

My English professional self lost in translation with an Italian client

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Abstract

This short story reflects some of the richness and complexity of working and thinking across languages and cultures i.e. Italian and English, a UK-trained professional self and Italian personal self and the complex interplay of these in therapy. It is a story about me from when I was a newly qualified systemic and family psychotherapist, sharing my inner conversation, dilemmas, hidden emotions and sense of incompetence and confusion about using my first language in therapy in the UK with a male Italian client, muddling through unclear professional boundaries. The story highlights the importance of self-reflexivity and transparency with our own cultural and gendered assumptions in order to promote personal and professional development. A male Mexican non-therapist designer complements the original script with some illustrations. This interplay between art and therapy becomes an enriching dialogue across professional boundaries, which is embedded in the final story. It results in an interweaving of multiple stories and provides a bridge between different perspectives e.g. art and therapy, male and female, therapy and non-therapy, within and outside own culture and language. Finally, the story is presented within a systemic framework and key systemic ideas about living in multiple languages, the socio-constructionist nature of meanings and emotions, the emotional posture in therapy when faced with many dilemmas about ethics, competence, professional boundaries, differences and similarities and their complex interplay in a therapeutic encounter.

Abstract (Italian)

Questa breve storia riflette la ricchezza e complessità quando si lavora e si pensa in lingue e culture diverse, in questo caso la lingua Italiana e Inglese, il self professionale formato in UK in lingua Inglese e il self personale radicato nella lingua e cultura Italiana e come interagiscono in terapia. E' una storia di una psicoterapeuta sistemica all'inizio della carriera professionale che condivide pensieri, dilemmi, emozioni nascoste e un senso di incompetenza e confusione usando la lingua madre in terapia in UK con un cliente italiano, muovendosi a tentoni attraverso labili confini professionali. La storia mette in rilievo l'importanza della riflessione su di se' e la trasparenza con i propri pre-concetti derivanti dalla propria cultura e genere diversi per promuovere la crescita personale e professionale. Un designer Messicano, al di fuori del mondo della psicoterapia, completa lo scritto originale con alcune illustrazioni e questo connubio tra arte e psicoterapia diventa un ricco dialogo che viene incorporato nella storia finale. Il risultato e' un intreccio di storie multiple che offrono un ponte tra diverse prospettive; per esempio arte e psicoterapia, genere maschile e femminile, terapia e non-terapia, all'interno e al di fuori della propria cultura di origine e linguaggio. La storia e' presentata usando un orientamento teorico sistemico specificatamente sul vivere usando vari linguaggi, la natura socio-costruttiva dei significati e le emozioni, la postura terapeutica quando a confronto con molti dilemmi sull'etica, i confini professionali, la propria competenza, similarita' e differenze e la complessita' del loro manifestarsi in un incontro terapeutico.

I was just qualified as a family therapist eager to build my confidence and competence. I was an accountant in my previous life. I worked very hard to become an “*English therapist*” whilst training in UK. It’s all I know about my professional self. An Italian male client contacted me. I was relieved that I could speak my first language as a therapist. I was full of expectations and confidence.



During the first meeting I diligently explored the goals of therapy, expectations and reasons for seeking therapy.

Client: “Nice to meet you!”

Therapist’s inner voice: “*He is inviting me to a friendly approach. This is typically Italian! As a therapist I am not sure. I wish I didn’t have to choose between addressing him like a friend or using the formal third person i.e. he/she. There is no difference in English unlike in the Italian language.*”

Unsure therapist trying to keep more of a distance: “*How do you do.*”

Client: “I want to have a chat.”

Confident therapist: “*What kind of chat?*”

Client: “I am here because my girlfriend said I need therapy.”



Circular therapist: *“Why does she think you need therapy?”*

Client: *“I have to look at things from my past that are impacting on our relationship.”*

Systemic therapist: *“I wonder why she didn’t come.”*

Client: *“She has her own therapy.”*

Curious therapist: *“What do you think the problem is?”*

Client: *“I am not sure.”*

Solution focused therapist: *“What would you like to gain from therapy?”*

Client: *“I want to talk freely.”*

Therapist’s Inner voice: *“I am not sure that we have a therapeutic contract here. I feel so muddled. I am translating into Italian what I know and how I should be as a therapist. I feel really lost in a familiar world and I don’t know where to go. I have no sense of direction.”*

Client: *“I don't f...ng know what she wants.”*



Selective hearing therapist: *“What? Can you repeat please? I wish I didn’t hear. Not sure how to translate. Italian swearing words suddenly resonate with much greater power and disgust. I am speaking my language and it all feels too intimate, even unsafe. I wish I could use English words to feel more distant from this uncomfortable feeling. I feel like running away. What makes him think that it’s ok to swear in therapy?!? I somehow feel violated as a woman and as a therapist. I feel for the woman who is not in the room, unable to give her views, to speak out, to tell her own story. I feel more of a feminist now, strangely pondering about the idea of sisterhood even if I don’t know her.”*



Client as he greets me on our second session: *“Ciao! Nice dress.”*

Boundaried therapist: Silence.

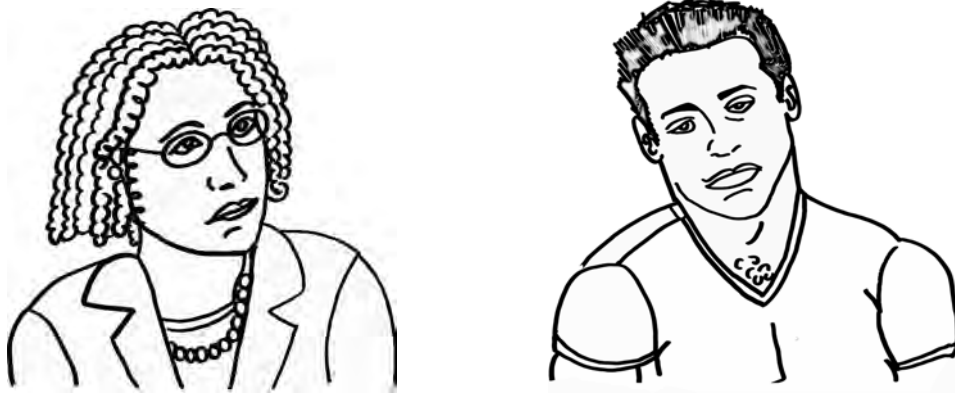
Inner voice: *“I’m shocked and paralysed. That’s inappropriate. I feel uncomfortable in my own Italian skin. I feel naked. Can I get over this?”*

Client: *“What should I do with my girlfriend?”*

Collaborative therapist: *“Well..... let me ask you a few questions so you can find your own answers!”*

Inner Reflective therapist: *“I am full of fear. I don’t know what to say. As a therapist I am speaking Italian words as if they are empty and unfamiliar. I feel speechless inside. I feel unsafe outside. This is not working. I am feeling so muddled and confused in my thinking to consider English words as a relief from this intimacy, which pushes my professional boundaries to an uncomfortable stretch.”*

Client: *“I do not have the money to continue.”*



Failing therapist: *"It's all about me. I couldn't help him. I was unable to draw professional boundaries. My brain is empty, no language to make sense of this."*

Client: *"Arrivederci"* (Goodbye, see you again)

Relieved therapist: *"Arrivederci" once again an empty word, full of relief that I will see an English client next!*



The back story

For a long time, I have been trying to hide away this uncomfortable story of myself as a failing family therapist working for the first time in my first language, Italian. However, every so often it was resurfacing in my mind and I was compelled to write it during a *Writing retreat for reflexive practitioners* in May 2017 led by Gail Simon. It was an uncomfortable story to share, yet I thought I could write a "half-story", meaning a short script as opposed to a long story to tell my experience.

It felt liberating to be able to write such a story, an interweaving of multiple overlapping stories about my professional self, my lack of confidence as a newly qualified therapist, my incompetence and unrefined clinical skills.



I was also excited afterwards thinking that I could complement my writing with some drawings. Thanks to a Mexican friend I was put in touch with a Mexican male designer. I sent him my short story without giving him extra information and wanting him to share his own perspective as a male, from a different culture, and from a non-therapy perspective.

Some more gender and cultural stories emerged and were interweaved together into my original script as we started an interesting email dialogue.



In response to reading my story, Daniel wrote:

On Tue, 1 Aug 2017 at 6:45 am, Daniel Sánchez Villavicencio <daniel@.....> wrote:

Dear Chiara

From what I understood, the woman feels somewhat harassed (even slightly sexually) by the male patient, who breaks the patient-therapist boundary with his behaviour and rude/aggressive language. Is the main objective of the story to show that to the reader? Should I portray the male character a little bit aggressive? Or would a "standard Italian good-looking guy" do alright? Please let me know if my interpretation of your text is accurate so far, or if it's anything different from what you intended.

Speak soon
Daniel



I wrote to Daniel:

On Thu, 3 Aug 2017 at 5:28 am, Chiara Santin <Chiara@.....> wrote:

Dear Daniel

This is getting very interesting! I was really curious about what you would make of **my** story. You are now making it yours! It really shows how different people attach different meanings to words and that there is no one single story or truth.

The gist of my story is

- My struggle and internal conversation on how to “translate” my English based training across languages and how things may get lost and complicated in translation!
- My difficulty as a therapist in defining the context of therapy with an over familiar client, male and Italian!

I wouldn't portray my client as aggressive, rather unsure about what to expect from therapy and maybe enjoying the familiarity of speaking the same language with a woman (therapist), which he could not experience with his girlfriend.

I think we should keep your own story as part of it to show multiple meanings and multiple readings of the same story! I also appreciate that you are a man!

I look forward to hearing from you

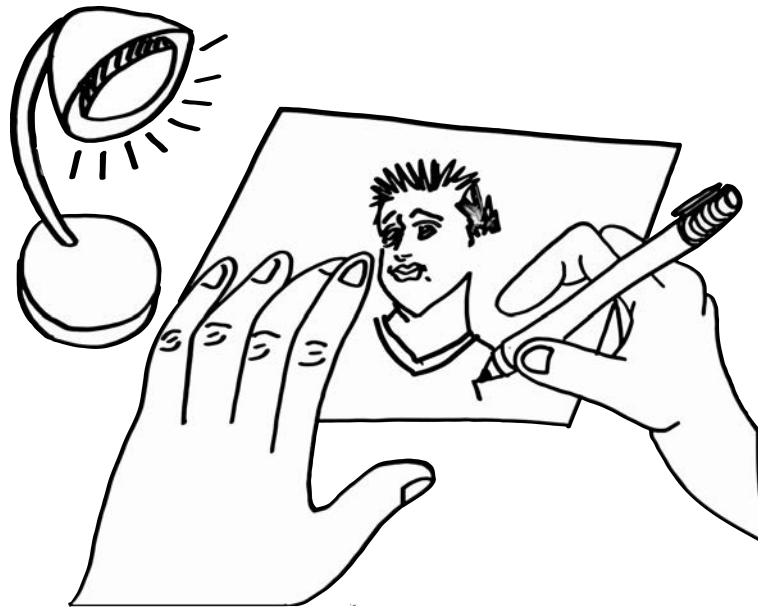
Best wishes
Chiara Santin



I became very curious about Daniel's story now embedded into mine as I had never admitted to myself what Daniel was seeing so clearly: yes, my client felt aggressive, verbally and in his body language. I felt threatened in my integrity as a therapist by crossing my usual personal and professional boundaries. I also wondered what it meant to be a "standard Italian good-looking guy" or what an "Italian female English therapist" should look like.



I was exposing Daniel to his own assumptions as well as mine with a different level of transparency from my previous reflections, which was helpfully taking me outside the therapy world, its language and specific ways of looking at things.



Daniel replied:

On Sun, 27 Aug 2017 at 4:17 am, Daniel Sánchez Villavicencio <daniel@.....> wrote:

Dear Chiara

Interesting indeed! I also thought it had something to do with language, but couldn't relate that to a "therapy" kind of problem - more to a communication one. I guess I went with my own interpretation of what a therapist might want to get from that story! Anyway, good to know that you didn't intend the patient to be aggressive in any way -as that would have certainly had an impact in the way I could have portrayed him!

Thanks!

Daniel

I told Daniel: *"Please just go with what you had in mind."*

Few more final adjustments based on our dialogue and we agreed on the final result of our de-construction and co-construction of the story!



The final systemic story

After 10 years of being a qualified family therapist, it is still embarrassing to share this silenced story and finding myself smiling at my own naivety and inexperience as a newly qualified professional. However, this story is a reminder of how self-reflexivity is key to ensure ethical practice and ongoing personal and professional development.

Reality is socially constructed through language in interaction (Burr 2003). The idea of “de-constructing the self” as if it was unified or internally consistent towards multiplicity of selves, fluid and dynamic (Brendan and McFadden 2001) was appealing in theory; however, I perceived myself as fragmented and lost in practice whilst I was relating to a client from the same culture as mine. It felt like I was negotiating between two different cultures and constructions i.e. the culture of therapy (my English professional self as “culturally and socially constructed in UK”) and my culture of origin and its language (my Italian personal self-located in my Italian roots, values, norms, family and personal experiences).

Reflecting and navigating the intricate web of meanings stemming from my story made me more aware of the complexity of living in multiple languages, how culture, subjectivity and language are inextricably intertwined (Burck 2004, 2005). Negotiating between my role as a therapist and my inner conversation (Rober 1999) can become a complex task for bilingual therapists working across languages (Karamat-Ali 2004). Yet I was working using my native language!

Emotions are also socially, culturally and historically constructed. These emotions are based on gender assumptions and moral values which belong to families, communities in a specific culture. They are not necessarily interchangeable and transferable across languages (Hedges 2005). My emotional presupposing was one of expected familiarity; however, my emotional posture was one that invoked a wish to run away rather than engaging, a sense of danger, defensiveness, control, justification and blame rather than tranquillity, curiosity and reflection (Fredman 2007). My story reveals my struggle in finding a therapeutic posture, identifying and reading emotions within and outside the same culture and made me wonder whether I have become a less emotional therapist than I would be if living and working in Italy.

However, through another professional's perspective and his illustrations I was able to acknowledge my anger using my second language as if it was disallowed within my native language and cultural gendered set of beliefs. Research based on people's experiences of living in multiple languages (Burck 2005) suggested that it might be easier to express an emotion e.g. anger in one's second language than within the first language. Furthermore, parents might experience a different way of parenting using English rather than their first language, particularly in relation to intimacy, sense of freedom and power. Similarly, I felt like "a different kind of therapist", lost in translation, uncomfortable using my first language and preoccupied with professional boundaries. Speaking Italian with the male client made me experience a different level of intimacy and less power compared to when working with English clients. I found myself privileging my role as a therapist to manage professional boundaries as the familiarity and intimacy of speaking my own language felt like a threat, hence the need to create an emotional distance, claim my professional power and build a safe context for developing a therapeutic relationship. However, this tension led to an uncomfortable sense of disloyalty to my own culture and unexpected "emptiness" using my own language.

This story is also about acknowledging the power of stories as located in time (early development as a professional) multiple contexts, and perspectives, considering multiple aspects of difference (e.g. the Social Graces, Burnham 2011) particularly in relation to gender and culture. According to Falicov (1995, p.377) an "ecological niche" is the combination of multiple contexts and partial cultural locations" to which we belong, hence its simultaneous memberships and participation in multiple contexts as a rich and endless possible combination of language, age, gender, cohort, family configuration, education, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, socio-economic status, employment, education, occupation, sexual orientation, political ideology, in rural or suburban settings. I found it helpful considering this broad view of culture and "cultural borderlands" (Falicov 1995, p.373) i.e. overlapping zones of difference and similarities within and between cultures as in the story similarity of culture i.e. Italian was assumed but actually challenged by the differences that were unravelling in the therapeutic process.

Sharing this story in an art form is also an attempt to marry the field of psychotherapy and art as expression of multiple identities, perspectives and languages to enrich our story telling. As Paré (1996, p.33) quotes: "In a universe of stories, we experience our identities and those of others as collection of social constructions –assemblies of cultural meanings with myriad origins." The interplay of the two different stories presented through my script and (non-therapist) illustrations reflect how stories are embedded in diverse cultural, gender, and professional contexts. Through relational risk taking (Mason 2005) i.e. me taking the risk of being seen through somebody else's eyes, e.g. my physical appearance and facial expressions as imagined by "an outsider", offered the possibility for exploring and expanding individual meanings towards shared relational meanings based on dialogue. It created a new insight and unexpected richness as to how embedded and embodied aspects of myself (Hardham, 1996) can usefully become voiced and more visible (Burnham 2011) to self and others. It would have been interesting to incorporate my client's own story of our encounter too!

As a therapist I feel committed to pursuing on going feedback and greater transparency in my use of self and relational self-reflexivity (Burnham 2005) to enlighten how all aspects of difference and similarity even within the same culture come in to play in therapy where multiple stories can be told. This will ensure better outcomes for clients and increased awareness and appreciation of the richness and complexity of multiple identities in any professional context and human encounter.

Through the kaleidoscope of new conversations with an outsider, using multiple languages and taking the position of being both a speaker and listener in dialogue with myself and others, a new emerging portrait of myself as a therapist was revealed. As Nora Bateson (2016, p.44) states: “*Within the great whirl of life there is culture; in culture there is language; in language there is conversation; in conversation there are two beings; in the beings there are frames of perception and, in their communication, a kaleidoscope of unpredictable repatterning. Impossibly, in that conversation, the world is simultaneously held together and blown apart. Together, as speaker and listener, we are both lost if found in our contact, researching the edges of another’s lives to reveal a portrait of our own outlines.*”

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