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Narrative Resistance

Ethnic Minority Girls' Responses to Discursive Constraint

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of *narrative resistance* as a framework for understanding how individuals respond to limiting social narratives and dominant cultural discourses. Narratives play a central role in shaping identity, belonging, and perceptions of self and others (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001; Somers, 1994). While some narratives become widely accepted and socially dominant, others marginalise particular groups and restrict the identities available to them (Foucault, 1972; Davies & Harré, 1990).

Drawing on qualitative research with ethnic minority girls in Denmark, the article explores how young people navigate experiences of social exclusion, unequal opportunities, and dominant discourses surrounding ethnicity, integration, and national belonging. The findings suggest that narrative resistance functions as a socially constructed strategy through which individuals challenge stigmatising representations and create alternative understandings of themselves and their place in society (Gergen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Anthias, 2008).

At the same time, the analysis highlights a paradox. While narrative resistance can serve as an important coping strategy and source of agency, it may also contribute to processes of disidentification with the majority population and reinforce experiences of social separation (Hall, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The concept therefore offers valuable insights into contemporary discussions of inclusion, exclusion, identity formation, and social belonging.

Keywords: narrative resistance, identity, belonging, discourse, social exclusion, ethnic minorities, youth, narrative identity

1. Introduction

Narratives are among the most powerful tools through which people make sense of themselves and the social world. They shape how individuals understand their experiences, define their identities, and position themselves in relation to others (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001; Somers, 1994). Some narratives become widely accepted within a society and develop into dominant discourses that influence public perceptions, social expectations, and institutional practices (Foucault, 1972; Gergen, 2009).

However, dominant narratives do not affect all individuals equally. For members of marginalised groups, certain narratives may limit the identities available to them and constrain how they are perceived by others (Davies & Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 2011). Such discursive constraints can shape opportunities for participation, belonging, and recognition within society (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Anthias, 2008).

This article introduces the concept of *narrative resistance* as a way of understanding how individuals respond to these limitations. Narrative resistance refers to the stories people construct when dominant narratives fail to provide meaningful, fair, or positive interpretations of their lives and identities. Through alternative narratives, individuals challenge stigmatising representations and negotiate new ways of understanding themselves and their place in the world.

The concept is explored through a qualitative study involving ethnic minority girls living in a socially disadvantaged urban area in Denmark. The analysis examines how the participants responded to dominant discourses surrounding ethnicity, integration, and Danish identity, and how these responses shaped their experiences of belonging and exclusion.

While narrative resistance may function as a source of agency and self-protection, the findings also suggest that it can contribute to the development of social boundaries between minority and majority groups. The article therefore explores both the empowering and potentially unintended consequences of narrative resistance.

2. Methodological Note

This manuscript is based on qualitative interview material originally analysed in a Danish peer-reviewed article published in 2018 and subsequently translated and revised for an international readership. The empirical examples are drawn from interviews with ethnic minority girls in lower secondary school. The analysis follows a narrative and social constructionist approach, focusing on how participants describe identity, belonging, exclusion, Danishness, language, education, and social distance through situated accounts rather than treating identity as a fixed attribute.

The quotations have been translated into English with attention to preserving conversational meaning, interactional sequence, and analytical significance. Because the present version develops a conceptual argument rather than presenting the full original study design, the methodological account is intentionally concise. The interviews are used to illuminate processes of narrative positioning, disidentification, and meaning-making, while the broader interpretation is informed by narrative inquiry and qualitative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Bamberg, 2011).

3. Discursive Constraint and Dominant Narratives

The girls' self-descriptions show how ethnic and linguistic identities emerge not as externally imposed labels alone, but as ordinary elements in how they collectively understand themselves. One participant formulation captures this layered identity work: "We are sweet, nice, we are a class, we are girls, we are in ninth grade, we are foreigners, bilingual." The sentence moves fluidly from personal qualities to school affiliation, gender, age, ethnicity, and language, suggesting that minority identity is embedded in everyday social description rather than treated as a separate or exceptional category.

This matters analytically because dominant narratives often work by making some identity categories appear natural, expected, or self-evident. When the girls name themselves as both ordinary classmates and as "foreigners" and "bilingual," they reveal how social categories circulate inside everyday speech. Narrative resistance begins from this point of awareness: the participants recognise the categories available to them, but they also reorganise those categories into a collective self-description that is affectionate, relational, and internally meaningful.

4. Negotiating the Meaning of Being Danish

The participants' discussions of Danishness reveal how formal citizenship and symbolic belonging may diverge. In one exchange, Zara states, "I'm a Danish citizen." Aisha responds, "Yes, but you are not Danish," and Zainab confirms, "Yes. But you're not Danish." The dialogue shows that national identity is not understood solely as a legal status. Instead, Danishness is treated as a socially recognised position that can be withheld, contested, or made conditional through symbolic boundary-making (Hall, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

5. Unequal Opportunities and the Threat of Expectation Poverty

The interviews also point to what may be described as expectation poverty: a pattern in which pupils are offered fewer academic demands and fewer opportunities to practise advanced

school tasks because low expectations have become embedded in institutional routines. This appears clearly in the girls' discussion of written assignments. Yasmin exclaims, "HALLO, IN EIGHTH GRADE WE HAD ONE." Lina adds, "YES. WE DID ONE WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT THAT YEAR," before explaining, "When we talk to other schools they are shocked." The quotation suggests that inequality is experienced not only through outcomes but also through the reduced educational opportunities made available in everyday school practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2006; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

6. Integration and Language

Language appears in the interviews as both a resource and a boundary. One participant explains, "My mother does not speak Danish, so at home we only speak our own language..." Rather than indicating a lack of integration in any simple sense, the quotation points to the uneven distribution of linguistic resources across home and school contexts. It also shows how young people may become positioned between family language practices and institutional expectations of Danish-language participation.

The quotation also complicates assumptions that bilingual family life is simply an obstacle to participation. The issue is not the presence of another language, but the way institutional expectations convert linguistic difference into a possible marker of distance from national belonging. From the perspective of narrative resistance, language becomes part of the story through which the girls explain both their resources and the limits placed upon their recognition.

7. Network Poverty and Social Distance

The participants also connect segregation to what may be understood as network poverty: limited access to cross-group relations that might otherwise challenge stereotypes and create social capital. As one girl explains, "If we weren't segregated in schools, they would be together with us and they would see how it really was instead of their prejudices." The statement identifies segregation not only as physical separation but also as a narrative problem: without everyday contact, dominant representations remain unchallenged by lived experience (Bourdieu, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

8. Parallel Society

The girls do not simply reject majority society or deny the problem of limited contact. They also recognise the lack of everyday interaction as a barrier to integration. Fatima observes, "There are not that many Danes." Amina responds, "It would be good to mingle." This exchange

complicates deficit-oriented accounts of minority communities by showing that the participants themselves identify social distance as a problem and express a desire for more ordinary forms of contact and shared participation.

This is important because it shifts the analysis away from a one-sided interpretation of parallel society as minority withdrawal. The girls' own reflections suggest that separation is also produced by school composition, neighbourhood patterns, and the absence of shared everyday spaces. Their wish to "mingle" indicates that integration is experienced not only as an institutional demand but also as a desire for mutual familiarity and ordinary social recognition.

9. Disidentification as Narrative Resistance

Disidentification becomes visible when the girls describe majority spaces as places where they do not fully recognise themselves as belonging. One of the strongest examples appears in a discussion of visiting other schools. Mona begins, "It's a little strange to visit other schools where there are only..." Yasmin completes the sentence: "Danes." Mona continues, "You feel kind of..." Yasmin answers, "Loner." Sonya confirms, "Yes." The fragmented dialogue is analytically important because the participants complete one another's descriptions of exclusion. Belonging is not absent because they lack formal access, but because majority spaces are experienced as symbolically organised around others (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Anthias, 2008).

The association between competence and majority-group membership also emerges in the interviews. Yasmin notes, "Anders, he is also very good at difficult words." Lina adds, "He's really smart." Aisha then reframes the explanation: "But also the fact that he's Danish." The exchange suggests that linguistic and academic competence can become symbolically linked to Danishness. In this moment, majority identity is not merely one identity among others; it becomes associated with being articulate, clever, and educationally legitimate.

10. Disidentification Reinforces Parallel Society

These examples show how disidentification may reinforce the very parallel social formations it responds to. When majority spaces are experienced as places where one becomes a "loner," withdrawal can appear as a protective response. Narrative resistance therefore contains a paradox: it can preserve dignity by refusing unwanted positioning, while also reducing the likelihood of future contact, recognition, and shared belonging.

The danger is that protective disidentification can gradually become self-confirming. If majority settings are anticipated as uncomfortable or excluding, avoiding them may feel

rational and emotionally safer. Yet avoidance also reduces opportunities for recognition across group boundaries. The process therefore links individual self-protection to broader patterns of social distance, showing why narrative resistance must be understood as both adaptive and socially consequential.

11. Narrative Resistance as Agency and Adaptation

Narrative resistance should not be understood solely as opposition to dominant discourses. Although resistance often involves challenging limiting narratives, it also represents a constructive process through which individuals create meaning, coherence, and continuity in their lives.

From a narrative perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing process of interpretation. People continuously construct stories that connect past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations. These stories provide a sense of direction and help individuals understand who they are and how they relate to the world around them (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001; Bamberg, 2011).

When dominant narratives fail to offer meaningful identity positions, individuals face a challenge that is both social and psychological. They must find alternative ways of making sense of themselves and their experiences.

The participants in this study demonstrate precisely such adaptive processes.

Their narratives did not merely reject dominant representations. They actively reconstructed meaning. Through conversations about ethnicity, belonging, discrimination, education, and opportunity, the girls developed alternative frameworks for understanding themselves and their place in society (Gergen, 2009; Riessman, 2008).

These alternative narratives often emphasised resilience, mutual support, cultural pride, and critical awareness. Rather than accepting externally imposed definitions, the participants sought to define themselves on their own terms.

This process can be understood as a form of agency.

Agency is often described as the capacity to act within existing social conditions. Narrative resistance illustrates that agency does not always involve changing external circumstances directly. It may also involve changing the meaning attached to those circumstances (Bamberg, 2011; Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001).

Individuals cannot always control how they are perceived by others. However, they can influence how they interpret those perceptions and how they integrate them into their own life stories.

In this sense, narrative resistance functions as a mechanism of psychological adaptation.

The participants' stories frequently transformed experiences that might otherwise have undermined self-esteem into sources of insight, solidarity, or determination. Difficult experiences became evidence not of personal inadequacy but of broader social dynamics. Such reinterpretations allowed participants to maintain a positive sense of self despite encountering exclusion or marginalisation (Bamberg, 2011; Riessman, 2008).

This adaptive function is particularly important during adolescence.

Adolescence is a developmental period characterised by heightened identity exploration, increasing social awareness, and a growing need for belonging and recognition. Young people actively negotiate multiple and sometimes conflicting identity positions as they seek to establish coherent understandings of who they are (McAdams, 2001; Bamberg, 2011).

For minority youth, this process often unfolds within complex social environments shaped by cultural expectations, institutional practices, and public discourses about migration, integration, and national identity (Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Narrative resistance may therefore serve as an important resource for navigating these competing demands.

At the same time, the findings suggest that agency should not be romanticised.

Narrative resistance emerges within contexts where individuals experience constraints on recognition and belonging. The need for resistance points toward underlying social tensions rather than their resolution. While alternative narratives may strengthen identity and provide emotional protection, they do not eliminate the structural conditions that made such narratives necessary (Bourdieu, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

This highlights an important distinction.

Narrative resistance is not simply evidence of empowerment. It is evidence of adaptation to social circumstances that individuals perceive as limiting, exclusionary, or unjust.

Understanding this distinction allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the participants' experiences. Their narratives reveal neither passive victimhood nor unrestricted agency. Instead, they illustrate how young people creatively navigate complex social realities through ongoing processes of interpretation, negotiation, and meaning-making.

From this perspective, narrative resistance can be understood as both a form of resilience and a response to inequality.

It reflects the capacity of individuals to maintain dignity, coherence, and self-understanding in situations where dominant narratives fail to provide adequate spaces for recognition and belonging.

12. Towards a Conceptual Model of Narrative Resistance

The findings presented in this article suggest that narrative resistance may be understood as a process that unfolds through several interconnected stages. This process-oriented view draws on narrative approaches that understand identity as situated, relational, and continuously negotiated (Bamberg, 2011; Somers, 1994).

Individuals encounter dominant narratives that define social categories and establish expectations regarding identity and belonging (Foucault, 1972; Davies & Harré, 1990).

When these narratives restrict meaningful identity possibilities, experiences of discursive constraint emerge.

In response, individuals develop alternative narratives that challenge, reinterpret, or resist dominant representations.

These alternative narratives provide agency, recognition, and psychological coherence. At the same time, they may contribute to processes of disidentification with dominant groups and strengthen alternative communities of belonging (Hall, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The process can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 1. Narrative resistance as a process	
Social context	Dominant narratives define what is seen as normal, legitimate, and recognisable.
↓	
Constraint	These narratives limit available identity positions and produce experiences of exclusion or misrecognition.
↓	
Interpretive response	Individuals reinterpret their experiences and begin to construct alternative stories about self, community, and belonging.
↓	

Narrative resistance	Alternative narratives challenge, revise, or oppose dominant representations while preserving dignity and coherence.
↓	
Identity work	Resistance supports agency, recognition, resilience, and alternative forms of belonging.
↓	
Possible outcome	The process may strengthen self-definition, but it may also contribute to disidentification and symbolic distance from dominant groups.
↺ The outcome can feed back into future interpretations of exclusion, belonging, and identity.	

This model should therefore be read as a dynamic process rather than as a set of separate categories. Dominant narratives generate constraints, constraints invite interpretive responses, and these responses may develop into forms of narrative resistance that reshape identity, belonging, and future interpretations of social experience (Bamberg, 2011; Somers, 1994).

13. Conclusion and Implications

The concept of narrative resistance offers a way of understanding how individuals respond when dominant social narratives fail to provide meaningful possibilities for belonging, recognition, and positive identity construction (Bruner, 1990; Somers, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with ethnic minority girls in Denmark, this article has shown how experiences of discursive constraint may give rise to alternative narratives through which individuals reinterpret exclusion, challenge stigmatising representations, and construct more meaningful understandings of themselves and their social position (Davies & Harré, 1990; Riessman, 2008).

The findings suggest that narrative resistance is neither a simple act of opposition nor merely a symptom of social exclusion. Rather, it represents an active process of meaning-making through which individuals seek dignity, coherence, and agency in contexts where dominant narratives appear insufficient or restrictive.

At the same time, the analysis highlights an important paradox.

The same narratives that protect identity and foster resilience may also contribute to processes of disidentification with the majority population. Narrative resistance can strengthen alternative forms of belonging while simultaneously reinforcing symbolic boundaries between groups (Hall, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Anthias, 2008).

This observation has important implications for research, policy, and practice.

Efforts to promote inclusion often focus on participation, educational achievement, or labour market integration. While such initiatives remain important, the findings suggest that inclusion is also fundamentally narrative in nature. Individuals do not merely require access to institutions and opportunities. They also require access to socially recognised stories in which they can see themselves as legitimate participants in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Where dominant narratives fail to provide such recognition, alternative narratives will inevitably emerge.

Understanding these processes may therefore help researchers, educators, policymakers, and practitioners develop more nuanced approaches to belonging, identity, and social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies (Anthias, 2008; Somers, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Narrative resistance should not be viewed as a problem to be eliminated. Rather, it should be understood as a signal that existing narratives of belonging may be insufficient.

In this sense, the study points towards a broader question that extends beyond ethnic minority youth:

> *Conceptually, the mechanism of narrative resistance may be summarised as follows: If you don't think I'm good enough for your society, I'd rather stand outside—even if that also hurts me, it hurts less.*

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