

**Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives:  
An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context**

Kate C. McLean  
Western Washington University

Moin Syed  
University of Minnesota

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### Abstract

In this paper we propose a model for examining personal identity development that moves attention from a relatively exclusive examination of the individual, to an examination of the intersection between self and society. We propose that a master narrative model of identity development allows researchers to 1) align the study of culture and individual on the same metric of narrative, 2) investigate the processes of negotiating personal and cultural narratives, the latter of which are embedded within the structures of society, and 3) investigate the internalization of those structures in personal identities. In laying out this model we define a narrative approach to identity development, five principles for defining master narratives (ubiquity, utility, invisibility, rigidity, and their compulsory nature), three types of master narratives (life course, structural, and episodic), and case examples of each type. This model brings attention to the interaction between self and society, as well as to the constraints on individual agency to construct a personal identity. We conclude by raising questions that emerge out of this framework that we hope will inspire future work on the relation between self and society in the study of identity development.

**Key Words:** Narrative identity, identity development, master narratives, alternative narratives, agency, culture

## **Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives:**

### **An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context**

The development of a personal identity is widely recognized to be a critical psychosocial task across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968; McAdams & Zapata-Gietl, 2015). While there are certainly manifestations of identity development in early childhood (Fivush & Zaman, 2015), and identity continues to be a concern across adulthood and into old age (Kroger, 2015), the developmental processes of identity are centrally located at the pivot point between childhood and adulthood. Successful navigation of this task indicates a transition out of the first part of a life lived, into the chapter of adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2015; McAdams, 1993; Syed & McLean, 2016). Erik Erikson (1950; 1968), the theorist most closely associated with the task of identity development, spent much of his scholarly time addressing this issue, delving into the processes through which individuals go about this task, as well as the cultural contexts that intertwine with individuals as they begin to construct an understanding of who they are.

This theoretical foundation has provided great inspiration to identity researchers, and an impressive quantity of research has helped to specify the components of identity development (see McLean & Syed, 2015; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). In particular, researchers taking various approaches to the topic have identified specific processes with which adolescents and emerging adults engage as they develop their identities, as well as various outcomes associated with these processes (e.g., Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Kunnen & Metz, 2015; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Meeus, 2011). Compared to the processes of identity development, however, we know comparatively less about the cultural contexts of identity development, perhaps because of the lack of an organizing framework for capturing these issues (Syed & McLean, 2015). In this paper we propose a *master narrative* framework for studying

identity development that attends to both the individual as well as the cultural structures in which the individual develops and, importantly, captures the *dynamics* of that relationship. In other words, our framework for understanding identity development encompasses the person, the culture, and the *processes of negotiation between the two*.

The framework we propose represents something of a departure from current approaches to identity development, as well as the dominant mechanistic models in psychological research more broadly. Indeed, the typical figure in any psychological research article is riddled with boxes and arrows that symbolize the association, represented as arrows, between at least two variables, represented as boxes. In terms of understanding the psychology of the self in society, there would typically be a box that defines some aspect of societal structure, or ‘context,’ and a box that defines some aspect of an individual. For example, living in what has been identified as an individualistic culture is related to developing a more independent sense of self (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005). In this model, cultural context and individual are two separate constructs (boxes) that have an often vaguely conceptualized, and relatively unexamined, association with each other (Matsumoto, 1999). The arrows connecting the two boxes to one another tend to signal either a causal relation (unidimensional or bidirectional) or an unexamined association (i.e., correlational). The metaphor of the *path* has been applied to the arrows, suggesting some process by which one variable “travels” to become associated with the other. But we are often left with the *how* question: How does the individual make sense of—or internalize—the cultural context of individualism? How does the culture ‘get to’ the individual? *What is the path?*

In this paper we argue that without enough attention to the arrows, in this case the arrow that represents *the process of structural-individual relations*, we are limited in reaching a full understanding of identity development. We propose that the concept of *master narratives*

provides a framework for understanding the nature of this intersection between self and society. Master narratives are culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a ‘good’ member of a culture; they are a part of the *structure* in society. As individuals construct a personal narrative they negotiate with and internalize these master narratives – they are the material they have to work with to understand how to live a good life. For many individuals whose lives fit in with societal structures, these master narratives are functional and unproblematic. Others, however, may need to construct or adopt an *alternative*<sup>1</sup> narrative, which at minimum differs from, and at maximum resists, a master narrative. We argue here that examining the dynamic among personal, master, and alternative narratives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding identity development in context.

It is important to note that “master narrative” is a concept that has been used in the literature for some time, but in many different applications and empirical manifestations (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, Thorne & McLean, 2003; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Our proposed framework builds upon these conceptual foundations, but seeks to move the field forward by bringing greater specificity to the concept. When we look at the literature we see neither a clear set of principles that *define* what master narratives are, nor is there an articulation of the different *types* of master narratives (of which there are, indeed, several). The result of this lack of organization is the same term, master narrative, being put to work in different contexts. Rather than adjudicate among the different approaches, our intention is to provide a broader framework to organize past and future research. Doing so will allow researchers and studies from various perspectives to better ‘speak’ to each other and locate one another within the broad conceptual landscape of master narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> We also considered using the term ‘counter’ narrative (as some have done; Andrews, 2002; McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013). However, counter is explicitly antagonistic, and alternative narrative is a broader framework that can encompass counter narratives.

This article is divided into three broad sections. First, we provide a definition for our approach to identity development. In the second, and most substantial, section we introduce our master narrative model, in which we delineate principles for defining master narratives, describe three broad types of master narratives, and provide a dedicated discussion of the role of agency in our model. In the final section we articulate a series of questions arising from our framework for researchers to consider as we move forward.

### **Defining Identity Development**

Our conceptualization of identity development follows McAdams' (2013) model, in which identity is defined as a subjective, constructed, and evolving story of how one came to be the person one currently is. This story integrates the past, present, and future providing the individual with a sense of personal continuity (Pasupathi, Brubaker, & Mansour, 2007). This initial definition follows Erikson's (1968) conception of ego identity most closely, but can also be linked to his conception of personal identity, in which narrative can not only be used to make sense of the self across time, but also to make sense of the self across contexts (McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2014; Schachter, 2004; Syed, 2010). That is, the subjective construction of identity can create coherence across time and context through crafting the stories that explain and illustrate these continuities (Syed & McLean, 2016).

Developmentally, children learn storytelling skills beginning in very early childhood, skills that eventually allow them to meet the task of understanding an autobiographical self, or the self through time (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006 for a review). Children become increasingly complex in thinking about that self through time as they move into and through adolescence, and by emerging adulthood they have the skills to construct a personal life story, or narrative identity (Habermas & Reese, 2015). This life story involves the selection of salient and

important past events, and the creation of links between those events and the present self, as well as between the events themselves (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Thus, this process of constructing a narrative identity not only involves narrating the details of past events to explain the personal meaning of them, but also provides an overall narrative arc of one's life, processes subsumed under the construct of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Once developed, this life story serves as an integrative force for the individual, providing meaning and purpose for one's life (McAdams, 1993).

Of course, narrative is not the only approach to identity development (cf., Crocetti & Meeus, 2015; Kunnen & Metz, 2015; Schwartz, 2001; see also Pasupathi, 2015), but we take a narrative approach for at least three reasons. First, storytelling is a common, necessary, and adaptive behavior, and the utility of narrative is manifest in its widespread use. We know that humans are frequent and natural storytellers (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986). For example, in everyday conversations, such as those around the dinner table or catch-ups between friends, stories are disclosed every few minutes (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Thorne, Korobov, & Morgan, 2006). The most memorable event of the day is likely to be disclosed by the end of that day (Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2007), and our most important memories, such as self-defining memories, are stories that are most often shared with others at least once, and often more (Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Individuals use narrative for connecting to others and for understanding and explaining the self (Bluck & Alea, 2009), for explaining discontinuities in development (Cohler, 1982), as well as to make sense of varieties of experiences beyond the self, including ambiguous shapes and even the game of baseball (Heider & Simmel, 1944; Roth, 2014; Sarbin, 1986). Thus, the ubiquity and utility of narrative suggests that the process of creating and consuming stories is fundamental to the human experience.

Accordingly, we situate our examination of identity development within that common human experience and activity.

The second reason that we take a narrative approach is because narrative affords us two contributions lacking in other potential constructs related to the link between self and society: time and sequencing. Narrative *dictates* a temporal and sequential order to the telling of events. The idea that events are to unfold in a particular way differentiates the value of narrative from other constructs such as dispositional states or value claims, although these may certainly be embedded in the content of the narrative. Narrative also brings the dynamics of time and sequence to similar existing concepts, such as stereotypes. Stereotypes are ‘typical’ representations or schemas about the expectations for behavior, cognitions, emotions, and values of particular social group (e.g., Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). Although stereotypes certainly appear in master narratives, the work that has been done on stereotypes (Mulvey & Killen, 2015; Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005; Steele, 1997) generally does not tell us about the *process of negotiation* that individuals make between their own lives and the societies in which they live (but see Way & Rogers, 2015, for an exception).

The third reason that we take a narrative approach has to do with the alignment of the ‘boxes’ of self and society. One of the problems we see in making the connection between these constructs is that they represent such different concepts that it makes it difficult to examine the interaction between them. That is, although many researchers have attempted to solve the challenge of understanding how to incorporate structural factors into individual experiences, there is no clear and consistent framework for understanding structural-individual relations. In this current state, researchers are left to select ad-hoc operationalizations of structural factors, with no clear sense of how to connect to them to individuals apart from a largely uni-directional,



top-down force. Even those more elaborated theories that address structure are often employed in relatively uni-directional manners. For example, one of the most prominent psychological models for understanding social contexts is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework, in which he outlined a series of successive layers of context, or *systems*, that have an influence on individuals: the microsystem (contexts in which individual has regular, direct contact, e.g., family, school), the mesosystem (the interaction of two or more microsystem contexts, e.g., parent-teacher conference), the exosystem (contexts in which the individual has no direct interaction, e.g., parents' workplace), the macrosystem (broader social structures, e.g., government and media), and the chronosystem (both ontogenetic and historical time). Much of the research that employs this kind of systems approach, or other similar models, assumes a top-down process in which distal contexts have "effects" on psychological experience; an emphasis on the boxes, not the arrows (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; see also Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012).

In contrast, narrative provides a uniform metaphor for understanding both the individual and the structure (see also Hammack, 2011). That is, representing both individual and structural factors as storied *aligns* the two levels of analysis on the same metric and facilitates the ability to connect them and identify the critical processes that operate in between. Finally, adopting narrative to represent individual and structural factors inherently resists the pitfall of conceptualizing and measuring either in static terms. Narrative, by definition, implies subjectivity, malleability, and flexibility (Hammack, 2011; Sarbin, 1986), characteristics critical for understanding the dynamics of identity development. That is, both the person and the structure are dynamic (though to varying degrees), and the model we describe captures this dynamism.

We now turn to our treatment of master narratives, which is divided into three broad sections. First, we elaborate on our model, providing a clear framework for identifying master narratives and detailing how personal narrative construction is informed by both master and alternative narratives. Second, we provide several case examples of master narratives. Finally, we provide a detailed discussion of the role of agency in the model.

### **Introducing a Model for the Master Narrative Framework**

Sarbin (1986; see also Hammack & Pilecki, 2012) proposed narrative as an organizational metaphor for the scientific root metaphor of *contextualism* (Pepper, 1942). Contextualism represents the perspective that psychological phenomena are situated within an endless web of personal, societal, historical, and temporal factors, all of which interact with one another (see also Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cooper, 1987). These intricacies serve as a major obstacle to using contextualized approaches to understand patterns of behavior and to make useful generalizations about psychological phenomena. One of the major obstacles is the methodological challenge inherent in the charge of contextualism to consider the many layers and dimensions of influence on individual experience. Yet, for Sarbin (1986), narrative provides an ideal framework for making sense of very complex, contextual phenomena.

Despite the promise of narrative as a model for conceptualizing this layered complexity, what Sarbin and most other narrative psychology researchers have been concerned with are *personal narratives*. Further, although substantial work has been done to both theorize and empirically assess the *proximal* cultural contexts of narrative development, primarily via the analysis of culturally-valued activities such as past-event conversations (e.g., Fivush et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998; see also Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), the larger *distal* cultural contexts have been largely left to theory

(e.g., McAdams & Pals, 2006; cf., Hammack, 2011). That is, the assessment and analyses remain almost entirely on personal stories, which remain largely decontextualized from the more distal structures of society. Although research on personal narratives has progressed for over 30 years (Cohler, 1982) and has provided us with an excellent foundation for understanding personal identity development, the lens has not broadened enough beyond those personal stories. The concept of *master narratives* is an area of inquiry that has the potential to broaden that lens.

Master narratives have been largely defined as culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; Hammack, 2008; 2011; Thorne & McLean, 2003). These are not stories of individuals' lives (i.e., personal narratives), but are broad culturally specific stories that are available for individuals to potentially internalize and resist, both consciously and unconsciously. Narrative researchers have been discussing the concept of master narratives for many years and to great effect (e.g., Andrews, 2002, Bamberg, 2004; Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Fivush, 2010; Hammack, 2008; 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Hatiboğlu & Habermas, 2015; McAdams, 2014; McLean, 2015; Thorne & McLean, 2003; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). However, the concept has been used in inconsistent ways, resulting in many questions about how to identify master narratives and how to apply them empirically to the study of individual psychological experiences. Thus, we reiterate our aim: to provide an organizing framework for those interested in the study of master narratives that will bring coherence to prior literature and facilitate the systemization of future studies by bringing greater specificity to the identification of master narratives and organizing the many different types of master narratives.

The contribution of the master narrative approach to the broader field of identity development lies in two primary areas. First, although there are some approaches to identity

development that put cultural context at the forefront of study design and analysis (e.g., García Coll et al., 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Umaña-Taylor, et al., 2014), these approaches are incomplete for several reasons. As previously discussed, they focus on the individual and structural components as distinct, with insufficient attention to the processes through which they are linked. They also tend to focus on structural factors that may influence individual experiences, but less so on how individuals relate to, or interact with, those structural factors: they are top down, without sufficient attention to the arrows that move in the other direction (cf., Hammack, 2011). Without attention to the other arrow we miss the relation that individuals have with these structures, which are not all the same. Indeed, some may have an unproblematic relationship with the beliefs, expectations, and priorities of a society. Others, particularly those from marginalized social groups, may have a fraught relationship with their society, engaging to a greater degree with *alternative narratives*, story structures that are created in resistance to the master narratives (Bettie, 2002). This general approach has foundations in Hammack's (2008) articulation of master narratives, but seeks to elaborate on it further and provide greater clarity for how the general field of identity development can move forward using a master narrative framework.

This brings us to the second major contribution of our framework: our approach highlights an issue that has received very little attention in the study of identity development, which is the depth of the constraints that cultural contexts can put on individual agency to construct a personal identity. Others have certainly discussed constraints and limitations to agency, and the barriers that individuals face as they take on the task of identity development (e.g., Côté, 2015; Hammack, 2011; Yoder, 2000). However, as we argue later in this article, even within the acknowledgement of constraints to identity we see an overemphasis on agency in the field at large. Altogether, our description of the processes through which individuals create a

personal narrative, within the context of the dynamic between master and alternative narratives, represents a major departure from existing psychological models of identity development, and is the crux of the model presented here.

The model for the master narrative framework is depicted in Figure 1 and contains six components: three concepts (boxes) and three processes (arrows). The model illustrates that individuals' personal narratives are intertwined with the balance of master narratives and potential alternative narratives. That is, each individual's personal narrative will be largely informed by the degree to which she or he aligns with the master narrative or alternative narrative(s), represented by Arrows 1 and 2. The figure highlights the strength of master narratives, as they can be maintained via the routes in Arrows 1 and 3. Those who are aligned with the master narrative (Arrow 1) reify the existing structures. Ironically, constructing an alternative narrative means recognition, and perhaps even validation, of the master narrative (Arrow 3). That is, one cannot develop the alternative without at least referencing the dominant narrative (McLean, 2015). In the language of discursive psychology, individuals engaging with alternative narratives position themselves against, or in contrast to, the master narrative (Andrews, 2002). This process can legitimize the master narrative, even though doing so is unintentional and likely undesirable<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the master narrative is strengthened both directly through unconscious internalization and indirectly through conscious opposition and negotiation. Finally, as we discuss in our case examples, with time, and perhaps great effort, alternative narratives can potentially change the master narrative (also represented by Arrow 3)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that this phenomenon is part of why scholars in critical race theory and feminist studies scrutinize the concept of legitimacy (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999; Ono & Sloop, 2002), and is generally consistent with Audre Lorde's (1984) famous dictum, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

<sup>3</sup> We thank Monisha Pasupathi for suggesting the metaphor of a spinning wheel. That is, if cultures are represented as spinning wheels, master narratives are in the center of those wheels – more rigid than those aspects of the culture that live at the rim of the wheels, such as alternative narratives. Those alternative narratives might be drawn in to the

To conceptualize the ‘path’ that we discussed at the outset of this paper, we propose that there are two psychological processes that are central to the master narrative framework. The first process is *negotiation* between self and society. Theory and research across many sub-disciplines of psychology highlight the psychological demand of developing a sense of belonging to the larger group or culture while maintaining a sense of the self as distinct (e.g., attachment theory, Bowlby, 1967/1982; individuation theory, Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan, 2011; agency and communion, Bakan, 1966; individualism and collectivism, Triandis, 1995; independent and interdependent selves, Markus & Kitayama, 1991; optimal distinctiveness, Brewer, 2003). The master narrative model builds upon this work but also broadens it by seeking to examine the processes by which people feel connected to and distinct from their cultures.

The second central process to the master narrative framework is *internalization*. Master narratives exist at the societal/cultural level, and thus do not represent personal narratives on their own. They provide the frame and the material to form one’s own identity narrative, serving as the ready-made option for how to construct a meaningful and productive life within a society (see Habermas, 2007). However, a fundamental component of our model is that societal master narratives will be evident within individuals’ personal narratives. That is, through the process of internalization, master narratives can become part of individuals’ identities (McLean, Shucard, & Syed, 2015; Way & Rogers, 2015; see also master narrative appropriation, Hammack, 2006).

Under most circumstances, individuals are unaware of how much they rely on master narratives to define themselves, and therefore the internalization process is commonly carried out unconsciously (see also Hammack & Cohler, 2009). However, if one does not take seriously that

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center, becoming calcified master narratives themselves, or they may spin off, leaving the original master narrative in place – rigidly holding to the center.

most individuals in a given culture unconsciously internalize these master narratives into their own personal narratives, one risks the temptation of emphasizing too strongly individuals' agency to construct any narrative of their choosing (see Waterman, 2015). That is, if one reads the personal narrative without accounting for the master narrative, we return to the individual 'box,' with no understanding of the structure box, or more central to our model, the arrow that connects them. This is a particularly critical issue for those whose lives do *not* align with the master narratives. For example, focusing on individual characteristics such as resilience as critical to overcoming the structural impediments of poverty runs the risk of 'blaming the victim' for not overcoming his or her challenges, or looking only to the victim for solutions (see Shaw, McLean, Taylor, Swartout, & Querna, 2016). As we discuss below, agency is a powerful psychological resource, but we do a disservice to the reality of individual experience by not accounting for the structures that limit agency.

### **Defining Master Narratives: Five Principles**

Despite the promise of the master narrative framework for understanding identity development, and despite the increasing use of the term, our read of the extant literature has left us wanting for a definition for what counts as a master narrative. In what follows, we provide principles for identifying master narratives and offer several case examples of current master narratives, delineating three *types* of master narratives: biographical, sequential, and episodic.

The five interrelated principles that define master narratives are utility, ubiquity, invisibility, their compulsory nature, and their rigidity. We view these principles as necessary for identifying master narratives, though they may differ in strength depending on the specific master narrative (e.g., some master narratives are more ubiquitous than others), and on the person who is negotiating with that narrative (e.g., some master narratives are more visible to

some than to others). We describe these features as *principles* because individually they are neither necessary nor sufficient criteria for constituting master narratives. We also describe them as *interrelated*, as they often work as a coordinated system rather than orthogonal dimensions. We assert that these principles are strong indicators of master narratives, and *taken together* form a foundation for identifying master narratives and understanding how they function.

*Utility.* Master narratives derive their utility by providing a foundation for how individuals should understand groups in societies and how they should understand themselves; they provide the substance that individuals can readily internalize to define themselves. They provide information about the history, goals, values, or identities of a group, and what kind of life course to expect for those in the group. Moreover, these narratives are templates that provide guidance about how to live appropriately, and how to belong. Research on social norms, the expected and customary behavior for group members, illustrates this point nicely, as they function to promote effective behavior, to build and maintain relationships, and to manage self-concept (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). That is, like social norms, master narratives keep things running smoothly (for a similar perspective, see systems justification theory, Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

*Ubiquity.* For master narratives to work, like social norms, they must be ubiquitously shared by a group of people with a shared culture. Social norms are no longer effective (or even norms) if they are not shared, and they are so critical to group success that norms about social conventions, for example, are learned quite early in development (Smetana, 2006). Like social conventions and social norms, ubiquitously shared master narratives are represented in various aspects of a culture, from stories and discourse to media representations, film, novels, and so on; they are pervasive. For example, research on media use shows the impact of ubiquitous messages



that are communicated to and absorbed by the populace, such as the thin-ideal (Harrison, 2000), the just world hypothesis (Furnham, 1993), and gender norms (Gill, 2007).

*Invisibility.* Although it may seem ironic, their ubiquity contributes to the third principle, which is the invisibility of master narratives. Since they are everywhere, they are hard for the majority to see (Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, & Larsen, 2003; Oishi, 2004). A wealth of research on motivation (Bargh & Morsella, 2008) attachment representations (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), and cognitive processes such as assimilation (Block, 1982; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), among many others, shows the power of unconscious processes in facilitating efficient adaptation (see also Fonagy & Target, 1997). In the context of master narratives this means that individuals do not have to work hard to learn how to be a ‘good’ member of a culture; people can largely automatically and unconsciously adopt master narratives. They become visible, however, when individuals negotiate with – and perhaps violate – them. For example, when a man refers to his husband, this violates the expectation of the heterosexual life course, and may be unsettling, as evidenced by research that shows more negative implicit attitudes are directed towards gay couples than straight couples (Banse, Seise, & Zerbes, 2001). This means that for those in the position of violating master narratives, or who are engaging in greater degrees of personal negotiation, master narratives are not likely to be invisible: the discomfort felt when the individual and the structure do not align brings the master narrative into relief. Importantly, broad-based violation creates the opportunity for the construction of alternative narratives, such as the increasingly rapid acceptance of the gay life course into mainstream culture with the legalization of gay marriage around the world.

*Compulsory Nature.* Given the disruption caused by the violation of master narratives, as well as their utility in telling us how to ‘be,’ we argue that master narratives are not value-

neutral. They have a moral component, an ideological message, which tells us how we are supposed to behave and how we are supposed to feel (Fivush, 2004; 2010; Fivush & Zaman, 2015; Hammack, 2008; 2011). Consequently, aligning oneself with the master narrative bequeaths the privilege of being good or right, allowing one to live his or her life uncritically (and often without awareness of this privilege – thus, the invisibility). In the implicit attitudes research discussed above, individuals are quicker to pair positive words with straight couples and negative words with gay couples, providing evidence for the idea of a ‘goodness’ to following the life course master narrative of heterosexuality (Banse et al., 2001; this is also evident in IAT tests of other marginalized groups, such as Black Americans; Greenwald, Banaji & Nosek, 2015). This fourth principle, the compulsory nature of master narratives, does not, however, mean that everyone does indeed follow them, as we indicated above. And those who do deviate are likely to be in the subordinated, oppressed, less powerful positions in society. Moreover, in this compulsory context, deviating from master narratives confers a degree of risk, a point to which we return later.

*Rigidity.* Finally, the approach we take to culture is a dynamic one, meaning that we view culture as created, sustained, and changed by individuals – with a reciprocity between top-down and bottom-up processes (Gjerde, 2004; Hammack, 2008; 2011), but there are some aspects to culture that are less dynamic than others. Master narratives are not made of stone – they can and do change – but they get their strength and their authority from their staying power. If it were easy to change a master narrative, then violating one would not be such a risky venture. Their rigidity comes in part from the benefits they confer on the privileged, who have a role to play in their sustainability. For example, the life course expectations of marriage and childrearing are steeped in a long history. Although the latter is a species-level necessity, the former is not, but it

has been entrenched in the structures of myriad cultures throughout history, and is upheld by those in power (e.g., the courts, elected officials, religious authorities). Thus, the rigidity of culture is a central component to this framework, and we argue that those who view culture as primarily dynamic (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; Gjerde, 2004; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) are not attending to the rigidity of power structures that fundamentally limit that dynamism (but see Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

### **Case Examples of Master Narratives**

As noted previously, existing work on master narratives has not addressed the notion that they can be of varying types. With our framework in place, we now address these different types of master narratives, of which we have identified three: 1) those centered on biography, or lifetimes, 2) those centered on structure, or sequences, and 3) those that concern specific episodes, or events. In addressing each of these types of master narratives, we also address where and how we see deviation and alternative narratives, as deviation is what makes a master narrative most visible. Further, as we discuss in the case examples, it is important to understand that master narratives can be conceptualized at different levels of analysis. Because master narratives are culturally-shared stories, they can be applied to different definitions of culture (Cohen, 2009), ranging from broader societies (i.e., mainstream American culture), sub-groups within a society (e.g., Black Americans), or even more local contexts such as family (McLean, 2015). We draw attention to these different levels, and their potential interaction, in what follows, as well as attention to the processes of negotiation and internalization.

**Biographical Master Narratives (Lifetimes).** Perhaps the type of master narrative most obviously aligned with identity development is that of biography, which concerns how a life should unfold. Rubin and colleagues (e.g., Rubin & Bernstein, 2003) have coined the term

‘cultural life script,’ and similarly, Habermas (e.g., Habermas, 2007; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Reese, 2015) has proposed the construct of the ‘cultural concept of biography’<sup>4</sup> (see also Elder, 1998; Neugarten, 1968). The basic idea is that there are common events that occur at a certain time and in a certain order that we would expect to see in the life story of those in contemporary, industrialized cultures, and which the majority recognizes, and in many ways enforces. Indeed, they are defined by their *ubiquity* (e.g., Rubin, Berntsen, & Hutson, 2009), and are prominent enough that children are aware of them by late middle childhood (Habermas, 2007; Habermas & Hatiboğlu, 2014). Some of these events and their ordering include: finishing school, finding a job, getting married, and having a child. Thus, this biographical narrative gets its *utility* from telling us how lives should unfold, and individuals do indeed use them to guide the development of their own stories (Grysmen, Prabhakar, Anglin, & Hudson, 2014).

The definition of a life course is not a-historical or a-cultural (Cohler, 1982). For example, adolescence was not viewed as a part of the life course until the introduction of child labor laws and the requirement of secondary schooling (Arnett, 2006). Emerging adulthood is defined as fully dependent on the social and economic shifts that have occurred in contemporary industrialized societies (Arnett, 2000). It is not surprising, then, that there is some variation in topics of expected life events by culture. For example, military service is a common part of a biography in Turkey (Erdoğan, Baran, Avlar, Tas, & Tekcan, 2008), a ‘long trip’ is common for Danes (Rubin & Bernsten, 2009), and emerging adulthood may be more salient as a life stage in some cultures than others (Arnett, 2011; Syed & Mitchell, 2013). There is also some similarity across cultures. For example, marriage or romantic commitment and child-rearing are a part of this narrative in all cultures that have been examined so far. Yet even then, the ordering of these

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that there are differences between these two perspectives in terms of how these events relate to life story development (e.g., Habermas, 2007), but they do share the emphasis on types of events and order of events in understanding how lives are supposed to be lived.

events can be culturally-specific: in the U.S. marriage is generally seen as a precursor to having children, while in Sweden cohabitation and child-rearing more commonly precede marriage (Kiernan, 2004; Wängqvist, Carlsson, van der Lee, & Frisé, 2016).

The expectations for a life can change over time, but these expectations are also relatively intractable – they are *rigid* and *compulsory* – which is made vivid when there are deviations from expectations (see Habermas & Köber, 2015). The challenge of deviation at the individual level can be seen with the stress experienced by those who are off-time with regards to culturally expected normative transitions, such as marriage and child-bearing (Elder, 1998; Kaplan & Gengstad, 2005). Along with being off-time, certain types of events can be seen as deviations. Positive events are viewed as central to the cultural life script, making negative events (e.g., divorce, illness, losing a job) the deviations (e.g., Grysman et al., 2015; Habermas & Köber, 2015; Rubin & Bernsten, 2003). Indeed, Habermas (2007) notes that the majority of personal memories in the life story are *not* a part of the cultural concept of biography, which underscores the difference between the life story and these expectations.<sup>5</sup> The life story is a personal identity construction, and the master narrative is the framework within which that identity is constructed, with which one must negotiate any deviations and that, ultimately, becomes internalized as part of one's identity.

As noted previously, master narratives can exist at multiple levels, and therefore another location for deviation – the sub-group level – can tell us more about various social categories within a culture (Hammack & Toolis, 2014). The sub-groups for whom there exist variations on the master narrative are often those who are marginalized to some extent. For these sub-groups,

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Habermas (2007) has shown that whereas children are rather homogenous in their view of the cultural concept of biography, by mid-adolescence there is more heterogeneity in what individuals expect to happen in a life. Habermas argues that this represents a growing awareness of the potential for and likelihood of personal deviation from cultural expectations.

some may internalize the dominant narrative that does not fit their experiences, resulting in feelings of relative inadequacy. Individuals may also negotiate their personal experiences with the dominant narrative, searching for an alternative narrative when these dominant and sub-narratives do not align. We elaborate on these processes here with three examples: Black Americans, women, and sexual minorities. We note that for each of these groups there are specific cultural and national constructions of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Our framework should be applicable to various cultures, but our examples focus on research and frameworks developed in the U.S., which have received the most empirical attention.

*Black Americans.* In contemporary American culture there is a different life course expectation for Black Americans than White Americans. For example, Black men are expected to be more likely to engage in criminal behavior, have more trouble obtaining a good job, and to be less-involved parents (see Nasir & Shah, 2011). Black youth are expected to have more trouble in school, with a lesser likelihood of graduating or obtaining a higher education. In fact, doing well in school is not indicative of meeting the expectations for a life course, but of ‘acting White’ (Cooper, Gonzalez, & Wilson, 2015; Ogbu, 1994; Way & Rogers, 2015). The idea of ‘acting White’ has a long history, at one point seen as a mechanism of survival for slaves who adopted the customs and language of their White slave owners (Ogbu, 1994). This process has continued to be viewed as the path towards upward mobility post-emancipation, and this master narrative is not inconsequential. The negative societal expectations that Black youth confront in school, along with discrimination and low quality schools, can lead to disengagement from traditional educational opportunities, and an ‘oppositional identity’ (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; see also Cross, 1995), perhaps due to the internalization of this culturally imposed narrative.

Although the dangers of these lowered expectations are very real, parents of Black youth can and do engage in protective socialization against this harmful narrative. Extensive research on cultural socialization has highlighted the utility of Black parents (and other ethnic minorities) talking with their children about issues of race, ethnicity, and culture (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Preparing them for the bias and discrimination they will experience in life, and that the majority culture tends to view their group negatively, can provide the psychological tools necessary to deflect the harmful effects of internalizing the master narrative (e.g., Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis 2006). Although these parents are directly engaging with the negative sub-group master narrative, they are simultaneously strengthening a positive alternative narrative that can be internalized in their children, and that can perhaps one day overtake the master narrative. Indeed, Te-Nehisi Coates (2015) discusses at length the damage done to Black Americans through attempting to align with the master narrative of the American Dream. At the same time, he talks about the problematic nature of the ‘African superiority’ narrative to which he was socialized within his nearly all-Black social world. His analysis of Black American life starkly illustrates the complex position of those who are simultaneously resisting the imposed master narrative, are cut off from the broader cultural master narrative of ‘a good life,’ and are struggling to create and sustain an adaptive alternative narrative.

*Women.* Another sub-group narrative for whom there is a long narrative history is women. Although the order, and perhaps even the timing, of events expected to unfold in a life may be similar for men and women, there is a difference in emphasis and in the acceptability of deviation. For example, women are expected to care more about, put more effort into, and derive their identity from child-rearing moreso than are men (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Nicholson, 1997).

Thus, women who post-pone work or leave the work force to bear and care for children are not deviating, because this alternative trajectory is acceptable for women. In fact, women who put more time and effort into work over children, or who do not have children, are considered deviant (e.g., Erikson, 1964; see also Gillespie, 2003), an issue that was center stage in the recent outcry over the idea that women should ‘lean in’ to their careers (Scovell & Sandberg, 2013; see also Hewlett, 2002). These traditional expectations for women are tempered, however, by structural changes (e.g., no-fault divorce laws, access to birth-control, legal abortion, work-place protections) that are meant to create equality between men and women and provide the building blocks for a new narrative.

The traditional narrative and recent developments put contemporary women in a paradox of negotiation processes. For some, following the ‘traditional’ life course may result in feelings of inferiority by not meeting the more modern expectations that women will be fully engaged in a work-life and earn a substantial portion of the family income. For others, full engagement in a working life may result in feelings of inferiority or loss for not realizing nurturing roles (see Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). We also see a trend of women working more *and* putting more time into caregiving than generations past (Pew, 2014; Ramey & Ramey, 2010), a trend that suggests some contemporary women are trying to meet the expectations of both narratives (Frisén, Carlsson, & Wängqvist, 2014), which may be a real impossibility. Whether or not there will be an eventual ‘winner’ of these two competing narratives with which women are negotiating remains in question (McLean et al., 2015). In sum, the negotiation between master, alternative, and personal narratives is where we can see the process of structural-individual relations, especially in the personal narratives of women who are negotiating their own identities around these issues.



*Sexual Minorities.* Individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or who resist labels are on track to live a life course that deviates from the norm in several ways. First, simply identifying as other than straight puts people in a category of deviation (directly implied by the term “straight”), as the life course assumes heterosexuality (see Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack & Toolis, 2014). These expectations create the requirement to ‘come out,’ which is a public process of revealing one’s deviation from society’s expectations. Second, non-straight couples are less likely to have children than straight couples (Gates, 2013), constituting another deviation. Third, gay marriage is still illegal in many places, and has only recently become legal in most locales in the United States. Thus, the legal structure of society means that some individuals have been denied the opportunity to meet one of the expected life events. Studies of gay individuals who came of age in different historical eras has shown that individuals differentially internalize the life course narrative, with greater restriction for personal narratives in older cohorts when structural restrictions were stronger, and more variability in possibilities for personal stories in younger cohorts as those restrictions have lessened (Weststrate & McLean, 2010; see also Cohler & Hammack, 2009). Interestingly, this life course narrative has had less historical ‘air-time’ than those about Black Americans and women, having only been a point of mainstream public discussion for a few decades. We return to this point in our penultimate section on questions that emerge from our master narrative framework.

**Structural Master Narratives (Sequences).** Master narratives of structure focus on how stories, or various episodic contents, should be constructed. These structural master narratives provide a *form* for the construction of personal narratives; thus, their authority comes not from dictating the content of personal stories, but in the dictation of *how* a specific story should be told. The narrative structure that has been most clearly identified as a master narrative in the U.S.

is the narrative of redemption (Hammack, 2011; McAdams, 2013). This story is one that moves from negative to positive, tragedy to triumph. McAdams (2013) has argued that there are certain types of redemptive narratives, such as atonement, upward mobility, liberation, and recovery (see also Benish-Weisman, 2009; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Yet even with these different types of redemption, at base, redemption is a structure for a narrative. It is a template for how to tell a story, in which many different types of story contents can fit (e.g., illness, job loss, death, divorce).

As Ogbu does in tracing the narrative of Black Americans to slavery, McAdams (2006) traces the redemptive narrative from the origins of the European arrival in America. He points to the stories of pilgrims, the Protestant work ethic, and narratives collected from American slaves to show the historical weight of this narrative – it is a narrative that in many ways has shaped America as we know it. Currently, financially successful Hollywood movies, the Oprah show and *O, the Oprah Magazine*, and celebrated individuals (e.g., the baseball player Josh Hamilton, particularly in 2010) put the *ubiquity* of the redemptive story sequence on display. McAdams (2004) once even argued that one reason that John Kerry did not win the 2004 US presidential election was because he did not tell a life story rich with redemption, which his competitor did (see also McAdams, 2011). The story of tragedy to triumph resonates deeply with the American populace; it is a story to which Americans gravitate, to which Americans want to align their own lives. And its *utility* comes in telling the populace how experiences of tragedy should be storied.

In general, individuals whose personal narratives reflect internalization of the master narrative – those containing redemptive sequences – are more likely to have better physical and mental health compared to those with less redemptive imagery. For example, Dunlop and Tracy (2013) found that recovering alcoholics whose personal narrative of their last drink was

redemptive were more likely to stay sober over time than those whose story did not follow this master narrative. Adler and colleagues (Adler et al., 2015) recently found that those individuals whose life stories were more redemptive had increasingly positive mental health over time. These findings have been explained by the importance of finding personal growth in and a positive resolution to challenging events for psychological and physical health, but they can also be explained by the power of fitting in with the culturally expected narrative structure.

The other side of these positive findings is that the *compulsory* nature of the redemptive story in American society renders deviations costly to mental health and sobriety. Deviation may also have a social cost. Thorne and McLean (2003) found that when individuals told personal narratives of near-death experiences that were unresolved, their audiences reacted negatively. An audience may not only feel the additional burden of comforting the teller with an unresolved story, but may also feel discomfort because one must make sense of the unexpected deviation. Thus, alternative narratives to redemption cannot get traction in a culture that is so *rigidly* married to redemption.

The importance of redemption is culturally defined (McAdams, 2006; Hammack, 2008); that is, in other cultures alternative story structures for tragedy may be more acceptable. For example, Russian novels do not tend towards the happy ending (Rancour-Laferrriere, 1995)<sup>6</sup>, which likely reflects different kinds of master narratives about how life is supposed to unfold in Russia. Thus, redemptive stories do not universally represent master narratives for cultures around the world (e.g., Arnett & Jensen, 2015, on Danish emerging adults' conception of the afterlife). Rather, each culture is likely to have its own structural master narratives that provide

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<sup>6</sup> This was especially apparent in the American version of the movie 'Love' (Goulding, 1927), which was based on Anna Karenina; the American version had a happy ending, quite divergent from the Russian original.

utility and meaning vis-à-vis the beliefs and goals of that culture. Charting these structural master narratives would be a worthwhile endeavor that, as yet, has not been carried out.

**Episodic Master Narratives (Events).** Master narratives do not only come in the form of the dictation of the life course, or in the accepted structures for stories, but also in the telling of particular episodes. There are specific, episodic stories about past events that are told with great frequency, and in relatively the same manner, that also constitute master narratives. We define one here: September 11, 2001.<sup>7</sup>

The commonly told, *ubiquitous*, narrative about 9/11 is one that begins with the beautiful blue sky and crisp fall day in New York City. It is followed by the destruction of that peaceful scene with the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center (and later the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania). The perpetrators of this action were ‘evil,’ and the dead were innocent victims. But very soon after the towers fell, in some cases on the day that they fell, Americans stood up to these evil-doers: they responded with strength and with resilience. They built a new tower, a taller tower, to show that they could not be denied. This story follows a classic redemptive sequence, and, in this case, good triumphs over evil with the result being a unification of Americans (McAdams, 2013). It is a narrative that brings people together (or keeps them in line), perfectly captured by the state-sponsored 9/11 motto, “United We Stand.”

However, one can interpret this event in another way, a way that deviates from the master narrative of unification. The alternative narrative is that this tragedy tore the country apart. The alternative narrative is one of division, in which 9/11 lead to the Patriot Act and the eroding of civil liberties, the global racialization of Muslims, rising tensions between racial and religious groups, two wars, a stalled economy, and the current state of social and political polarization in the U.S. If the master narrative of 9/11 is “United We Stand,” the alternative narrative is

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<sup>7</sup> For another episodic narratives see a discussion of John F Kennedy’s assassination in McLean (2015).

“Divided We Fall” (Raju, 2006). But this alternative narrative is not the accepted story. For example, Americans who tell the story of 9/11 without redemptive imagery, a deviation from the master narrative, have lower rates of well-being (Adler & Poulin, 2009), and risk being labeled unpatriotic (as was the case with the filmmaker Michael Moore and linguist Noam Chomsky post-9/11).

Just as there are multiple levels to the biographical master narratives, there are also multiple levels of the episodic master narratives. 9/11 is a master narrative shared by Americans (as well as others around the world). October 17, 1989 is a date that marks a shared narrative for both authors of this paper. This was the date of the large Loma Prieta earthquake in Northern California, an event that gave rise to a shared narrative for those who experienced it, and not necessarily for those who lived elsewhere when it occurred. It is also a date that occurred for us during early adolescence. Historical events may play a particularly powerful role in individual’s identities when people are in the midst of defining themselves (Eisenberg & Silver, 2011; Stewart & Healy, 1989); that is, the role of episodic master narratives can be especially strong when the personal narrative is first being authored.

Episodic master narratives play a special role in the *utility* they have for creating shared experience, group cohesion and identity, and cultural understanding, much as collective memories do (Harris, Paterson, & Kemp, 2008; Hirst & Manier, 2008; Wertsch, 2002; see also McLean, 2015). One need only mention 9/11 to a fellow American with a certain tone of voice to engage in shared sadness, and connection; sharing earthquake stories reveals a historical and geographical connection. Phil Hammack (2011) has detailed how Israelis and Palestinians have constructed divergent master narratives about specific historical events that sustain their individual identities (as well as the conflict between the two groups). But just as specific episodic

master narratives can build group cohesion, they can also constrain individual identities by tying those identities to these specific master narratives, which are then internalized as part of their identities (Hammack, 2011).

Episodic master narratives are particularly illuminative of how those in power shape master narratives. Although we have argued that what makes a narrative a *master* narrative is the uncritical adoption of it by the majority, this is not purely a numbers game. There is a particular power conferred on certain people in a culture to define master narratives. Those with good storytelling skills, those with authority (e.g., parents, politicians), or those with access to the masses (e.g., the media) have greater power to confer master narratives and to perpetuate them (Boje, 1991; Fivush, 2010). For example, the persuasive power of narrative (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000) may be especially potent for authority figures, such as parents who can guide their children towards telling certain kinds of culturally valued stories, and interest groups who can use narratives to persuade others into action.

The media, in particular, control the flow of information that shapes how these events are first encoded, remembered and narrated, sometimes with dangerous consequences (e.g., Tropp, 2012). A powerful example is the shift in the funding of political advertising and the subsequent effect on voting behavior, conferred by the US Supreme Court's decision on *Citizens United*. Political action committees can now fashion narratives, distribute them through the media, which subsequently shapes behavior. Yet individuals have a role to play too, as they tell and re-tell instantiations of master narratives. Thus, master narratives gain strength from top-down positions of power and bottom-up passive support, thus constituting the dynamics of creating, changing, and sustaining culture (Hammack, 2008).

With our definition of master narratives and these case examples now detailed, we move to a discussion of the role of agency in our model, and how it compares to existing approaches.

### **The Dynamics of Identity in Context and the Limitations of Agency**

We have argued that the field of identity development has generally neglected the larger culture, not because researchers do not think it matters, but because we have lacked an integrative framework for conceptualizing the nature of the relation between self and society. We have argued that by taking a narrative approach to identity development, we can align person and society on the same metric, and can begin to conceptualize how individuals negotiate with that larger society as they construct their identities.

Although the framework we have provided allows for an examination of the dynamics of the intersection of self and society, we argue that a potentially more important contribution is an issue that arises out of the examination of this intersection: recognizing the limitations of personal agency in identity construction. Agency has been conceptualized in various ways from dominant social-personality perspectives in which agency typically emphasizes a broad focus on future action, goal formulation, planning, and mastery (e.g., Adler, 2012; Bandura, 1982; Little, Snyder, & Wehmeyer, 2006; Rotter, 1990), to ‘everyday agency,’ such as decision making (e.g., Breen & McLean, in press). Broadly, these literatures have primarily conceptualized agency as a tension between internal beliefs about control and external constraint, or whether one has control or autonomy over one’s actions (e.g., self-determination theory; Deci & Ryan, 2011: see Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010 for a discussion). In contrast, some developmentalists conceive of agency as phenomenological, emphasizing the *experience* of agency as individuals seek to link their broader life orientation to the enactment of specific goals. That is, people can *feel* agentic in the way that they construct their experiences and see their lives, perceiving control over their

actions even in the face of great obstacles, regardless of the reality of their objective control or autonomy (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; see also Toolis & Hammack, 2015). In some ways, this distinction can be thought of in terms of levels of agency, from more situation- or context-based (agency as control) to more ontogenetic (agency to construct a life of one's choosing). The latter conceptualization of agency is what is most clearly at stake in the context of master narratives, and is manifest in the dynamic between the processes of internalization and negotiation.

Overall, our model of master narratives departs from existing theories of identity development in that we place much greater emphasis on the importance of those objective constraints to agency, which is in contrast to models that place a strong emphasis on personal (or context-based) agency (e.g., Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1993; Waterman, 2015), including our own prior work (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). The emphasis on agency is, of course, consistent with the values and master narratives of the U.S. culture in which these approaches were developed. Specific to the literature on master narratives, we see a particularly notable overemphasis on the role of individual agency in *resisting* master narratives (e.g., Gjerde, 2004; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). For example, Cohler and Hammack (2009) discuss *narrative engagement* as concerning structure, agency, and mutuality, but they have little to say about what constrains the process of engagement itself (see also Hammack & Toolis, 2014). Moreover, despite references to structural impediments to identity development in conceptual terms, agency is heavily emphasized in the analytic context. For example, in their study on homeless youth, Toolis and Hammack (2015) examine how these individuals resist dominant derogatory narratives about homelessness, constructing their own stories of resilience – surely an act of *felt* agency. Yet, this leaves unexamined the lack of *actual* agency to address the societal constraints and narratives that maintain income inequality, for example. Furthermore,



from a master narrative perspective, one could argue that the homeless youth who embrace the narrative of resilience are conforming to the master narrative of redemption. While telling that culturally desired story may relieve psychosocial tension, it may also result in less press to examine the constraints that the redemptive story imposes on their agency to tell a different story, perhaps one that works to change the system, or that puts that focus on the system rather than the individual. Additionally, what is left unexamined is the potential psychological toll of being pressed to construct a personal narrative that aligns with the master narrative (an agentic, redemptive story, in the case of Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Thus, *to take the power of master narratives seriously means that one has to see how master narratives inherently limit individual agency.*

The stifling nature of master narratives, how strongly they can shape personal stories, and how much this shaping occurs without awareness, is central to our model, and it applies to those who both resist and internalize master narratives. The clearest challenge to agency is in resisting the master narrative (see Arrow 2 in Figure 1), such as the woman uninterested in either marriage or childrearing, or the father who opts out of the work force to care for his children. In the latter cases, resistance can be an act of intentional psychological accommodation, and one that takes some agency. Resistance can also be unintentional and thus less agentic, such as for the person who never finds the right person to marry. In either case, however, the person is up against narrative obstacles. These obstacles can come from having no platform to communicate alternative stories so that they are literally unheard by a larger audience, such as is often the case with victims of rape or sexual abuse (Fivush & Edwards, 2004). These obstacles can also come from the inability of the majority (or the individual) to hold two stories, such that one of those stories must be rejected. For example, the myth of meritocracy, in which hard work and

determination is rewarded with material successes, and the stories of those worked hard but did not enjoy success, are stories that cannot co-exist. Holding one story makes the other impossible, so one is dismissed, and it is usually the one that threatens the dominant view. Thus, the idea that individuals can interact with powerful structures – that they can construct and tell alternative stories – does not make those structures entirely negotiable: those structures derive their strength from *not* accommodating alternative narratives. To maintain the validity of the original narrative, structures of societies *constrain and confine* interpretive activities where the subjectivity of interpretation meets the facts on the ground. These facts – the weight of law, the pervasive socialization messages in the media, and the values that are upheld in the very architecture of society – are not easily ignored, dismissed, or revised by the individual who has a different story to tell.

Further, although we focus on the importance of this framework for marginalized groups, those who uncritically internalize the master narrative (see Arrow 1 in Figure 1), such as the woman who marries a man and has children whom she nurtures, are less agentic than they may think. In other words, *master narratives are also stifling for those who are aligned with them*. Indeed, these individuals may experience more agency, or legitimacy, because they are in alignment with the culture, but their narrative path has been relatively passive, and often (but not always) unconscious, in regards to the intersection of the personal and structural (see also Freeman, 2014). This suggests a sense of false agency that can occur when questioning one's life path is not required because it aligns with the master narrative (see also Fivush, 2010). This example typifies internalization without negotiation, and is an individual psychological process that serves to perpetuate, and even to strengthen, the master narrative.

This approach to agency takes a turn away from the heavy emphasis on the subjective interpretation of experiences as the ultimate data point, in which stories are read at face value, are allowed to “speak for themselves,” or are portrayed as a “window” into individuals’ experiences (as portrayed in some of our past work: McLean & Thorne, 2003; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). To be clear, and as we noted earlier, one of the great values of narrative is that it allows individuals to communicate their life concerns and experiences in their own words, providing insights into their specific contexts, insights that are not available with other approaches. We also argue, however, that these insights can be both limited and constrained. Certainly, the story at face value – the individual’s rendition of personal experience and the interpretation of that experience – is a critical piece of data. But we must also understand the structures that are embedded within that personal experience, as well as the facts on the ground that may contradict or constrain the story. In fact, if we attend to structure we cannot just let the stories (or interpretations) speak for themselves. This view is, indeed, already represented in the narrative literature (e.g., Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; Pasupathi, 2015; Riessman, 2008; Schachter, 2015), but we take it one step further by taking seriously objective constraints. This stance brings a more post-positivistic perspective to the study master narratives, which is consistent with our goal of establishing a clear framework, with definitions, principles, and types of master narratives. In an analytic context, we argue that this framework calls for (at least) two reads of personal narratives, one read that attends to the tellers’ construction of their lives, and one read that attends to the structural factors and objective facts that may contour their account.

These points are not to be taken to indicate that we are suggesting the complete absence or irrelevance of agency. We follow from Hammack and Cohler (2009; see also Hammack & Toolis, 2014) who have argued that narrative engagement is an ongoing situated activity that

manifests as a negotiation between personal experience and cultural context. That is, narrative is not only a product, but is also a process of reconstruction and interpretation that reflects human development in a specific cultural and historical space (Cohler, 1982). This argument fits with how we view agency in this model, albeit with some added constraints. We certainly believe that human beings are agentic, but the potential for agency to manifest is strongly shaped by the opportunity structure in which individuals are located, as was detailed in our case examples. We see benefit in decomposing the concept of narrative engagement into our two proposed processes of internalization and negotiation, as they help draw attention to the restrictions on agency regardless of an individual's relation to the master narrative. That is, "engagement" privileges an active, agentic perspective that could potentially lead to less attention to how master narratives are unproblematically internalized by some individuals. Separate conceptualization and examination of internalization and negotiation can obviate this problem.

With our model now laid out, we now turn to the most pressing questions that we see in applying this framework to identity development.

### **Questions Arising from this Framework**

#### **How to identify master narratives?**

One of the motivations we had for writing this paper was the difficulty we have both had in identifying what master narratives are. Indeed, one of our mentors in graduate school used to say 'I only know them when I see them.' Since then, we and others have worked to create ways of identifying master narratives. For example, targeting specific marginalized groups, especially those with ties to specific historical events (e.g., gay-identified individuals and Stonewall) can illuminate the alternative narratives by which some groups live (Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Studying immigrants can be a way to see the master narratives that

are often invisible to the existing majority (Syed & Frisé, 2015). Asking individuals for moments of deviation from master narratives is another strategy (Alpert, Marsden, Szymanowski, & Lilgendahl, 2013). All of these examples focus on the issue of deviation – understanding master narratives by their contrast.

We have also found conversational analyses to be particularly useful in illuminating the dynamics of personal and master narrative negotiation (McLean et al., 2015; see also Andrews, 2002; Bamberg, 2004; Thorne & McLean, 2003). We have recently asked dyads of emerging adults to discuss newspaper articles that touch on issues of the gendered life course master narrative, with particular attention paid to any personal experiences they may have with these issues. We found that in the conversational interactions there was relatively little discussion of how personal experiences interact with these larger master narratives, but there were references to master narratives. After the conversational task we also asked participants to engage in a follow-up one-on-one interview with a research assistant about the conversation; here we saw more reflection on the negotiation between personal and master narratives. Thus, assessments that target interpersonal exchanges and more private reflections on those exchanges may be particularly useful.

Of course, beyond these assessments of personal deviation and conversational negotiation, one can also engage in artifactual analyses with magazines, newspapers, television programs, movies, and books to help to identify common themes in a given culture, much as McAdams (2006) has done in his work on the redemptive self in the U.S. We hope that the specificity of the framework we have provided will inspire researchers to focus on how to identify master narratives, as we now have principles that define them, and a differentiation of

types of master narratives. From there, we can explore a host of juicy questions about how master narratives are associated with positive and negative developmental pathways.

### **What do negotiation and internalization look like?**

The processes of negotiation and internalization are central to the dynamic between personal, master, and alternative narratives. But where do we look to see this negotiation and internalization? We argue that negotiation can be both an intra- and inter-personal process, and that capturing both of these dynamics is important. Intrapersonal approaches involve examining how individuals make sense of their past experiences in light of their current concerns and identity positions. This general approach is broadly represented within the literature on autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Köber, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013) but places specific emphasis on how people reason about their selves in relation to the broader society (Syed & McLean, 2016). For example, in asking individuals to report on experiences of deviation from master narratives (Alpert et al., 2013), we can understand the process by which people negotiate “not fitting in,” can analyze the content of the deviations, and locate these negotiation points in the lifespan (e.g., the parts of the biographical master narrative that are most or least ripe for movement).

Interpersonal negotiation has been well represented in discursive psychology, focusing on how people take positions that embody or resist master narratives in live conversation (e.g., Bamberg, 2004). Non-discursively oriented researchers have much to learn from these methods. For example, in asking people to discuss with others the identity content domains relevant to master narratives (e.g., the gendered life course) we can identify discursive positions that serve to strengthen or shift master and alternative narratives (McLean et al., 2015). Moreover, as we

noted above, asking people to reflect on those interpersonal conversations after the fact can reveal the connections between the intra- and inter-personal processes.

In terms of internalization, our model suggests that it can be seen in individuals' personal life stories. If we 'read' people's narratives as not only holding information about their own experiences, but as also holding the frameworks within which those experiences are constructed, then we can see master narratives. In other words, the accumulation of personal narratives around a particular life theme, style, or event can suggest the presence of a master narrative. Secondly, as noted, analyzing individuals who are actively negotiating and resisting master narratives can help shed light on the master narrative itself. Finally, there is great utility in analyzing the narratives of those who hold the power in the relevant context, as they have the most invested in sustaining the master narrative and should therefore be more likely to unconsciously internalize and promote it. This bottom-up approach can, and should, be paired with a historical-cultural analysis to understand the origin and function of the master narratives (see Hammack, 2011 and McAdams, 2006 as exemplars). The five principles of master narratives outlined in this article can help guide such an analysis.

### **What is the developmental process of becoming aware of these narratives?**

The dynamic between personal, master, and alternative narratives has developmental properties, and there at least two process questions that are critical to examine. The first is when and how individual members of a culture become aware of master narratives (if they do at all) and potential deviations. Tilmann Habermas has begun some of this work with the cultural concept of biography (Habermas, 2007; Habermas & Reese, 2015), or the life course master narrative. It appears that the most rapid period of growth in knowledge about the life course master narrative is between ages nine and 12 (Habermas & Reese, 2015). Why this period is so

central is still a question to be examined, as there are myriad possibilities, such as cognitive development, exposure to knowledge in school, or a broadening peer group. Further, we wonder if this is when knowledge growth about the life course master narrative occurs for all children, or is there a different developmental course for those in marginalized positions in society?

Indeed, for those who deviate, what is the process of recognizing the deviation? Does it come from confrontation with a larger cultural artifact (e.g., movie, news story), from an interaction with a peer or family member, from an accumulation of such experiences? How people recognize their own (and others') deviations will tell us more about the locations of intersections between self and society, as well as how people deal with these deviations in more or less healthy ways (see Habermas & Köber, 2015).

This leads to the second process question concerning how alternative narratives are developed (Arrow 2 in Figure 1). We are particularly interested in alternative narratives that are developed by the sub-group, rather than narratives that are imposed upon sub-groups, as this marks a prime location to examine issues of agency. One example is the Black American narrative. As we detailed earlier, the alternative narrative about the contributions that Black Americans have made to society is explicitly told in response to the deleterious sub-narrative that has been assigned to this group. Thus, alternative narrative creation involves engagement with the master narrative (see Figure 1), but the parameters of the process of creating the alternative is still unknown. Examining how parents and others socialize marginalized groups into these alternative narratives could tell us something about the developmental process of acquiring this knowledge, as well as the processes of creating larger narratives.

**What predicts the degree of stability and fluidity of master narratives?**



One of the principles of master narratives is rigidity, made evident in some of our case examples, particularly in terms of the life course. For example, the Black American master narrative is one that seems relatively enduring. Even with a Black president, an event that brought hopes of dramatic changes in race relations and racism, we see a relatively intractable narrative about the Black life course. Indeed, the rigidity of that narrative is manifest in both the assertion that Black Lives Matter and in the subsequent resistance to the movement – that in 2016 there would be a need to make this statement, and that it would be controversial, signals a master narrative resistant to change. In contrast, the narrative about gender also has great traction in the U.S., but the presence of two competing narratives (i.e., traditional gender roles and equality) suggests some malleability. Finally, the speed with which structural and attitudinal changes have occurred regarding sexual minorities in the U. S. shows how master narratives can actually change (or at least begin to). So why do some narratives change (if slowly) and some seem set in concrete?

There are at least five places that point to explanations for why some master narratives are so persistent and some adjust relatively more easily. The first is power. If those in power are invested in a master narrative, then changing it will be that much more challenging. Those in power control much of the space for narrative production (e.g., media), as well as the structures that can maintain the realities. For example, men have a more powerful role than women in America. They have jobs with more prestige, make more money, are better represented in elected positions, and as CEOs of companies, including those that run the media (e.g., Warner, 2014). As Coates (2015) discusses, American prosperity has come at the cost of the Black body. The presence of this negative interdependence (Hammack, 2006) between American success and the

Black life course renders change to the master narrative of Black lives risky and threatening for those in power.

The second explanation for master narrative persistence is history. The longer a story has been told, the more normative it seems, the more developmentally rooted it is in a person and in a culture, and the more “real” it seems. Individuals are invested in these narratives with real staying power because they create a stable structure in which individuals can make good predictions about what will happen to reduce anxiety and avoid conflicting needs (Festinger, 1957; see also McLean, 2015). The narrative about gender has been told for a very long time, as has the narrative about Black Americans, and the narrative of redemption. In contrast to these narratives, there is a shorter historical period for the narrative about sexuality to have percolated; that is, this life course has only been a topic of general conversation in the U. S. from the 1960’s or 1970’s (Cohler & Hammack, 2006). This shorter history may be important to the lesser rigidity of the narrative seen in the relative speed of attitudinal change in the populace (e.g., support for gay marriage in the U.S. has risen from 11% approval in 1998 to 46% approval in 2010; NORC, 2011). Indeed, recent studies have shown how these structural changes permeate individuals’ personal stories, which change from generation to generation (Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Weststrate & McLean, 2010).

The third place is the difficulty of interpersonal communication when one challenges master narratives. For example, American audiences dislike unresolved (non-redemptive) and traumatic stories (Thorne & McLean, 2003; see also Fivush & Edwards, 2004), making those stories risky to tell, and thus unlikely to become a part of common discourse. Similarly, Korobov and Thorne (2007) revealed how male dyads in conversation would follow bids for intimacy (non-gender normative behavior) with mitigation of that intimacy, to maintain alliance with

gender norms, and each other (see also McLean et al., 2015). These examples show that people may make bids that resist master narratives in conversation, but then hedge or pull back if the audience does not accept them, resulting in the dilution of any more extreme position that deviates from the norm. The desire to connect with others, to be accepted, or to maintain stable and predictable knowledge structures may be greater than the desire to tell stories that are true to the self, and points to how the sustainment of master narratives occurs at a very proximal level.

The fourth issue concerning intractability is the reality of facts. Women bear children, which changes motivations, mindsets, as well as the tasks they can perform, given the physical demands of pregnancy, labor, and nursing. Men are physically bigger and stronger than women, which gives them objective power and prestige in certain situations. Thus, there are biological constraints to changing the narrative in ways that create equality (at least as long as equality is defined by ‘sameness’). Of course, these three issues are interrelated. One can have power, history, and facts working to maintain the same narrative, as is the case for women.

Finally, when master narratives fit more than one type, it may make them more intractable, more important in shaping individual lives, and more meaningful to the larger culture. Biography, structure, and episode are different types of master narratives, but they are not always mutually exclusive. For example, the American master narrative about 9/11 is a master narrative both in structure and episode. In contrast, when one of these master narratives does not fit with another type of master narrative, we may be in a quandary. For example, the different life course expectation for Black Americans is at odds with the redemptive master narrative that focuses on the possibility of emancipation and triumph, the classic Horatio Alger story (McAdams, 2006). This paradox may make the sub-group narrative less explicit, and more silenced (causing more of a ‘blame the victim phenomenon’). Further, the expectations for the

specific group are low, but the expectations for citizens of America are high, putting the individual in a place of paradox (Breen & McLean, in press; McLean et al., 2013). Similar conflicts can be seen *within* types of master narratives. This is most readily apparent within the biographical type, as highlighted by theory and research on intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2002). For example, feminists of color have documented how the women's movement has primarily served the interests of White women, and not women of color (e.g., Hurtado, 2003), and thus any changes to the biographical master narrative of women have been disproportionately experienced (see Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004, for a similar issue with LGBT people of color).

We detail these questions that we see as most pressing but, of course, there are many more, and we hope that this framework inspires researchers to engage the questions we raise here, as well as those we have not touched on. As we think to future research projects, we reiterate that our aim in writing this paper was to propose an integrative framework for tackling questions about individual-structural relations in the study of identity development, a framework that aligns individual and structure within the same metric.

### Conclusion

In closing, our emphasis is on the *negotiation* between self and society, the *internalization* of societal structure, and the *limitations* on personal agency, issues and processes that we think are best captured with the metaphor of narrative. The field of narrative psychology has made impressive strides in understanding the processes of identity development, in contextualizing the proximal processes of such development (e.g., Fivush et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2007), and in theorizing about the role of culture and context in narrative identity development (e.g., Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2006). Given this impressive foundation, the

time is ripe to advance our understanding of this critical developmental process to fully encompass the more distal contexts that are intricately embedded in the individual's identity.

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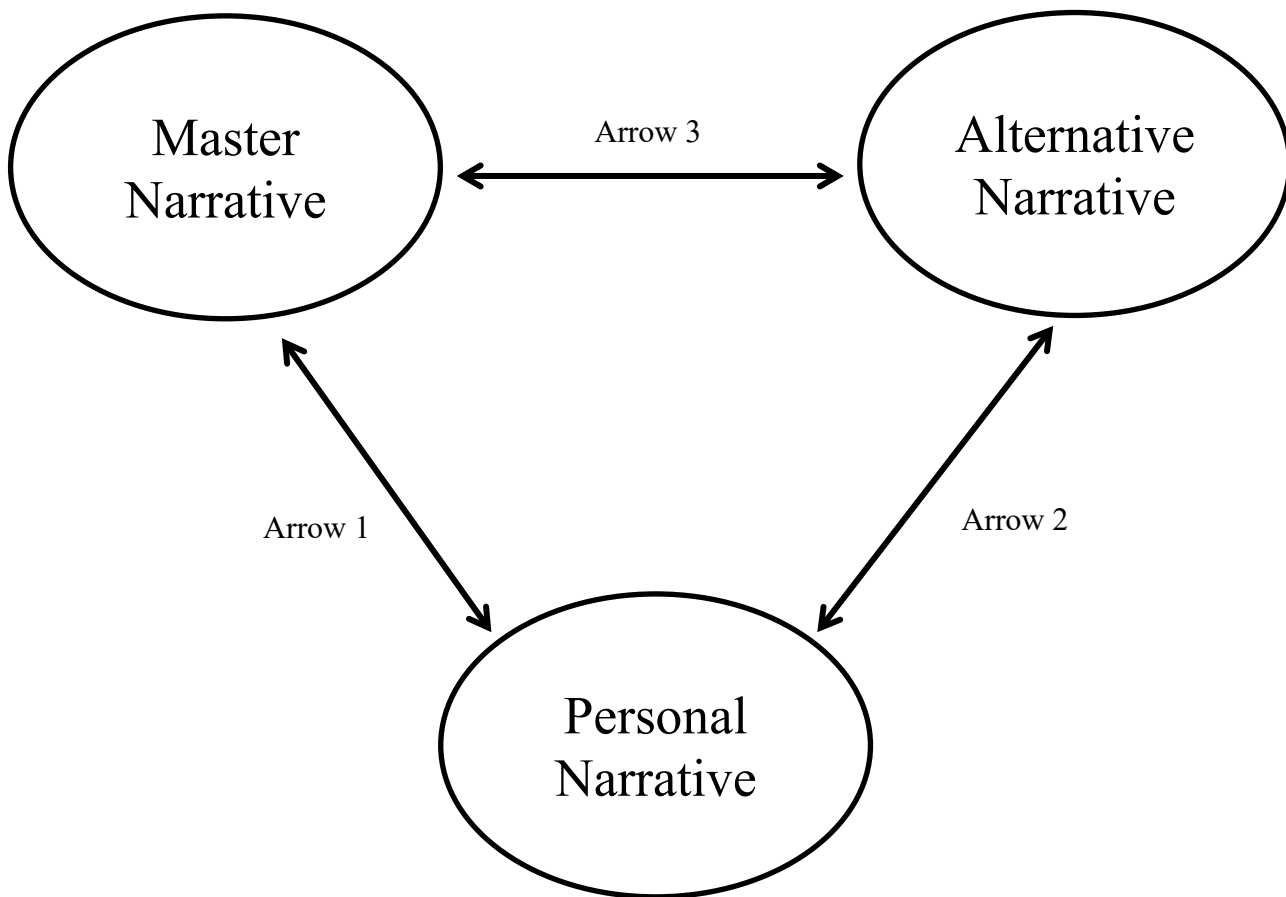
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*Figure 1.* The Master Narrative Model, in which personal narratives are derived from a balance between master narratives and alternative narratives. The bidirectional arrows indicate that individuals, through their personal narratives, both internalize and create/sustain master narratives (arrow 1) and alternative narratives (arrow 2), and that alternative narratives and master narratives exist in relation to one another (arrow 3).