

## **Voices of ethnicity: a metaphor for creating conversations that lead to collaborative therapeutic contracts**

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**“Curación y cultura están en una relación mutua y, dado que la evolución cultural es un proceso abierto, tampoco la teoría y la práctica de la curación pueden alcanzar nunca un punto final definitivo.” (Kurt Ludewig, 1996)**

En el presente artículo exponemos la problemática de la dificultad en hacer contratos efectivos en la práctica privada de la psicoterapia. Los acuerdos son transgredidos con frecuencia por parte de nuestros pacientes. En nuestra opinión se relaciona con el contexto de incertidumbre que domina el país donde ejercemos, un contexto de guerra, crisis económica y derrumbe de valores éticos. También pensamos que existe un aspecto que complejiza más la situación que es la propia historia y construcción de ésta sociedad.

Con el ánimo de facilitar nuestra reflexión elaboramos una metáfora como ayuda en la comprensión de éste fenómeno, la cuál consiste en la exploración del mestizaje y de las voces étnicas que se esconden en él. Esto nos ha facilitado entender que en el encuentro terapéutico el cliente trae además de la voz que se relaciona explícitamente con nosotros otras voces silenciosas en el discurso pero que tienen un gran poder de acción y que con frecuencia obviamos.

Al mismo tiempo en los terapeutas también reconocemos un mestizaje en su cultura terapéutica. Esta está conformada por su cultura personal y además la cultura conceptual, teórica y técnica de otros terapeutas pertenecientes a otros contextos donde han diseñado su forma de hacer terapia. Ellos con sus visitas y sus libros nos han también mestizado.

Entonces vemos que el encuentro terapeuta-cliente es un encuentro de alta complejidad en el cuál múltiples voces de lado y lado están presentes en la conversación. Con frecuencia nosotros terapeutas obviamos las voces silenciosas del cliente e incluso las nuestras propias. Esto contribuye a que los acuerdos se hagan desde la perspectiva de las voces dominantes en el encuentro pero no el de las voces con poder de acción.

A partir de ello, hacemos una propuesta de cómo podemos entender y comprender éste proceso y además, de cómo debería ser el encuentro para que en la acción tenga efectividad; pues consideramos que de ello depende la posibilidad de producir cambios en la terapia.

### **Abstract**

From the Milan school's perspective, the process of establishing a workable therapeutic contract is vital in therapy. This article describes one way that a group of therapists in Bogotá, Colombia use their understanding of ethnic voices and the deconstruction of contextual forces as a means of developing "workable therapeutic contracts". The authors, who are systemic therapists working in a private setting create an ethnic metaphor that facilitates the management of problem issues related to the way clients "make and break scheduled appointments, use and misuse in-therapy time, and withhold payment of agreed upon professional fees". By analyzing these issues through the lenses of culture and ethnicity, the authors develop a metaphor of "mestizaje" that refers to the ethnic and racial crossbreeding which took place in Colombia and most of Latin America. They build a story that helps them initiate a new form of dialoguing with clients to develop a collaborative therapeutic space, time and language. The story around the "mestizaje" that began during the colonization of the New World provides the therapists with an inner map that helps them discuss problem issues, to allow the building of a new therapeutic culture where collaborative and meaningful change can begin to take place.

### **Introduction: culture as context**

Understanding things in context has been essential to Systemic thinkers from its earliest stages. (Bateson,1972). As psychotherapists working in a private setting in Bogotá, Colombia; we have become sensitive to the influence of context in our professional role and work place. Colombia is a country that has been experiencing an "irregular" or undeclared war fought between the State , the Guerrilla and Paramilitary rebel groups for over 50 years. This confrontation which began as a struggle between political parties to obtain the control of the country has produced a culture of violence, despair, negativity, and disbelief in the State's ability to protect its people. (Rangel Suarez, 1999). Today the drug lords have joined forces with the Guerrilla groups in an added effort to strengthen their mutual goal of weakening the State's ability to govern and maintain peace. This prolonged confrontation has also created real problems that are experienced by citizens on a daily basis: severe economic depression, over 20% unemployment rate, hundreds of families fleeing daily (desplazados) from the rural farm lands to the crowded cities, as well as the emigration of the wealthy leading class abandoning the country in hopes of protecting their economic situation. (Galindo C.et al, 1999) Additionally, the Guerrilla has found another fruitful way of increasing their power by kidnapping men, women and children; a practice that provides a steady income of thousands of dollars on a daily basis and weakens people's faith in the State's ability to protect them. Political and social corruption are rampant , thereby creating a great deal of anxiety and the expressed feeling that people need to create their own laws and take care of themselves in order to survive in a "dog eat dog" environment. Therapy takes place in a socio-economic and political context where personal security is at constant risk.

The economic recession and the increasing rate of unemployment or sub-employment experienced by families places a strain on potential clients since psychotherapy is not covered by most insurance companies or state health programs. Potential clients must pay for their own treatment; therefore the re-negotiation of the terms and the fees are brought up as often as possible in order to accommodate the deteriorating situation.

The Therapeutic relationship is influenced by cultural practices of “regateo” (bartering and negotiating for price cuts) that was customary only in the food markets and the rural areas. Difficulties arise when the basic conditions of the “therapeutic contract” are expected to be re-defined each time the client so desires. Given that the success of the therapy is based on the “co-ordinated use of language and meaning” created by therapist and clients; the therapeutic process is placed at risk each time that agreements are broken or brought up for re-negotiation. For example, a client may accept the conditions of the cancellation policy and then feels insulted by the therapist when fees are charged regarding an unattended session by saying “since I forgot, I shouldn’t have to pay; you should have reminded me”, or, a client arrives half an hour late and expects to be given a full session of therapy. Other situations that are frequent are the following: “I forgot my check book today, I’ll pay you next time”, “Didn’t we agree on another price?”, “Can’t we change that, I don’t remember agreeing to that.” Clients repeatedly disregard their initial agreements, and prefer terminating the relationship than being held accountable.

Although a greater number of people look at therapy as a relationship where personal, family and work problems can be resolved, fewer therapeutic contracts are followed through due to the “contradictions” that are lived out between action and meaning surrounding issues that are essential to the therapeutic relationship.

In a culture of violence where feelings of impotence and fear abound, “la palabra no vale” (a person’s word is worthless), the act of doing therapy is confronted with the need to create a “client-therapist culture and grammar” in which the meanings of words are supported through actions so that positive change can take place.

### **Ethnicity as context**

It is in this cultural context, as we experience it, that we set out to analyze shared difficulties in maintaining workable therapy contracts. From a second order perspective we looked at our contracting procedures from two cultural viewpoints: the “foreign” therapeutic culture and the “surrounding” client culture. We considered our therapeutic culture, its beliefs and the actions that were considered essential for a good therapeutic relationship, to be foreign for our clients relate to.

We initially described our difficulties by adapting Bowen’s concept of the “undifferentiated ego mass” as one where “our undifferentiated mass of meanings” needed to be untangled (Bowen, 1991). We worked on deconstructing client-therapist episodes using cultural context and ethnicity.

On the one hand we analyzed the contextual forces experienced by the country’s culture of violence and insecurity and considered our sense of belonging and participation in the surrounding culture (Pearce, 1994). We then studied the ethnic

composition of our clients and analyzed how we saw ethnic factors being played out in their personal and social lives. We agree with Harlene Andersen's idea that "the discourse of therapy and the system it forms takes place in a broader social, cultural, political and economic context where new meanings can evolve only if a *collaborative therapist-client relationship* is created" (Andersen, 1997). We set out to understand how these non-collaborative client and therapist episodes were occurring. A new understanding of how ethnicity and culture give meaning to our clients' actions developed, allowing us to relate to our clients in a more constructive way where a shared therapeutic culture and grammar emerged and facilitated changes in building therapeutic contracts.

We understand ethnicity as a silent force that brings forth from the past both individual and group meanings that are active in the present. In agreement with Watzlawick, we believe that our cultural values and assumptions are generally outside of our awareness while simultaneously playing a profound role in the organization of our lives. Individuals see the world through their own "cultural filters", stubbornly persisting in maintaining established views despite clear evidence to the contrary (Watzlawick, 1992).

We have created a story regarding the "mestizaje" or cross breeding of races and ethnic groups in Colombia as a way to help us understand the powerful influence of ethnicity, history and culture in giving meaning to behaviors. A sense of belonging and of historical continuity is understandably a basic psychological need. Individuals may ignore or hide their roots by changing their names, rejecting their families and social backgrounds, but they do so in detriment to their well being (McGoldrick, 1982). If family patterns and belief systems stem from people's pasts and are lived out in the present, it is important for us to understand the "mestizaje" that took place in Colombia and the "New World" after Columbus "discovered" America in 1492. Colombian cultural meanings and actions are the product of the blending of the European, African and Native Indian races that colonized this continent.

### **Building a metaphor by looking at the historical practice of mestizaje or crossbreeding**

As a means for understanding the problem issues at hand we have developed a metaphor that has served as a mental map to guide the complex interaction of the personal and professional cultures of both client and therapist in the contractual stage of therapy. We have identified what we consider to be both the *audible and silent voices of each of the major ethnic groups* that are part of the Colombian cultural heritage and developed an understanding of how they are present and give meaning to the difficulties we described above.

Our new understanding has to do with the way that actions and meanings were crossbred by the Native Indians, the Spaniards and the Africans in order to live together in a shared geographical space. Our metaphor has to do with how these ethnic groups blended their understanding and management of time, the use of space and the use of language and meaning, considering these elements as critical to our therapeutic practice.

Given that the Indians inhabited this land when the Spaniards conquered and colonized the "new world", we asked ourselves what could have happened to their sense of being

and belonging when a new culture, language and way of life took over. For the Indians life was determined by their gods and by nature. Time, which was determined by nature's own movements, was modified by the anthropocentric and the linear time of the Spanish invader. This new experience of "foreign" time placed man as the organizer and the controller of an element that could be found on an object (a clock) and was transferable from one place to another. It determined a past, present and future for the native that was separate from the cycles, time intervals and patterns set by nature. This ethnic characteristic of the Spaniard came into contact with the ethnic practices of the native Indian whose concept and management of time had been profoundly ecological and cyclical. For the Indian only nature could create change by means of repetitive life giving, life-taking cycles. These natural and recursive cycles joined man and nature in a mutually interdependent existence. There was no need to talk about past, present and future as defined by man when nature provided all meaning and organization through cyclical movements.

The Spanish conquistadors also imposed a new definition of space. During the colonization period, land began to be defined by boundaries and landmarks which made it easier to possess. Space became an object that could be taken away, transformed and stolen. Space became manipulable; it could be drawn on a map which could be used as a document to show proof of its existence and ownership. Drawings of the land became documents that made space negotiable and transferable from one person to the other, making it unnecessary for an owner to be present at the time of the transaction. Based on the understanding that documents have value in and of themselves, space was no longer determined by the relationship between man and nature, it was now assigned to documents.

For the native Indian, space was unlimited and had been communally shared. Land was not possessed and there were no man-made boundaries. With the arrival of the Spaniard this communal, undefined space was re-defined, circumscribed and dis-possessed. An example of this is the indian reservations that were created after the colonization period.

The use of the Spanish language and the meanings of its words were also imposed. The Spanish settlers used their language to control the people and the land; making their voice (Spanish) the only one heard and listened to, thereby, pushing the native Indian voice into silence and secrecy. In the interaction of these two ethnic groups, native Indians began to transform their own language, words and meanings into a silent language. The native Indian was forced to accept an imposed language, and a culture of multiple levels of meaning and action emerged; a culture which is expressed in the loud Spanish voices of dominance and the underlying silenced (not extinguished) voices of the native Indians. The "voices heard" and the "voices silenced" were equally present but not equally considered.

Having identified the first two major ethnic groups, we now turn to the third group: the Black Africans. This racial group was violently torn from its habitat and brought by force to a foreign land where the Spaniards were conquerors and rulers. Africans were forced to break ties with their language, their people and their land. They were uprooted

and displaced to an exotic and unfamiliar place. They were incarcerated in boats that travelled the oceans for months and made them lose all sense of time, being and belonging. Together with the native Indians they shared an understanding of ecological time. In the dark boats without sunlight, time could only be experienced by the natural, physiological processes and the changes that took place within their bodies. Their bodies became their sole and most important possession.

As the European conquerors took over and “created the new world” both the native Indians and the Africans experienced a brutal loss in their ability to protect themselves and the land. They no longer belonged to their land. Their bodies were their sole belongings. The Indians were subjugated and the Africans are enslaved. With time, the native Indians were given areas of land where they are allowed to re-establish their culture. But most often the lands that were returned were not the rich extensions they once occupied and enjoyed. They were given wastelands, the undesired and barren areas that the Spaniards did not want.

The African languages were extinguished rapidly and by force. Unlike the Indians who were allowed to stay in groups, the Africans were spread out and had no one of their own ethnic group to converse and relate to. They were coerced into acquiring a new language and way of life. They had no voice. The Spanish language became dominant. The Indian voice was subjugated; and the African voice was silenced. The African’s manner of expression was then transferred to their body; their dances, movements and chanted sounds became a unique and genuine form of expressing meaning, feelings and beliefs.

“Mestizaje” (crossbreeding) allowed these three ethnic systems to come together in a way that allowed people to stay alive and to develop the culture of the inhabitants of today. Every individual is a hybrid of the Spanish, Indian and African people and cultures that historically inhabited this land. On occasion in any one person or situation the characteristics of three ethnic groups are present; only one may be clearly expressed while the others remain in silence. This complex cohabitation of cultures is neither good nor bad, it is a blending of the differences that co-exist in the Colombian community of today.

The mixing of time concepts produced through the crossbreeding of ethnic groups has created some very peculiar time management practices—a hybrid blending of the ecological and the anthropocentric concepts of time. An example from daily life may explain this better; if you are invited to a social reunion at 7:00 p.m. and you arrive at the specified “man named time” you will be the only person there. What normally occurs is that people begin to arrive between one and a half to two hours later. In this two hour lapse of time each person arrives in their “personally determined time”. The blending of the anthropocentric clock time and ecological natural time becomes visible in the laxness and flexibility expressed in action (people arrive, you just don’t know when and any time is alright). There are many examples that express this crossbreeding. In this blended culture it is not so important when things are done, it is more important that they are done, and the moment is not determined by the clock; it is mandated by desire, motivation or circumstance. Things are done in response to a relational context, a specific coming together of circumstances; in other words in response to the ecology of the moment.

We now look at space management in this “mestizo culture”. A unique coming together of the meanings of what is private and what is public remains. Boundaries are consistently broken, limits are not respected. For example, buses do not stop at the delineated bus stops, they pick up their passengers wherever these may stand to flag them down. Although bus stops are physically built and assigned by civil authorities (which in one sense represent the Spanish conqueror), users decide and define their own space; a space that is momentarily determined by chance and by need—their own bodily needs. When each person raises his/her hand to detain the bus, he/she is establishing a personal space, a body space determined by personal desire, an ecological space that is responded to in a similar fashion by the bus driver who singularly chooses to stop thereby coming together in the building of a context, a space and a meaning of what is correct. What is correct is what the two of them feel can and should be done based on their bodily needs.

In the language area, studying our clients’ language gave us clues for creating the metaphor. Historically, a mixing of languages came together in a way that one word may have several meanings or several words may have the same meaning. One example that can elicit this complex hybrid of languages is the word “cola” (rearend, tail) that in the mestizo culture means the rear end or tail of a person while the original word in Spanish is “culo” and is considered an irreverent word in the mestizo language. Euphemisms become a formal and habitual way of understanding language, meanings are softened by use of alternate words, and original words are replaced. Another example is the use of the word “si” (yes) which may mean yes, no or even maybe given the circumstance and relationship in which it is used. In the process of ethnic crossbreeding some words have lost their original meaning, such as the word “verriondo” which in the sixteenth century Spanish of the traditional novel *El Lazarillo de Tormes* meant to be sexually aroused. In contemporary mestizo Spanish “verriondo” now means to be irritated or angry and is associated with violence. It is probable that when the Spanish “Conquistadores” invaded the land and the native Indian and African bodies with their sexual violence, those who were dominated related the word to the anger, aggression and violence experienced. This explains the meaning that has prevailed and the loss of the original meaning of the word.

We now understand that language also underwent a process of crossbreeding where the Spaniard, the Indian and the African co-constructed a new language that makes habitual use of euphemisms, making it difficult for a foreigner or stranger to understand the subtle and multiple meanings of language. So that when a person says “ahorita mismo” (right away), which is a common response to a favor asked, one never knows when in time the favor will be granted. It may be now, in five minutes, in two hours or in several days. Once again it takes a blending of meanings and actions to come together in a circumstantial way so that a context can be created and enacted.

### **How the ethnic metaphor has changed our practice**

The metaphor regarding the dominant and silent voices of ethnicity has become a map that guides our language and actions during the contractual phase of therapy. When we are talking with clients regarding professional fees, appointment times and the

cancellation policy we are aware that we are participating in a complex communication act where a multiplicity of voices and cultural beliefs are present. As conductors of the contractual process we listen how our “Milan and other European voices” are connecting with the Spanish and Mestizo voices of our clients. Contracting becomes a complex dance of voices and cultures that must be heard and represented if mutually respectful relationship is to develop.

Therapeutic relationships have acquired an ecosystemic perspective where clients and therapist use their ethnic and cultural meanings and actions to build a context and relationship where the expression of differences makes a difference (Bateson, 1972).

We become guests in each others cultures, thereby facilitating the construction of relationships where the respect and the dignity of all participating members is made possible (Lang, 2000).

An example, taken from a therapy session illustrates how ideas become actions that guide conversations:

Therapist: “I think that it is important to talk about my fee”

CL. “Unfortunately, yes ...”

Th. “I have a standard fee which is \$XX.00 but I also feel it is important that you and I can talk about this.”

CL. *Hesitatingly says*, “Can it be less?”

TH. *(Rather than feeling offended the therapist begins to open up a space for talking about the meaning of the request)* “Are you saying that because you always ask for a break or are you having difficulties at present?”

CL. “Well, ... both! *(Nervous laughter)* You know in this culture one always tries to get a break ... but the truth is that at this moment things are difficult.”

TH. *(Using a transitional phrase in order to create a common language)* “I know talking about money is difficult in this culture but I think it is important for us to talk clearly about this. I think that the sum we agree upon should be useful to both of us, so that we can both feel comfortable in our work.” *(This opens up the possibility for creating a context and a relationship where shared meanings can develop).*

CL. “Well, then let me explain ...”

TH. *(We now proceed to negotiate the amount until we can reach a standing agreement that allows us to continue our process. We can now begin, having established a shared meaning of what the amount means to both therapist and client, our first step of creating a therapeutic shared ethnic community).*

The contractual dialogue continues in this horizontal style of dialogical conversation. Our purpose is to show how we invite the client to contact his/her internal voices and create a space where it is possible for the client bring forth his private voices that are silenced when fees are unilaterally established by the therapist. Although this may appear to be simple, in the surrounding culture there is a predominant belief that it is wrong and humiliating to talk about money and/or to show one's poverty or limitations. This means that as therapists we are clarifying intense emotions, beliefs and prohibitions that need to be surpassed in order introduce and begin to create new meanings so that the "undifferentiated mass of meanings" can open up to the construction of a mutually respectful relationship.

### **'Regateo' or bartering**

The cultural custom of bartering has been incorporated into our practice in the following way. When we communicate to our clients what our fees are and rather than waiting for the client to say yes or no, clients are then asked "How much can you pay .... and how much are you willing to pay, so that the cost may be useful for both of us." In this manner, the client's multiple voices are brought into our conversational relationship. In being asked "what are you willing to pay" we find that clients are invited to develop an internal conversation with their voices. By formulating a question about the need to establish mutual agreement between therapist and client, the client is placed in participatory relationship where bartering and negotiating are explicitly brought into the relationship. The client's dominant voice is asked to dialogue with his/her inner voices in order to negotiate the fee. The Indian and the Black voices that are accustomed to being submitted are brought into conversation with the Spanish dominant voice that is used to accepting contracts. In this inner dialogue the mestizo voices which are habitually submitted and silenced are invited to interact and participate in the decision making process of the final fee agreement.

Bartering or negotiating time elements has also changed. Clients are now asked, "How much time do you want to invest in this process, how much are you willing to ... what is your availability?" Client and therapist interact to find mutually available times.

### **Ethnic voices used in building therapeutic contracts**

We agree with Harlene Anderson that in collaborative relationships and conversations it is important to be "aware of who is in relevant conversation with whom about the problem". We therefore used this idea to understand how multiple levels of relevance must develop while establishing therapeutic agreements (Anderson, 1997). The metaphor helped us to visualize our clients as hybrids of three underlying ethnic groups: the Spaniard, the Indian and the African. In each client we decided to ask ourselves "With which person am I talking? Which of the three is responding? To whom am I addressing this question?"

As we looked at ourselves and our professional training in order to study the therapist-client interaction an additional new meaning arose. We understood the therapeutic culture and its voices to be foreign to the client culture we were entering and at moments asked ourselves if with our questioning we were being experienced as “conquistadores” who wanted to take over the manner of living, talking and time management of the client’s culture. This led us to think of the contractual process as a possible encounter of multiple people (Spanish, Indian, African), with multiple meanings (dominant, silenced, secret), in multiple cultures and languages (Spanish, Indian or African) so that what was happening in a given moment was an ethnic encounter that required ethnic sensitivity and understanding if mutual respect and collaborative relationships and conversations were to emerge.

Once we developed the idea that each client speaks with the multiple voices that inhabit his history and the surrounding culture, we began to deconstruct our therapist culture and the voices that inhabit our actions in the therapeutic context. We discovered another set of foreign voices: Peter Lang (English), Heinz Von Foerster (Austrian-American), Barnett Pearce (North American), Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo (Italian), Humberto Maturana (Chilean), Milton Erickson (North American), Gregory Bateson (English-American) among many others who have been influential in our professional training.

We realized that the therapeutic encounter is determined by a very specific way of understanding time, space and the relationship, based on theoretical ideas (prejudices). As therapists we set out to construct the relationship applying concepts and ideas that are proper to our Systemic Constructionist culture. Additionally it is important to understand that our clients are unaware of the specific attributes that we ascribe to these elements of our encounter; so that the emphasis on the seriousness of our contractual agreements may have been experienced as an imposition, thereby producing a non collaborative, hierarchical relationship.

The balance of therapist and client cultures must be carefully sought in order to build a horizontal, collaborative relationship. We found ourselves as therapists trying to establish therapeutic contracts using discourses and beliefs common to North American and European Systemic cultures quite foreign to our clients.

In our reflexive dialogues while writing this article our own culture and personal beliefs allowed us to become observers of the culture in which we work. We also looked out our own ethnic roots and were enriched in our realization that Jose Antonio brings to his practice his Vasque-Spanish culture of origin and that Jeannette brings to her practice the North American and Colombian cultures of her family.

We believe that our modern day world is moving towards globalization and an increased crossbreeding of cultures where differences and voices will not be eliminated (differences will be less visible but more important to bring forth). We have learned to look for differences and make them more visibly significant in the moment by moment development of our therapeutic encounters. Collaborative relationships cannot be built as long as we are not aware of the voices that are being silenced in our conversations and any time that we are not aware of the differences that are present even if they are not visible and tangible.

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