

Chapter 7

Therapeutic Latinx Story-Sharing or Chismorro



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Abstract Through the lens of de Cervantes’s classic Spanish novel, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, we discuss the nature of language and reality and the idea of therapeutic story-sharing or *chismorro* (gossiping). Within the Latinx community, the oral practice of *chismear* or *chismorrear* is a common communicational practice that involves imagination, fascination, and novelty (Tanaka, *Fermentum. Revista Venezolana de Sociología y Antropología* 17:646–672, 2007). In this chapter, we explore how Spanish-speaking marriage and family therapy (MFT) supervisors and therapists, at Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, embrace their novelistic imagination to explore clients’ resourceful identities, peripheral stories, and undefined journeys.

In this chapter, we¹ focus on our linguistic practices as bilingual (Spanish/English) family therapists working in academic and clinical settings. Within these contexts, we have been challenged with the question of figuring out how to switch codes between English and Spanish. We (Carlos and Jimena) received our marriage and family therapy (MFT) training in English, and we are now teaching, supervising, and doing clinical work in both English and Spanish at Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU), San Antonio. Alvaro is currently finishing his MFT training and Psychological Services for Spanish Speaking Populations certificate at OLLU and has been seeing clients in both English and Spanish at our university-sponsored community clinic. In the process of doing this, we have encountered issues of

¹We, Carlos, Jimena, and Alvaro, embrace the term Latinx to refer to our linguistic and cultural commonalities while also embracing our cultural idiosyncrasies. Born in Venezuela to Cuban parents, Carlos emigrated to Miami as a toddler. Jimena is from Cali, Colombia, and she has been living in the USA for over 10 years. Alvaro was born in Mexico and emigrated to Texas as a child.

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untranslatability, as polanco (2016) suggested: the words and meanings we construct and perform in “one language often becomes inaccessible or untranslatable to be performed in the other” (p. 69). Thus, rather than translating therapeutic ideas and questions from one language to the other, we have engaged our imaginations as polanco invited. For this, we have drawn ideas from de Cervantes’s classic Spanish novel, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (2004). We have also allowed the flair of the Latinx social practice of *chismorrear*, *chismosear*, or *chusmear* (i.e., gossiping)² to flow through our conversations and therapeutic practices.

Bakhtin, Don Quijote, and the Art of Story-Sharing

Bakhtin (1981) suggested that “Language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary” (p. 288). He casted light on the multi-voicedness of dialogical engagement, and he considered the novel as the quintessential genre in which this polyphony can take place. According to Villanueva (in de Cervantes 2015), the classic novel *Don Quijote de la Mancha* is an example of Bakhtin’s *dialogism*, or “dialogue between languages” (p. xvi). In *Don Quijote*, de Cervantes (2004, 2015) weaves in multiple narrator voices, dialogues between the different characters, between the author and his creation, and various idiosyncrasies, slangs, and expressions informed by different senses. The pattern of interaction among the characters revolved around the exchange of stories and experiences, regardless of “reality,” objectivity, truthfulness, and/or sanity.

This contested idea of sanity or reality is mainly depicted in Cervantes’s main character, Don Quijote, who, as an expert in the antiquated practice of chivalry, “created a self-image from books...of heroic deeds of medieval knights” (Slade 2004, p. 55). Under this pretense, Quijote embarked on an elusive journey to combat evil or as he claimed, “to extirpate such a wicked race from the face of the [E]arth” (de Cervantes 2004, p. 55). Along with befriending neighborhood countryman Sancho Panza, Don Quijote interacted with a variety of other characters with rich and detailed stories during his heroic quest. Despite that others questioned Quijote’s reality, they also engaged in the art of vividly telling their stories. One of them, Cardenio, whom the local goatherd considered a “lunatic,” shared his story of misfortune with Don Quijote. Cardenio had taken refuge in the Sierra Morena, a remote and rural area in the mountains, after having discovered that he was betrayed by his compadre Don Fernando, who exploited his position of wealth and power to enamor Cardenio’s one true love, Luscinda. “Listen[ing] with vast attention” (de Cervantes 2004 p. 182), Don Quijote “promised, in behalf of himself and the company, to

²The words *chismorrear*, *chismear*, or *chusmear* will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter. These words are used in different Latin American countries to refer to the linguistic and sociocultural practice of telling *chismes*, that is, of sharing intimate stories about others who are not present (Tanaka 2007). We are using the word gossiping as the closest translation in English; however, we acknowledge that the felt sense of the *chismear* cannot be captured in translation.

avoid all manner of interruptions” (p. 183). As a result of their plurilinguistic engagement, the characters’ identities and aspirations transformed as they shared their stories and realities yet to never be the same.

Language(s) and the Construction of Reality

Social constructionists emphasize the role of language in the construction of reality (Gergen 2015). The language we speak shapes our perception, the ways we describe experiences or construe events (Boroditsky 2011). For instance, “bilinguals change how they see the world depending on which language they are speaking” (p. 65). This is evident in the therapeutic context, in which bilingual and multilingual clients may bring forward different selves when they switch languages (Rolland et al. 2017).

As bilingual (English/Spanish and Spanglish) family therapists, we have been ruminating with questions related to the unique qualities that our journey across languages brings to the conversations with our clients. We have been wondering what happens in our traveling back and forth “in the space in between . . . [the] distinct and particular visions of life” (polanco 2016, p. 69) that our languages bring and in the plurilinguistic dialogues in which we engage. In this quest, we and our students have noticed that our ways of engaging in therapy have a unique taste depending on the language we speak; our story-sharing in Spanish has a different pace, emotionality, logic, flow, and so on. We have also recognized that our conversations are not always straightforward or linear. Thus, to help us describe our dialogical practices, we became curious about what the practice of *chismorroeo* entailed.

Latinx Therapeutic *Chismorroeo*

Some authors (e.g., Fasano et al. 2009; Tanaka 2007) have pointed to the sociocultural, therapeutic, and identity constitutive functions of the Latinx practice of *chismorroeo*, *chusmear*, and *chismear* (i.e., gossiping).³ Tanaka (2007) considered it as a social and dialogical practice, in which the participants tell, create, and reconstruct the information that is passed on. The practice of *chismorroeo* usually happens in small groups where participants know and trust each other. They gossip about people who are not present, and the stories they tell transform as they are being told (Tanaka 2007, p. 650). The accuracy or the truthfulness of the stories is irrelevant. In the process of sharing them, they become real.

³In a review of the literature, Tanaka (2007) noted that the practice of gossiping has been studied in different social contexts throughout history. Some studies focused on highlighting negative and serious consequences of the practice (e.g., moral sanction and public humiliation), whereas others have pointed toward its positive aspects (e.g., promoting friendship and facilitating group cohesion, among others).

Similar to the art of story-sharing in *Don Quijote*, with its sensory details and plurilinguistic richness, Latinx *chismorro* also involves imagination, fascination, and novelty. In addition to its social function, the practice of *chismorrear* has also been deemed therapeutic. It opens the dialogical space for the participants to connect with each other and to embrace the complexities of human's thoughts and emotions (Tanaka 2007). This communicational practice allows the participants to understand themselves within the context of a community (Fasano et al. 2009). Explaining the practice through Bakhtin's ideas, Fasano et al. (2009) suggested that through the *chusmeo*, the participants construct the other in reference to who they are and vice versa. They engage in a relational discursive practice, which "double-ness" allows them to *ser de acá y ser diferente* (to be from here and to be different) (p. 75).

Our Story-Sharing

The world is nothing if not stories, stories we tell ourselves to live.
(Stavans 2018, p. 55)

Let us introduce you to *unos chismes*, or a few stories, about our clinical experiences. We hope to bring the spirit of *Don Quixote*, *Sancho Panza*, and a few other characters in Cervantes's novel, whose plurilinguistic engagement allowed them to experience themselves differently (to be transformed), as they crossed back and forth between their realities. Like the characters in *Don Quixote*, our Spanish-speaking clients vividly and passionately share their (most often elaborate and emotional) stories. They invite us into their world through narratives about themselves and/or others or, as we have described, therapeutic *chismorro*. Through these stories, we get a better understanding of our clients' dreams, hopes, struggles, experiences, relationships, worldviews, purpose, and so on.

While our clients share their stories, we tend to adopt a *Don Quixote* stance, in which we listen with "vast attention" (de Cervantes 2004, p. 182). We would describe, however, our listening posture as having a novelistic intention. We listen "with an openness to hearing the clients' stories more than listening for symptoms or to develop insight" (Hibel and Polanco 2010, pp. 51–52) while participating with our clients in a plurilinguistic story-sharing.

*Chismeando con Lina*⁴

A woman (Lina), who lost her husband a while ago, came to our clinic. Lina mentioned that she and her adult children have been coping with their pain by supporting each other. Family was very important to them. While explaining how all the fingers in a hand relate to each other, she described her family. We acknowledged and validated her family's ability to work together. Then, we became curious about what had brought her to our clinic. Lina had been really sick and close to dying. While in the hospital, she had lost consciousness and was in what she understood the process of dying. She found herself in darkness but then saw a light and a tunnel. Her husband was there extending his hand. He seemed to be at peace. Lina felt compelled to take his hand and follow him, but suddenly, she remembered her children. As soon as this happened, she could not see her husband anymore and was awakened (came back to life). Since then, she has been feeling "culpable" (guilty). She felt guilty for coming back to life and not following him, and she also felt guilty about her guilt because she should have not desired this.

Midway through the session, we decided to conduct a reflecting team (Andersen 1987). In a reflecting team, the team members usually comment on what they have learned from the client and share their curiosities about the situation, while the clients listen to the conversation. Although reflecting teams are very common in MFT training settings, therapists have approached them in various ways depending on their intentionality and therapeutic assumptions. In our experimenting with them, we have noticed that our ways of reflecting have changed because of our work with Spanish-speaking clients. We embrace our clients as if we were in a family gathering. Some of us might sit on the floor, if there are not enough spaces for all of us. We might be quite loud and *dicharacheros* (i.e., chatty) or serious and solemn, depending on the situation. There are no strict rules about how this dialogue needs to unfold; however, the team members usually reflect on what they have heard from the client and how the clients' stories have touched them (us). We do this while sharing our own personal and professional stories. Jimena, for instance, shared a story of her father whose right thumb had been amputated when he was diagnosed with melanoma 10 years ago. From writing to grabbing things, everything was a struggle for him, and it was also painful. He suffered from phantom limb pain. He got mad and sad; yet somehow, he kept going while re-learning how to work with his four-fingered hand.

Similar to what happens in the practice of chismorroreo, we related to Lina's stories from our own vantage point. This positioning allowed us to be with her and to be ourselves, to cross back and forth between our realities. As Fasano et al. (2009) suggested, *ser de acá y ser diferente* (to be from here and to be different) (p. 75).

⁴The conversation with Lina was conducted in Spanish. The team members who participated during the initial conversation included the co-therapists (Alvaro and Erric), the supervisor behind the mirror (Jimena), and four other therapists in training (i.e., Celeste, Ann, Areli, and Valerie). During the follow-up session, Carlos was the supervisor behind the mirror.

Immersed in our plurilinguistic engagement with Lina, we acknowledged the complexity of her situation and reflected on her family's values and strengths. We also sprinkled some novel elements and shared our doubts about her interpretation of what her husband may have wanted to communicate in her dream by extending his hand. As Fasano et al. (2009) noted, for *chisme* to be possible there needs to be an "undefined" territory (p. 78). It is in this undefined territory where new stories can be born. We acknowledged that it made sense that she had thought that her husband wanted her to follow him, given how close they were, and we also wondered out loud if perhaps he wanted to communicate something else. Given that he seemed peaceful in her dream, we suggested that perhaps he wanted to tell her he was fine, so she could continue her life. Our client told us that she had not thought about it in that way but that it was certainly a possibility because her husband cared for her and her family. During the follow-up session, Lina appeared to be relaxed. Her concern about her dream and decision to remain in this world was no longer a concern.

*Chismeando con Lazara and Juan*⁵

This *chisme* is about two Mexican Spanish-speaking parents (Juan and Lazara) who had a story to share. They wanted their son (Armando) to quit smoking marijuana because of its hallucinatory effects. Armando was never physically present in any of the sessions, but his story (*chisme*) was salient despite his absence. In the initial session, they described a variety of pathological ways that marijuana provoked insanity in their son, which included hallucinations, paranoia, and distancing himself from friends. Although most of the descriptions of Armando had negative connotations, we listened with vast attention and curiosity.

Buried within these pathological descriptions, the therapists discovered Armando's dream of becoming a farmer and being able to economically provide for his parents in the future. As the focus shifted to Armando's aspirations, the topic of marijuana became less of a concern. Juan and Lazara then felt a sense of comfort with the therapists and shared their personal *chismes*. Juan mentioned that he had always worked hard and spent 12–14 hours on his farm developing his agriculture. Lazara's story revolved around religion and her devotion to the Catholic church, as well as her role as a mother, having raised two magnificent children.

We wondered about Juan's strengths, his work ethic, in relation to Armando's aspirations to become a farmer and his dedication to provide for his parents. Juan mentioned that Armando used to help out at the farm. However, because of his marijuana use and abnormal behaviors, Juan and Lazara thought it was safer for Armando to stay home. Although we understood their concern, we asked Juan if he would be willing to try an experiment. The experiment was to choose any day of the week in

⁵In this *chisme*, Alvaro was one of the therapists, and Carlos was the supervisor observing behind the one-way mirror. All conversations were in Spanish.

which Juan felt safe and comfortable inviting Armando to the farm to help with the labor. The second part of this experiment, which was a bit more unusual, was to remain open and receptive to any conversations or topics that could come up. Essentially, we were asking Juan to curiously immerse himself in Armando's reality with the intention of allowing his son to tell his story, regardless of the "truthfulness" or "sanity" of it. Some would say that we suggested a Don Quijote and Sancho Panza relationship, in which two different realities (or understandings of the world) were able to converge.

We provided a similar suggestion to Lazara. Curious about the family's devotion to Catholicism, we wondered if they spoke about God or prayed at home. Lazara said that she wanted to dedicate more time to praying for Armando, so we suggested if she would be willing to pray with him about any concern, regardless of the concern. A few weeks after these suggestions, Juan and Lazara described a variety of changes. Juan mentioned that he invited Armando to the farm and both had worked most of the week. Juan provided a specific example of how he was able to immerse himself in Armando's reality. While working, Armando mentioned that he felt uncomfortable because there were people watching and criticizing him. Rather than trying to persuade Armando otherwise, Juan listened and agreed with Armando that others were watching and criticizing but because they were envious of his work ethic. Juan mentioned that Armando agreed and continued to work.

Lazara said she was able to spend more time with Armando. They started to randomly pray throughout the day and continued to go to church on Sundays. In our last session, Lazara mentioned that a priest randomly approached them and recommended that they should believe their son's unique experiences because the devil does exist. The priest had now become a part of this plurilinguistic engagement. At that moment, Lazara mentioned that she became more understanding and accepting of Armando's experiences, and what they thought was insanity was a reality they were initially unable to understand.

Closing Comments

When we engage with our clients in some sort of therapeutic *chismorro*, we are not concerned with the trueness or sanity of their stories but with creating a dialogical space for our voices to create together. Latinx MFTs could be inspired to embrace their clients' *chismes* and explore with them undefined territories. By means of their novelistic imagination, therapists and clients could share *chismes*, stories, metaphors, ideas, and therapeutic suggestions.

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