the story had not been told. This is much like when George Herbert Mead discusses his concept of time in his well-known article with the same name. There he referred to the past as nothing in itself and as something that could never reoccur (Mead, 1956). With our master narratives, it is as if events, people and other things have been reoccurring all the time. Contrary to the past of Mead, the master narratives seem to take on the appearance of being stable, constant and change-resistant. The past, for Mead, disappears

as soon as it has happened. When one talks about it again, it becomes a new past. Moreover, the past interacts with current experiences in the present and becomes a new past – a present past. In each of the stories presented in this book, authors are challenging the master narrative much like Mead did in his discussions about the past. It is imperative for master narratives to be confronted with present times – with new narratives, with different experiences. Silence is like the past that does not exist and when it exists, it is not the same phenomenon anymore (Mead, 1956). “When the story is told in the present, there will be an interpreted past within it” (Levin, 2013a, p. 188).

When Mead discusses the concepts of time, he also includes the future. With master narratives, the future attempts always to be stable and unchangeable. These narratives in this book are addressing a different future – an ever-changing future where the past and the present are included in a process filled with possibilities and challenges.

*The voice of resistance with micro and macro potentials*

Between the master narrative and the women’s counter-story, there is silence. The term silence is here used in relation to what is not present. This missing part has importance and power; it is just not being talked about. Its knowledge has been invisible and its potentials have been non-existent or without interest. Language supports the silencing processes. The discourse and the master narrative hide individual experiences and silence them.

The potentials of counter-stories are numerous – especially in political and social ways. My final point here is that theoretically we can read the stories as a way of breaking the silence of the taken for granted of master narratives. These stories are like ways of coloring the air so that we – the whole population – can see what is going on. The method of using counter-stories for such a project is clever, but not unique. What does constitute the uniqueness of this book is the way it is put together. The way the editors have managed to create a framework for making each of the contributions valid within their theoretical framework. That is one main reason why I really like this book and why I have recommended it for reading to my close colleagues.

Chapters include:

1. Women counter-storying their lives; Michelle N. Lafrance & Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr
2. Language and stories in motion; Marjorie L. DeVault
3. Beyond “coming out”: lesbians (alternative) stories of sexual identity told in post-apartheid South Africa; Alexandra Gibson & Catriona Macleod

4. Bodies talk: on the challenges of hearing childbirth counter-stories; Rachele Joy Chadwick
5. Counter-storying rape: women's efforts toward liberatory meaning making; Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr
6. "I used to think I was going a little crazy": women's resistance to the pathologization of premenstrual change; Jane M. Ussher & Janette Perz
7. Talking against dominance: South African women resisting dominant discourse in narrative of violence; Floretta Boonzaier
8. "Oh it was good sex!": heterosexual women's (counter)narrative of desire and pleasure in casual sex; Pantea Farvid
9. Depression as oppression: disrupting the biomedical discourse in women's stories of sadness
10. "Girly-girls", scantily-clad ladies, and policewomen: negotiating and resisting femininities in non-traditional work space; Bridgette Rickett
11. Untangling emotional threads and self-management discourse in women's body talk  
Catrina Brown
12. Women's discursive resistance: attuning to counter-stories and collectivizing for change; Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr & Michelle N. LaFrance.

### *Literature*

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