

## The Master/Dominant Narrative, Counter Narratives, and Multipartiality

Adapted from the works of Janet Rifkin, J.D. and Leah Wing, Ed.D.

### Master Narrative (or dominant narrative)

**T**he Master Narrative is a dominant narrative a society develops to make sense of shared history. Though the Master Narrative is often accepted as fact, it is very frequently incorrect about explanations of diversity and privilege/oppression. On these issues, the Master Narrative frequently assumes that all people's experiences resemble those of the privileged group. The narrative does not account for the treatment or experience of marginalized or oppressed social groups. The dominant groups have the privilege of not noticing or believing that there is a Master Narrative that prevent them from being on equal ground.

EXAMPLE: **The Myth of Meritocracy:** If you just work hard enough in the United States, you can make it. *My grandfather came to this country from England with just the coat on his back, but he worked hard on his own, he didn't take handouts, and he made it.*

This Master Narrative presumes that anyone can earn wealth or power through hard work, and if you have not made it, it is your own fault. It fails to acknowledge that not everyone in the U.S. has equal access to resources and that minoritized groups face oppression at the individual, structural, and institutional levels that prevent them from having equitable opportunities.

EXAMPLES: *Redlining, World War II veterans*

### Multipartiality

“**M**ultipartiality is a power-balancing approach to Intergroup Dialogue that supports and sustains all voices, especially the minoritized voices or the concerns and needs of those with less power.” (Fisher and Petryk, 2017)

One way that facilitators can help dismantle the master narrative is through practicing multipartiality. Multipartial facilitators:

- Assume the Master Narrative is present in every setting
- Seek to balance power in a dialogue
- Bring forth minoritized perspectives when others do not
- Surface both master and counter narratives
- Convey empathy, dignity and respect as they challenge the Master Narrative

They ask questions like:

- *Where did you learn this perspective?*
- *Many people believe this. Why do you think that might be?*

### Counter narratives

**C**ounter narratives are those which exist at the margins and are discordant to the Master Narrative. Counter narratives dispel the illusion of simplicity and ubiquity of the master narrative. Counter narratives can be used to interrupt, invalidate or add previously unconsidered facts or perspectives. Counter narratives destabilize master narratives allowing for new complex understandings to emerge.

COUNTERNARRATIVE: *Europeans did not discover America, it was already here. Native people were the first "Americans."*