

# The Power of Domestic Violence and Abuse Counter Narratives: Telling Stories in Parliamentary Debates

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Article abstract

This paper sets out to interrogate the use of master and counter narratives in UK Parliamentary Select Committee debates surrounding the passage of the Domestic Abuse Bill (now Domestic Abuse Act 2021) in Parliament. These debates are a site that allow for the telling of counter narratives in order to challenge the narrative of the normative socio-legal position regarding domestic violence and abuse (DVA). With its roots in the patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles that foster violence and abuse, the issue with such a narrative is that it fails to recognise the complex, nuanced nature of domestic violence and abuse. As a result, it maintains the status quo and is disconnected from the realities of DVA. The work of this paper, then, is to consider the dialogue between the masterplot of DVA, the Domestic Abuse Bill, and the attempts of counter narratives to act as discursive resistance. It will consider what is the true power of these anti-hegemonic stories in exposing the problems with the master-narrative. Counter narratives submitted by organisations, activists, academics and survivors of DVA during the Committee Stage of the debates were not uniform, monolithic or pure, and were often plagued with inconsistencies and contradictions with one another. Characterised as the same but different, these counter narratives did not act in strict opposition to the hegemonic master narrative. As a result, this paper will draw on a case study which examines three different reports submitted during the Committee Stage of the Debates to consider the following questions: in what way can counter narratives act as discursive resistance in law reform efforts and why are some more successful than others in dismantling the master narrative through the mechanism of the law? Overall, the argument put forward is that it is the counter narratives with a greater illocutionary force and greater narratological power which can be a successful tool in law reform and effect a shift in the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse.

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:**  
**CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES**

**The Power of Domestic Violence and Abuse  
Counter Narratives:  
Telling Stories in Parliamentary Debates**

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This paper sets out to interrogate the use of master and counter narratives in UK Parliamentary Select Committee debates surrounding the passage of the Domestic Abuse Bill (now Domestic Abuse Act 2021) in Parliament. These debates are a site that allow for the telling of counter narratives in order to challenge the narrative of the normative socio-legal position regarding domestic violence and abuse (DVA). With its roots in the patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles that foster violence and abuse, the issue with such a narrative is that it fails to recognise the complex, nuanced nature of domestic violence and abuse. As a result, it maintains the status quo and is disconnected from the realities of DVA. The work of this paper, then, is to consider the dialogue between the masterplot of DVA, the Domestic Abuse Bill, and the attempts of counter narratives to act as discursive resistance. It will consider what is the true power of these anti-hegemonic stories in exposing the problems with the master-narrative. Counter narratives submitted by organisations, activists, academics and survivors of DVA during the Committee Stage of the debates were not uniform, monolithic or pure, and were often plagued with inconsistencies and contradictions with one another. Characterised as the same but different, these counter narratives did not act in strict opposition to the hegemonic master narrative. As a result, this paper will draw on a case study which examines three different reports submitted during the Committee Stage of the Debates to consider the following questions: in what way can counter narratives act as discursive resistance in law reform efforts and why are some more successful than others in dismantling the master narrative through the mechanism of the law? Overall, the argument put forward is that it is the counter

narratives with a greater illocutionary force and greater narratological power which can be a successful tool in law reform and effect a shift in the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse.

**Keywords:**

domestic abuse, counter narratives, master narratives, law reform

## INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to interrogate the use of master and counter narratives in UK Parliamentary Select Committee Debates surrounding the Domestic Abuse Bill (now Domestic Abuse Act 2021) and its passage through the UK Parliament. These debates are a site that allow for the telling of counter narratives, which are brought forward by NGOs, activists, academics and victim-survivors in order to challenge the narrative of the normative socio-cultural position regarding domestic violence and abuse (DVA).<sup>1</sup> With its roots in the patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles that foster violence and abuse, the issue with such a “master narrative” is that it fails to recognise the complex, nuanced nature of domestic violence and abuse. As a result, it maintains the status quo and is disconnected from the realities of DVA.

Utilising this framework of master narrative, we can begin to unpack the recurring scripts, characterisations and patterns of narrative emplotment in the context of DVA: one with myriad resilient elements that permeate all levels of the legal system, along with statutory agencies and service providers. Such characteristics of this master narrative which remain prevalent today include the stereotyped script of equating domestic *abuse* with violent behaviour; the idea that if a woman does not present in a certain way she is culpable in the abusive behaviour; and the misguided belief that a victim can, and should, simply “just leave” their abusive relationship. Additionally, there is still the culturally accepted convention that perpetrators are male and victims are female. The latter, it has been argued, is entrenched by a “lack of understanding of the gendered dynamics and harm of domestic violence and abuse” (Bishop, 2021, p. 165). These characteristics are borne out of a patriarchal social discourse that misconceptualises the gendered dynamics of DVA and frames it in such a narrow way that produces a master narrative which fails to recognise the nuances and power dynamics interwoven into

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is the term that will be used. While ‘domestic abuse’ is the language adopted by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, it is recognised that this shift is problematic (see Aldridge 2021).

this gendered crime. As a result, challenging this hegemonic tale is fraught with challenges. This master narrative then, with its problematic origins and construction, not only serves to shape the law and lay the groundwork for understanding how it should operate, but there exists a perpetual dialogue between it, the law and contesting, counter narratives.

The work of this paper is to consider this dialogue between the masterplot of DVA, the Domestic Abuse Bill, and the attempts of counter narratives to act as discursive resistance. Situating this discussion within previous debates on counter narratives, drawing in particular on the works of Hyvärinen (2022) and Bamberg and Wipff (2020 and 2022), it will consider what is the true power of these anti-hegemonic “stories” in exposing the problems with the master narrative. Counter narratives, which emerged through the arguments put forward in the myriad reports sent during the Committee Stage of the debates, typically followed but slightly diverged from a thematically similar narrative that aimed to resist the dominant socio-legal ideas of domestic violence and abuse. While some reports were submitted by individuals, for examples activists, academics and victim-survivors of DVA, the leading DVA organisations (such as Women’s Aid, Refuge, Standing Together Against Domestic Violence, and Respect) dominated the field of responses. Characterised as the same but different, this paper examines how these counter narratives did not act in strict, binary opposition to the master narrative particularly with regards to the gender-neutral nature of the proposed statutory definition of ‘domestic abuse’. As a result, it asks to what extent were some counter narratives ‘lost in translation’ in their attempts to confront, and reveal, the inaccuracies of the master narrative?

This paper will proceed in five parts. It will begin by setting out the relationship between narrative and the law, and with the help of Lueg *et al.* (2022), I proceed to map the *topos* for making sense of narrative and the law, identifying a hierarchy of narrative. Crucially, I argue that the master narrative, at the apex of this hierarchy, is not the law itself but rather a framework for paying attention to the organisation and operation of the law from each of the subordinate levels. Based on this discussion, and the classification of the master narrative within this hierarchy, the paper then sets out to identify what is the master narrative of DVA, before examining the ways organisations and individuals draw on different countering resources to contest that narrative in the Parliamentary Debates. I then consider the term “narrative” versus “narrativity” in the context of these written submissions, mindful of hyper-extending the sense of “narrative” beyond the idea of ‘narrative proper’. As will be seen, while such reports might not instinctively be viewed as “being narratives,” they nonetheless possess sufficient narrativity to

elicit and inspire a narrative response. The paper closes with a case study drawn from the Parliamentary Debates, which concerns the script that misconceptualises the gendered dynamics of DVA and the legislation's proposed (and ultimately accepted) gender neutral definition. It is in this context that we can see how counter narratives do not operate in strict, binary opposition to the master narrative, and in fact can collide, and counter, one another as well. As a tool for social change, legislation will not, and cannot, reflect all these myriad counter narratives. Overall, the argument put forward is that it is the counter narratives with a greater illocutionary force and greater narratological power which can be a successful tool in law reform and effect a shift in the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse.

### MAKING SENSE OF NARRATIVES IN THE LAW

Any discussion of master and counter narratives in the law should not pass over, first of all, the connection between narrative and the law. Narration and narrative play a central role in legal discourse, with narrative and *nomos* fundamentally concerned with *mimesis*, the act of representation. Laws and lawmakers, themselves, are kinds of stories and storytellers respectively, concerned not just with “representation but with re-presentation, with presenting again, with retelling familiar stories” (Liveley and Shaw, 2020, p. 255). Thus, there is a clear understanding that narratives are an essential part of any legal process and justice system, whether that is in the contest of stories which take place in adversarial trials; in the stories told to foreground the experiences of minority groups and challenge law's autonomy; or in the historical, cultural and societal narratives to which the law is inextricably bound (see Olson, 2014). Within the law, then, there are a range of different stories to be told, and subsequently a range of different levels of narrative and narration, often at issue or competing with one another. We only need to think of a typical criminal trial to see how the act of telling a story plays out, and it is in this particular legal context where scholars have begun to distinguish between different micro and macro levels of narrative within the trial itself (see Jackson, 1996; Grunewald, 2013). Yet, this theorization of the levels of narrative can be extended beyond the stories recited in trials to the wider legal system, with different levels of narrative in the law discussed in terms of a hierarchy that has observable interconnecting levels. More specifically, my point of departure is Lueg *et al.*'s (2022) micro, meso and macro observation categories. Based on their discussion, I suggest four levels for making sense of narratives in the law, and

recognising this hierarchy is a necessary precursor to analysing contestations between master and counter narratives within the law.

First, there is the micro level which centres on dimensions of individual sense making. It allows for a nuanced analysis and acknowledgment that “individual identities are created by making use of narratives and that narrative capability is one important form of self-expression” (Lueg *et al.*, 2022, p. 6). This can be applied to the competing micro-narratives that make up a legal case, whether criminal or civil, including the charges, statements, witness testimonies. It is at this point that I move away somewhat from Lueg *et al.*’s dimensions and suggest reframing the meso level to include the narrative of the legal case itself. That is, the verdict made by a jury and ‘its own reconstructed narrative of what most likely happened to whom, where, when and why’ (Liveley and Shaw, 2020, p. 257). This meso-narrative and its perceived completeness is then “judged” against the norms of legislative statutes, common law or legal precedent. It’s apparent compliance with this overarching macro narrative is used in the determination of sentence or civil remedy. We then arrive at this macro level of narrative, akin to Lueg *et al.*’s meso level.<sup>2</sup> Moving away from the sphere of individual cases, this level is concerned with the laws and legal structures the organisation that is the law. This institutional structure of common law rules, precedent, and legislation manifests wider cultural, societal and historical narratives, and exerts control over society (Lueg *et al.*, 2022, p. 7). Finally, there is the master level of narrative, which is made up of the so-called masterplot. This level of narrative concerns so-called “large” cultural, historical and societal narratives (Lueg *et al.*, 2022, p. 7), and for our purposes, it provides a framework within which the law operates. All these levels of narrative can be bridged and linked to each other, with interaction occurring across and between the micro, meso, macro and master levels, not simply moving up through the hierarchy of narrative. Such interaction pays respect to the fact that these levels are all interconnected, and discussing narratives of the law means recognising and paying attention to this complex interaction. Indeed, as Lueg *et al.* articulate, this linking is, in fact, ‘the hallmark of counter narrative theory’ (2022, p. 7).

The expression “master narrative” or “masterplot” is one which has been lively discussed in a range of fields, and has been conceptualised in a variety of ways. Paraphrasing Grunewald, these are narrative archetypes or masterplots

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars and theorists vary in their use of terminology to describe these various levels of narrative. See Jackson (1996) who refers to the “meso-narrative” as the “macro-narrative,” and Grunewald (2013) who sees the “macro-narrative” as the “master narrative,” which is subsequently distinguished from “masterplot” or “narrative archetypes.”

with recurring “skeletal stories that belong to a culture” (2013, p. 374). Andrews argues that “they offer a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience. In this way, such storylines serve as a blueprint for all stories” (2002, p. 1). According to Bamberg (2004), master narratives can be viewed in two different interpretations, one claiming that “general cultural expectations [...] are frames according to which courses of events can easily be plotted [...] these so-called culturally accepted frames most often are fragment and come in ways that make it easy to set them up as problematic” (360). Even such brief discussion reveals that, if theorised in these terms which foregrounds cultural traditionalism, master narratives can thus be viewed as abstract and intangible. This is certainly the observation which Hyvärinen *et al.* make: the master narrative “comprises cultural expectations, an abstraction of routinised stories as well as an ideology [...] the expected sequence of events, than a proper, tellable story” (2021, p. 102). Indeed, Hyvärinen discusses this further within the framework of Brunerian narrative theory, and sees master narratives in terms of “scripts and frames” rather than real, recognisable narratives (2022). These idiosyncrasies of master narratives are helpful when considering master narratives and the law specifically. The hallmark of this highest level of narrative then is the fact that woven into these abstractions are normative life experiences, shared meaning and cultural resources: social, historical and cultural scripts. Individual tellers can invoke and mobilize these scripts, and plot their own experiences against these culturally expected events. The same can be said for the law: master narratives form part of the groundwork of the law, infusing and shaping how the law is made, debated, upheld or repealed. Such a master narrative is quite often invisible, emphasising that intimate connection between master narrative and abstraction that Hyvärinen articulates. Crucially then, the master narrative is not the law itself. It is a framework for paying attention to the organisation of the law from the macro level, whilst likewise investigating the operation of both the meso and micro levels of narrative underneath. And countering that master narrative in the context of law reform, due to its abstract nature, becomes inevitably difficult and complex.

### **THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

Positioning the master narrative as an abstraction of routinised stories, of stereotyped scripts stored in our cultural memories, rather than a tellable story or reference to an individual narrative, means that it can be difficult to pin down. As Hyvärinen argues, they are not narratives at all, not at least in the rhetorical (Phelan, 2005) or discursive (Ryan, [2005] 2008) sense of narratives (Hyvärinen,

2022, p. 20). Certainly, this is true when considering the master narrative, or masterplot, of DVA. Despite the abstraction of this master narrative, we are still able to unpack some of the recurring scripts and characterisations. When it comes to the master narrative of DVA, there are a number of expected and resilient elements that continue to form part of the discourse, despite decades of legislative changes and activism.

In wider socio-cultural terms, there is a stereotyped script of DVA that remains prevalent today. These characteristics of the master narrative are visible because someone - academics, practitioners, activists - is countering them, invoking the very cultural resources, stories and scripts that they are trying to resist (Hyvärinen et al, 2021, p. 103). Some have identified that DVA can follow a “formula story,” one which portrays DVA as a “good-and-evil tale with victims and villains” (Corple et al, 2021, p. 534). Certainly, there is the culturally accepted convention that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims who can save themselves, if only they were to leave their abusive partner. Ostensibly, this reflects the gendered nature of this crime, with over 1.4 million women in England and Wales experiencing domestic violence and abuse in the year ending March 2023, compared with 751,000 men (ONS, 2023). Yet, this cultural convention of male perpetrators and female victims is one that is borne out of a patriarchal social discourse that misconceptualises the gendered dynamics of DVA. This systemic, institutional and ideological discourse infiltrates societal conceptions of domestic violence and abuse, and such scripts “presume male privilege and subjugate women” (Andrus, 2021, p. 6). It has developed out of a historical framework where domestic *violence* is understood as wife-beating and traditionally men have the right to control “their” women (Andrus, 2021, p. 60-61). Even the statistic outlined above, oft-cited in support of this aspect of the master narrative, obscures the “role of domestic violence and abuse in sustaining male dominance” (Bishop, 2021, p. 166). As Bishop has argued, “It is not simply that women are statistically more likely to experience violence and abuse in intimate relationships, it is that the gender role expectations prevalent in society enable it to happen in the first place” (2021, p. 166). The problem, thus, with these gendered assumptions of this element of the master narrative, which permeate the discourse surrounding DVA, is their origins. Framing domestic violence and abuse in such a narrow, patriarchal way produces a normative script of the master narrative that fails to recognise the nuances and power dynamics interwoven into this gendered crime. It is not borne out of any analysis of gender, and as we shall see, attempts to contest or counter this particular element of the master narrative in the Parliamentary debates of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 were particularly “lost in translation.”

This stereotyped script, with its structured characterisation, can be extended further with the myth of the “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986). Despite the fact that much has been written about the ideal victim within domestic violence and abuse, and that a DVA victim can never be ideal (Bows et al, 2023), this hierarchy of victimhood remains. Victims are still expected to conform to a series of norms that are imposed by this master narrative, which constructs an image of the “ideal” victim. This is reflected in a recent survey conducted by Women’s Aid Federation of England (2022, hereafter Women’s Aid) , which was designed to better understand why people hold the views that they do towards domestic violence and abuse. The survey found that if a woman did not present in a certain way, “she is culpable in the behaviour of her abuser” (30). A tension arises in the characterisation of victims, seen as either legitimate and deserving versus those who are viewed as illegitimate and underserving. A tension borne, once again, out of the patriarchal construction of domestic violence and abuse. Victim blaming remains a key feature of the master narrative, and its emergence within the ideology of the patriarchy, particularly expectations of women around fidelity and sexuality, has undoubtedly shaped the telling of this master narrative (see Women’s Aid, 2022, p. 30).

Another characteristic of the master narrative, which emerged from the Women’s Aid survey (2022), includes the fact that some types of abuse are viewed as more tolerable than others. Behaviours such as those typically associated with patterns of coercive control were broadly perceived as less wrong or harmful, with 81% of respondents viewing physical abuse as extremely wrong (Women’s Aid, 2022). Thus, the idea of equating domestic abuse with *violent* behaviour is one particular aspect of the master narrative that lingers. Terminology may have moved on from “battered women” but the cultural script that abuse needs to include physical violence continues to persist. Society, therefore, is still cueing into these prevalent myths and stereotypes regarding DVA, perpetuating its powerful but invisible master narrative. A final characteristic which is woven into the master narrative of DVA is the constancy of the stance that a victim should simply leave their abuser and are often blamed for failing to do so. Police are often frustrated with returning to the same house on multiple occasions and victims are accused of being unable to take care of themselves, “as though it is their fault for staying” (Andrus, 2021, p. 13). Thus, at the moment a DVA victim is “inaugurated into the criminal justice system” (Andrus, 2021, p. 13), they are faced with an experience which in turn serves to reinforce and strengthen the normative master narrative.

Certainly, then, this master narrative continues to “normalize” and “naturalise” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 360) the expected scripts of DVA, so that we, as

society, continue to be engaged in and subjected to them. It exists within the very fabric of DVA, and is situated within this country's socio-legal approach(es) to providing justice to victims. As a result, this master narrative continues to "constrain and delineate the agency of subjects," and in the context of law reform, subjects who have the influence to counter, and change, the master narrative (Bamberg, 2004, pp. 360-361). It is a master narrative propagated throughout not only the criminal justice system and family courts, but throughout all the hierarchical levels of narrative within the law and subsequently structures how the law responds to DVA. If this narrative permeates the law to such a degree, the question arises then, of how legislation specifically can assist in countering that narrative and lead to legal and societal change. Parliamentary debates undoubtedly offer a site that allows for the telling of counter narratives by organisations in order to challenge the narrative of the normative socio-legal position and urge the law to change accordingly. There exists a dialogue between those counter narratives and the law, as the former seeks to use its illocutionary force "to delegitimise, erode or even change those discourse which are perceived as oppressive" (Bamberg and Wipff, 2020, p. 25) through the mechanism of the law. However, as we shall see with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, building and maintaining such a dialogic connection between counter narratives and the law, one which secures legitimacy and efficacy of those counter narratives in their bid to use legislation to disrupt the master narrative, is not always a successful endeavour.

### **COUNTERING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF DVA: THE DOMESTIC ABUSE ACT 2021**

The Domestic Abuse Act, which received Royal Assent in April 2021, was hailed as a "landmark moment" with its commitment to addressing the issue of domestic violence and abuse and was welcomed by both activists and academics who had "long highlighted the inadequacies of the existing laws [...] in England and Wales" (Bishop, 2021, p. 163). The key aims of the Act were to raise awareness and understanding about the impact of DVA on victims and their families; to improve the effectiveness of the justice system in providing protection for victims and bringing perpetrators to justice; and to strengthen the support for victims of abuse by statutory agencies (Home Office Policy Paper, 2024). In order to achieve this, key provisions of the Act included, *inter alia*, the creation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse; the establishment in law of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner as an independent voice with statutory powers to raise public awareness and hold both agencies and government to account in tackling DVA;

extending the controlling or coercive behaviour offence to cover post-separation abuse; and placing a greater focus on children as victims of DVA rather than merely witnesses. Undoubtedly the provisions of the Act were far reaching, as the Act and associated policies set out to “transform” the master narrative of DVA. For example, the inclusion of a statutory definition of domestic abuse, one which emphasises not only physical violence but also emotional, controlling or coercive, and economic abuse, shows a commitment to reframing the view that there is hierarchy of harm and placing all types of harm on an equal footing (see s.1 Domestic Abuse Act 2021). A view, as outlined above, that persists within the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse. However, while this ambitious piece of legislation was welcomed, academics and commentators have recognised that it will not be “a panacea when it comes to protection lives and providing justice” (Bishop, 2021, p. 164). One of the major limitations of this definition of domestic abuse, and an area where some counter narratives struggled to successfully act as discursive resistance, is in its gender-neutral approach.

During the bill’s passage through Parliament, and the various readings and debates in both the House of Commons and House of Lords, over 60 organisations, activists, Members of Parliament, and academics put forth their own counter narrative aimed at persuading law makers to contest different characteristics of the master narrative. This was a site where different counter narratives converged, and which cannot be divided simply into one homogenous group. Rather, this group of narratives typically followed but slightly deviated from thematically similar narratives, and this is evident by the number of written submissions from outside bodies and individuals sent during the Committee Stage of the debates. Over 90 submissions were made, with some reports submitted jointly by multiple organisations, as well as submissions from individuals, each with their own agenda and aspect of the master narrative they wished to counter. In particular, the principal issue of opposition between these counter narratives, and which will be explored in further detail in the case study below, concerned the tension between a gendered or a gender-neutral definition of DVA in the Act. Leading DVA and VAWG (violence against women and girls) organisations such as Women’s Aid, Refuge and End Violence Against Women vociferously argued for a gendered definition. On the other hand, organisations such as Men and Women Working Together (MWWT), along with individual male survivors of DVA, advocated for the opposite. Indeed, in MWWT’s submission to the Committee Stage, they argued for a gender-neutral narrative, specifically stating that they believed “the gendered narrative that it [DVA] mostly happens to women is misleading” (DAB 27).

Therefore, it is not a straightforward case of saying that these counter narratives act in strict opposition to the master narrative (see Frandsen et al, 2017; Kuhn, 2017). Bamberg and Wipff's assessment is most apt in this context, as these counter narratives are not "uniform, monolithic or pure, but rather [...] are plagued by inconsistencies and contradictions" (2022, p. 77). Characterised as the same but different, the relationship between each of these counter narratives, and their contesting of the master narrative, is complex. They "never simply account for one natural course of events (Hyvärinen *et al.*, 2021, p. 103). This feature of counter narratives begins to explain the inherent limitations of legislation dismantling the master narrative. How can a single piece of legislation embody myriad, multifaceted counter narratives? With master narratives conceptualised as abstract and nebulous, and in this case concerned with systemic issues and views on domestic violence and abuse, there inevitably cannot be a singular counter narrative to dismantle the master narrative. Indeed, trying to find one singular narrative to counter something so intangible and multifarious, is impractical. This is clear with law reform efforts: as a dynamic, interactive process, different counter narratives are approaching different elements of the systemic master narrative from different places and contexts. Different characteristics and scripts of the master narrative are important to different organisations, so there is no convergence in these counter narratives. It is this intricate relationship that we can see play out in Parliamentary debates a site where all of these counter narratives collide. It is for this reason that Hyvärinen's point particularly stands with respect to counter narratives in law reform: "It is far more recommendable to investigate how different narratives and narrators draw on different and contradictory canonical and countering resources" (2022, p. 77).

This is reflected in one particular case study drawn from the Parliamentary debates, which concerns the script that misconceptualises the gendered dynamics of DVA and the legislation's proposed (and ultimately accepted) gender neutral definition of domestic abuse. In this case study, three reports which were submitted to the Parliamentary debates of the Domestic Abuse Bill will be examined. First, one report co-written by twenty-nine VAWG sector Organisations (DAB32) is studied for its particular views on the gendered construction and dynamics of DVA. This is then considered against two reports written by individuals Tim Tierney (DAB56) and Andrew Pain (DAB60), which present different counter narratives. In this way, this case study allows for an analysis of the dialogue between counter narratives, the law, and the master narrative, and the principle that counter narratives do not act in strict opposition to the master narrative. Given that, as we have already seen, this dialogue cannot be

separated from the wider cultural, social and historical framework within which it operates, a case study appropriately allows for the investigation of this contemporary issue within its real world-context (Yin, 2014, p16). Fundamentally, it provides an apt framework for answering the questions at the heart of this paper: How can counter narratives act as discursive resistance in law reform efforts and why are some more successful than others in dismantling the master narrative through the mechanism of the law? However, before examining this case study below, I wish to set out what I mean by the term “narrative” in the context of reports submitted to the Committee Stage of Parliamentary debates, as I am mindful of hyper-extending the sense of “narrative” beyond the idea of “narrative proper.”

### **NARRATIVE VERSUS NARRATIVITY**

The “territorial expansion” of the theoretical concept of narrative, with its foray into fields such as historiography, medicine, ethnography and indeed law, has been “accompanied by a semantic broadening” of the term itself (Ryan, [2005] 2008, p. 344). In some respects, this can be viewed as a dilution of the term, or perhaps misappropriation, where the term “narrative” is cast about to cover all manner of sins. A distinction can thus be made between “being a narrative” and “possessing narrativity” (Ryan, [2005] 2008; see also Herman, 2007). The former, namely “being a narrative,” concerns the representation of one or more real or fictive events in a time sequence, meaningfully connected, with chronological and causal arrangement (see Prince, 2008). This allows for a distinction between “narratives and non-narratives, (and more specifically between narratives and the mere representation of an event activity, the mere description of a process or state of affairs)” (Prince, 2008, p. 19). In contrast, the discussions on the latter concept of narrativity, as Abbott highlights, can quickly become a “tangled web” ([2002] 2008, p. 25). It is beyond the scope of this article to launch into an extensive discussion as to the definition of a narrative and the distinctive features, or set of properties, which characterise the “narrativity” of a given narrative. However, most would accept the following two propositions about the premise of this term: that it is the set of qualities marking narrative and that it is a matter of degree (Abbott, [2002] 2008, p. 25). Thus, narrativity pertains instead to a quality rather than an entity, designating a set of traits. It takes into consideration a set of qualities or attributes as a matter of degree, which allows for a more dynamic and scalar definition of what constitutes a narrative. Rather than understanding “narrativity” as a binary concept or as a complete list of particular attributes which all narratives must realise, it permits different degrees of narrativity instead. As Prince articulates,

a text is subsequently quantifiable as a narrative if it shows some of the traits associated with it: “Some objects are narratives; some are quasi-narratives; and some are not narratives” (2008, pp. 20, 22).

When it comes to the reports submitted at the Committee Stage, it can be argued that these are not narratives “proper.” The intent of the authors is not the construction of a story: these reports are not intended to be processed in that way or to serve a storytelling purpose. Rather, the intention is to create a persuasive, argument one based on reasoning, statistical data and case studies to persuade law makers to make the changes they desire. Returning to Ryan’s distinction above, the reports, therefore, do not contain the property of “being” a narrative. Yet, what each of these reports do possess is a level of “narrativity,” namely myriad prototypical features that can be recognised as narrative (see Ryan, 2007, pp. 28-31 for the “fuzzy-set” definition of narrative). There is a world populated with individuated existents (characters and objects), for example victims of DVA and the various agencies who provide support. This world is situated in time and undergoes significant transformations, whether that is the lack of joined-up government action to tackle VAWG which has undermined responses to DVA, or the Covid-19 pandemic which exposed the lack of protection and support for all survivors. These physical events are associated with ‘intelligent agents’ who have a mental state and react emotionally; and the sequence events are given coherence, motivation, closure and intelligibility, so that they are able to communicate something meaningful to the audience (Ryan, [2005] 2008, p 347). Indeed, within these narrative forms, there is causal-chronological organisation, a focus on particularised situations and events, and crucially “a structured relationship with background assumptions and expectations” (Herman, 2007, p. 279). Those background assumptions and expectations that form part of the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse. Thus, while readers might not instinctively view these submissions in the debate stages of a bill’s passage through Parliament as “being narratives,” they nonetheless possess sufficient narrativity to elicit and inspire a narrative response. The “fuzziness” of the category, rather than its discrete boundaries, allows us to account for these reports as narrative forms without, as Herman cautions against, hyperextending the term (2007, p. 279).

### **CASE STUDY: A GENDER NEUTRAL OR GENDERED DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC ABUSE?**

The Domestic Abuse Act’s gender-neutral definition of domestic abuse, provided under section 1, is one of the most controversial, and contested,

elements of the final Act. Certainly, it has the potential to raise awareness as with its reference to abusive “behaviour,” which it defines as physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; and psychological, emotional or other abuse (s.1(3) Domestic Abuse Act 2021). It provides legal recognition of the non-physical harm that can constitute domestic abuse, although only time will tell if this definition will “replace alternative ones currently in existence in the legal system, and among statutory agencies and service providers” (Bishop, 2021, p. 166). For the purposes of this article, however, the aspect of the definition that I will focus on is its gender-neutral nature. Namely that in this definition, there is no statutory recognition of the gendered dynamics of domestic violence and abuse. Multiple attempts to counter this fundamental script of the master narrative were made during the Bill’s passage through Parliament, however these endeavours to confront and reveal the inaccuracies of this script were ‘lost in translation’. As a result, the final definition has been criticised for failing ‘to engage with the broader cultural and social conditions in which male violence and abuse against intimate partners and children is enabled to take root’ (Bishop, 2021, p. 166).

Of the 96 submissions made to Parliament during the debate stages of the Bill, I’ve selected one joint written evidence submission from twenty-nine VAWG sector organisations (DAB32). These organisations included Women’s Aid, Respect, Refuge, End Violence Against Women, Women’s Resource Centre and Standing Together Against Domestic Violence. In it, these organisations advocated for a number of recommendations which they viewed as key to the success of the Bill and the wider non-legislative package of action, including an accurate definition of domestic abuse which recognised the gendered nature of the crime. The submission argued thus (3-4):

Domestic abuse is a devastating form of violence against women and girls (VAWG) – a cause and consequence of women’s inequality [...] We are clear, however, that this is also required in statute to ensure compliance with international law [...] A gendered definition is crucial to guide effective and safe responses that meet survivors’ needs [...]

This narrative, jointly produced by the twenty-nine VAWG sector organisations, reveals the structured relationship it (and by extension these organisations) has with the background assumptions and expectations of the master narrative of DVA. However, its “story” attempts to foreground an entirely different reality to the one

told by the master narrative and that the proposed legislation aims to preserve. Rather than continuing with one which privileges neutrality, this report highlights the problems that reside in such a definition. For these organisations, they draw on the countering resource that the role of gender cannot be ignored and that women are disproportionately the victims of repeated and severe forms of abuse. Instead, the report frames DVA as “a cause and consequence of women’s inequality” (DAB32, p. 3), or as “a patriarchal issue of male dominance” (Andrus, 2021, p. 62; Stark, 2007). As Stark reasons, domestic violence and abuse is “a course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control” (2007: 5). Indeed, there are further examples of such “stories” focusing on challenging gender bias within the written submissions from the Parliamentary debates, as part of continuing attempts to reframe the conversation and counter the master narrative about domestic violence and abuse. For all of these organisations, there is a fallacy in a gender-neutral definition for a gendered crime and their narrative attempts to disrupt the canonical course of events and the corresponding master narrative.

However, while this category of narrative in the Committee Stage written evidence privileged the gendered construction of DVA and attempted to act as discursive resistance to that element of the master narrative, a second category of narrative also emerged comprising of a range of “stories” for why the definition should be gender neutral. Once again, reminding us that counter narratives are not pure, monolithic or uniform, and here in the Parliamentary Debates, they collide with, and counter, one another as well. Written evidence submitted by Tim Tierney (DAB56) and Andrew Pain (DAB60) reveal two different narratives which aim to challenge not only the gendered counter narrative outlined above, but also attempt to challenge the classic script that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. In contrast to the submission jointly authored by twenty-nine VAWG sector organisations, both DAB56 and DAB60 are written by individual men, in the first person, as male survivors of domestic violence and abuse. Each submission tells the man’s own story of abuse, and in this way can be much more readily quantified as a narrative “proper.” For example, in DAB56, the narrative outlined reveals Tierney’s experience as a male victim, undergoing abuse for over four years before “escaping” to meet a close friend who helped him understand he was a domestic abuse victim. The narrative continues as Tierney recounts the issues he encountered with the police and how they “refused to view any of my evidence which demonstrated she was the abuser” (DAB56). Returning to Prince’s definition of “being a narrative,” this text clearly concerns the representation of multiple real

events in a time sequence, which are meaningfully connected. It undoubtedly conveys a story: a chronological representation of human experience, with causally linked events and purposeful action by characters, which is unlike the report submitted in DAB32. As a result of each man's experience of domestic violence and abuse at the hands of their female partner, their submissions argued for a fully gender inclusive and neutral statutory definition of domestic abuse. For them, discussions around DVA are "gynocentric, with gamma bias" and "if gender was placed in the statutory definition, then this will lead to the creation of a victim hierarchy [...] not in keeping with equality-based, diverse or inclusive policy making or law" (DAB60).

Both of these narratives (DAB56 and DAB60) present a duality of contestation, where they are competing for recognition and tellability greater than not only the other categories of counter narrative, but also the culturally accepted narrative that all perpetrators are men and all victims are women. They subsequently exhibit several aspects of counter narrative. Indeed, foregrounding their experience as male victims of DVA and using this as a countering resource has allowed each of these narratives to draw on the voice of a homodiegetic narrator. A voice which is itself outside the mainstream of counter narratives of domestic violence and abuse. Why, then, did this particular counter narrative "win" the so-called contest in law reform? I suggest that the fact this counter narrative paid respect to the individual experience, and was manifested on an individual level, provided the narrator "with more tellability and individuality" (Hyvärinen, 2022, p. 27) compared not only to the master narrative, but the gendered counter narrative too. In short, the gendered counter narrative of DVA as a patriarchal problem is now more abstract and faceless that it resembles less of a tellable counter narrative and more of a master narrative that needs correcting.

In addition, when told to an institution, such as the law, which is "saturated with patriarchal ideals and values" (Andrus, 2021, p. 54), the narratological power of this gendered counter narrative is diminished. Its power remains "situationally and contextually dependent" (Bamberg and Wipff, 2022, p. 78), relative to the very institution it is trying to build a dialogic connection with. The lack of congruence, then, between these counter narratives ultimately contributes to the positioning of some as more "successful" in law reform efforts. Their very nature as counter narratives, with a lack of uniformity between stories of individual storytellers and stories of organisations, means that some narratives will "win" the contest in law reform efforts and others will not. Legislation will not, and cannot, reflect all those counter narratives drawing on different and contradictory countering resources. Rather, it is those counter narratives with a

greater illocutionary force, with a greater narratological power, which are the ones that can be a successful tool in law reform. And in this case, it was the real, tellable stories of individual male victims of DVA who managed to effect a narrative shift in the legislation and counter the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse.

### CONCLUSION

Starting with the premise that the law is full of narrative, and that written submissions in Parliamentary Debates “possess narrativity,” allows for a narrative inquiry framed by discussions of master and counter narratives. In particular, considering the counter narratives presented in the course of debates on the Domestic Abuse Bill (now Domestic Abuse Act 2021) carries with it the benefit of casting light on the dialogic connection which emerges between counter narratives and legislation, and how counter narratives can act as discursive resistance to change the master narrative of DVA through the mechanism of the law. For the Parliamentary debates not only draw our attention to their status as a site for counter narratives but also demonstrate that a binary understanding of master and counter narratives is at best inapplicable and, at worst, reductive. Rather, here is a site where different counter narratives collide and contest with one another, with each narrator drawing on contradictory countering resources as they attempt to utilise the law to challenge the master narrative.

Subsumed within this, different counter narratives emerged on the issue of gender neutrality in the proposed statutory definition of domestic abuse, revealing the complexity of this dynamic relationship. Each counter narrative, whether put forth by a group of VAWG sector organisations or by individual men speaking as male victim survivors of DVA, had their own aim and agenda, pitting their illocutionary force and narratological power against one another. The lack of congruence and uniformity, then, is the very reason why legislative efforts (whether in this area of DVA or others) will never be able to solely serve as part of a corrective move to tackle or dismantle a systemic master narrative. The law cannot, and will not, embody all counter narratives, and it is only those with greater tellability and individuality that ultimately succeed in effecting a narrative shift in the legislation, with the others “lost in translation” in their attempts to contest and counter the master narrative of domestic violence and abuse.

This paper, thus, has sought to foreground the application of counter narrative theory and its value in providing a pathway for understanding specifically the dynamics of master-counter narratives in the context of law reform efforts. In this way, such a framework can be useful for exploring not only the legal-social

dynamics in narrative struggles over social “truths,” but for understanding the efficacy, or lack thereof, of individuals and organisations who wish to use legislation to effect social change.

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