

Hilde Lindemann Nelson

Damaged identities, narrative repair

ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001

Reviewed by Abraham P. Schwab

ISBN: 0801487404

Despite the lingering challenges facing her concept of the counterstory, Nelson offers an important tool for resisting oppressive master narratives and for challenging received narrative approaches.

In *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann Nelson takes on the ambitious project of setting up the concept of the counterstory. According to Nelson, the counterstory can provide oppressed persons with the means of resisting their oppression by challenging master narratives. Nelson does not attempt to provide original arguments in favor of the narrative perspective, but she invokes the arguments of four well-known proponents—Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor—as well as recent supporters Marya Schechtman, Christine Korsgaard, and Marcel Lieberman. According to these accounts, our lives, commitments, explanations, justifications, and identities are grounded in broadly accepted master narratives. Nelson describes master narratives as “the stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings” (6). They are the “stock plots and readily recognizable character types” that are used “to makes sense of our experience [and] . . . to justify what we do” (6). Although it is not necessarily the case, Nelson asserts that these master narratives often support oppressive power structures that deny the moral agency of certain persons or groups. In setting up a response to oppressive master narratives, she introduces the counterstory, a liberating narrative that aims to alter (1) “the *oppressors*’ perceptions of the group” and (2) “an oppressed person’s perception of *herself*” (7). In her concept of the counterstory, Nelson offers a needed alteration to the received accounts of the narrative approach.

To illustrate the lack of attention to oppression within the narrative tradition, Nelson points out a variety of problems within the work of Nussbaum, Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor. She argues that they express elitism in terms of the genre of literature they recommend (Hegel and Proust, for example) and in the type of individual narrative that is idealized (such as the “quest” narrative, similar to the King Arthur story). Moreover, she argues that the explicit purpose of narratives, as it is described by these authors, fails to include appropriate attention to oppression. While such a critique is overdue, some of her criticisms rest on less than generous interpretations; furthermore, some of these criticisms give rise to some troubling ambiguities within her own account. Despite these concerns, Nelson’s review of these authors does illustrate the narrative tradition’s lack of a formalized approach to challenging oppression or even discussing how that challenge should take place.

Nelson lays out three specific criteria for evaluating all narratives, including counterstories. The first of these is what she calls “strong explanatory force.” While her criticism of MacIntyre and Taylor includes explicitly rejecting linear and unified narratives as reliable standards of

evaluation, Nelson depends on narrative unity in the application of the criterion of strong explanatory force. To illustrate what she means by this concept, Nelson uses the hypothetical example of her attempts to foster the growth and sense of community experienced by a junior faculty member in her department. While she intends her social invitations and interactions to be innocent attempts to help this new faculty member acclimate, the junior faculty member sees them otherwise: “I’ve lusted after her ever since she arrived on campus” (94). The junior faculty member reads all of Nelson’s “friendliness” as “predatory.” Nelson suggests that by comparing these two stories to *other* stories told about her, one of them should come out as the better narrative because it has stronger explanatory force. Even though she agrees with Wittgenstein that lives are made up of distinct but overlapping fibers, the suggested application of this criterion suggests that reflecting a unifying theme found throughout the fibers is an important part of an adequate story. If there is no requisite unity (as Nelson’s critique of MacIntyre and Taylor suggests), strong explanatory force is meaningless. In her example, if invoking unifying themes is illegitimate evaluation, disagreement with *other* stories about Nelson would not delegitimize either story: Nelson can be justifiably narrated as both a sexual predator and a caring mentor. But this works against Nelson’s explicit claim that “one of these stories has got to go” (94). Although at times it seems her primary concern relates to the linear characteristic of adequate narratives, she never distinguishes between linear and unified narratives. As a result, she both criticizes a dependence on unified narratives and depends on unified narratives in her criterion of strong explanatory force.

Nelson acknowledges that her other evaluative criteria, correlation to action and heft, have a certain degree of indeterminacy as a result of their subject matter. Her criterion of a correlation to action—relating a narrative to future activity such that only narratives that suggest plausible future actions are justified—is obviously somewhat indeterminate. Her criterion of heft—evaluating a narrative according to its “accurate” weighing of important aspects or characteristics—is the subject matter of many disagreements. Combined with the confusion surrounding strong explanatory force, these three criteria will not distinguish between adequate and inadequate stories, except in the most extreme circumstances. Because her discussion of the other requirements that make a good counterstory avoids much of this indeterminacy, Nelson may have been better served avoiding the criteria for “good” narratives. Not only does she encounter the problems mentioned above, but also her arguments take her away from the larger project of setting up her concept of the counterstory. Whether she offers her own criteria, adopts another set of criteria, or even leaves open what the criteria are, it could be enough to require that a counterstory count as an adequate story (whatever that would mean) alongside its other requirements.

Nelson goes on from her discussion of the narrative tradition to show how some specific master narratives are oppressive. She uses stories about gypsies, transsexuals, and mothers to show how limited or no recognition of their moral agencies, as well as the social treatment of these groups, marginalizes them as moral actors. For example, in the case of mothers, Nelson describes two general kinds of oppressive master narratives: “who” and “how” narratives. “Who” master narratives describe all women and only women as appropriate mothers. Accordingly, Nelson relays cultural evidence ranging from television shows to court cases illustrating how women who fail to become mothers have failed to be adequate women and how women are always primarily responsible for the care of children. “How” master narratives describe the limitations

on legitimate motherhood—a “good” mother exists only in a patriarchal and “traditional” marriage. A counterstory in this case would challenge, among other things, the presumed role of mother for all women or the role of submissive wife for all mothers—a good counterstory will substantiate the adequate moral agency of women and mothers whether or not they conform to the above master narratives. By including gypsies and transsexuals as well as mothers, Nelson makes an important point about the kinds of groups that can find counterstories useful. Her concept of the counterstory provides a framework for resisting oppression in all its forms. The counterstory can be useful to groups whose moral agency is denied, whether they are on the extreme margins of society (gypsies and transsexuals) or are explicitly lauded as an important foundation of society (mothers).

Toward the end of *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Nelson clarifies the point of counterstories: to consciously and more accurately recast moral agents whose agency has been misrepresented or ignored in master narratives. Two important difficulties arise here: first, ensuring the actual success of the counterstory in changing the way a group is recognized; and second, laying out the conditions of a counterstory’s success. Nelson tries to leave aside the first difficulty of ensuring success. Resolving the second difficulty, defining the conditions of this success, means meeting the three criteria discussed above, legitimation of the counterstory through an “abnormal” moral community, and of course, actually doing the work a counterstory should do by recasting, in moral terms, the agency of an oppressed group.

Despite her criticism of Rorty’s “self-invention” where an individual can reinvent herself regardless of her social circumstances, Nelson claims that individuals can tell justified counterstories in isolation from other oppressed members of a group. Yet, she also points out that such a story will not be a “legitimate” counterstory without the support of an “abnormal” moral group that presupposes the adequate moral agency of that individual. But if a counterstory’s legitimacy depends upon group support, then the “legitimate” challenging of oppression becomes a matter of circumstance. Even though an individual may attempt to bring together a group or join a group of similarly oppressed individuals, unless that group materializes and forms an “abnormal” moral community, there is no “legitimate” way to tell the counterstory. This is noteworthy simply because it means that both one goal of counterstories and one condition of the possibility of “legitimate” counterstories is the narrative recognition of others. This suggests that the success of counterstories, and subsequently, challenges to oppression are largely dependent on others and may be painfully arbitrary.

Despite the lingering challenges facing her concept of the counterstory, Nelson offers an important tool for resisting oppressive master narratives and for challenging received narrative approaches.

Abraham P. Schwab is currently a Teaching Fellow and doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago. His teaching and research is focused on health care ethics, feminism and social/political philosophy. He would like to extend thanks to both Jennifer Parks and J.D. Trout for their help in working on this review