

12-5-2022

The Power of Counterstory with Martín Alberto Gonzalez

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Repository Citation

Gonzalez, Martín Alberto, "The Power of Counterstory with Martín Alberto Gonzalez" (2022). *PDXPLORES Podcast*. 27.

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Martín Alberto Gonzalez

Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge, practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Martín Alberto Gonzalez, and I'm a Chicano from Oxnard, California. I'm an assistant professor in Chicano Latino studies. My research aims to learn more about the experiences of students of color, specifically Latinx students in schools, both in K through 12 settings, but also in higher education, especially higher education.

I'm interested in learning more about how white supremacy and systemic racism impacts the sense of belonging of Latinx students, but also how these same Latinx students navigate, resist, and challenge those racially hostile campus environments by creating counter spaces and demanding structural change by protest.

I am most proud of the fact that I use counter storytelling as a research method to communicate or convey my research findings. If I had to define a counterstory, I would say that a counterstory is the other side of the story, but with the critical lens. A counterstory sheds light on and directly challenges these dominant and often told negative stories that are grounded in stereotypes and that perpetuate systems of oppression like sexism, white supremacy, ableism, racism, anti-blackness, and so on.

So basically, a counterstory critically analyzes the systems that prevent individuals from succeeding or being themselves. It's those stories that tell the other side of the story through a critical lens. For example, we often hear that students of color do not finish college because they're not smart enough or, or maybe they didn't work hard enough or their parents just didn't value education and preferred for them to work. Or maybe it's because they weren't motivated enough.

But a counter story will provide another explanation that doesn't rely on blaming the students or their culture or their motivation. But instead will point to the factors that didn't allow for those individuals to succeed. These factors such as not having professors who look like them and who they can relate to or facing discrimination because they have an accent, or even having professors who belittle them and talk smack about their writing and not having access to curriculum that is culturally relevant that they could relate to, that would help

them motivate themselves. These are the types of topics that counterstories emphasize, is the other side of the story.

I chose counter storytelling as a research method because as a first generation Chicano university student, I was assigned and expected to understand traditionally written research articles and reading these articles was discouraging. It was intimidating, and it made me feel as if I didn't know anything. And so I realized that these traditionally written research articles are often filled with academic jargon that I'm not familiar with, and that jargon is inaccessible to myself, to my community, to those who I love, but also to other communities of color who have been historically marginalized and historically excluded from higher education.

And so I wanted to do something different. I wanted to tell stories that people could relate to. Especially first generation students. I wanted to write research articles that my family and my friends could not only read and follow along, but stories that they could be engaged with, stories that would teach 'em a lesson.

Whenever I visit schools, whether it's elementary, middle school, high school, or even colleges, I always read them counterstories that I wrote about racism in schools. My stories are filled with cultural references, song lyrics, jokes, and students, especially students of color, have expressed to me that they have been able to relate to my stories. Such stories serve as a foundation for us to have important and necessary conversations about societal problems. Especially issues about race, class, gender, sexuality, and more.

Counterstorytelling has been used as a form of scholar discourse that not only relies on writing in the past, I have been able to use Counter Story as a framework to inform and tell counter stories through various formats and styles.

Like, we should all know this. There are many ways to tell a story, and there are many ways to tell a counterstory. It could be oral for that. I did an audiobook, it could be visual. I have commissioned local Oxnard artists and close friends to create illustrations of my counterstories, so I can put them on posters, on hats, on buttons, on stickers, on shirts, on coloring books, and other creative mediums.

Counterstories are not just limited to academic settings and are appreciated by non-academic audiences, and that's why I appreciate counterstorytelling so much. My aims and objectives in using counter storytelling as a form of scholarly discourse is to keep it as real as possible in the stories that I tell.

It is also important to remind the readers that they may know something about a particular experience in schools, but that there is a lot more to it. It is to try to provide a simplistic explanation of how systems of oppression impact our daily lives, especially those who are marginalized.

Another aim is for me to challenge what it means to produce knowledge and what research looks like. Our experiences produce knowledge and our stories are valuable lessons for our communities. Let's never forget that.

Counter storytelling is greatly informed by critical race theory. Critical race theory reminds us that race and racism exists in our society, and we shouldn't deny that. Critical race theory also encourages us to challenge dominant ideologies. Ideologies that tell us that whiteness is better than blackness. Ideologies that tell us that if you work hard, you'll be rewarded when in reality, that's not always the case. I know a lot of hardworking people that don't get rewarded and have to continue working for the rest of their lives.

Critical race theory also has a commitment to social justice. The stories that I tell are not just stories about butterflies, but if I'm gonna tell a story about butterflies, it has to be connected to environmental racism. It has to be connected to environmental justice. There is a commitment to social justice.

Just as important, critical race theory tells us that our experiences produce knowledge and that that knowledge is very valuable. Experiential knowledge is knowledge, and so the stories that we tell are producing knowledge.

And the last thing that critical race theory tells us when writing these counterstories is that it's perfectly fine for us to be interdisciplinary. It's perfectly fine for us to incorporate history, sociology, psychology, geology, geography, whatever disciplines, whatever perspectives in our stories. That's perfectly fine too.

Sometimes people read my stories and they think I'm just making things up. What some people fail to recognize is that my stories are informed by literal research. To develop my stories. I use research methods such as interviews, platicas, participant observations, document analysis, and historical artifacts. I use my memory, I use my experiences. Those conversations, that cultural intuition to develop these stories, they're not just made up. They come from years and years of research.

In a recent counterstory I wrote, it's like; researchers aren't actually invested in the communities they are researching. In graduate school I was frustrated that

researchers would conduct research on specific populations, for example, first generation Latinx students, and yet would not write in a way that was relatable to first generation Latinx students. I questioned myself, like, who is my target audience and why? It's not that first generation students can't read research articles. I'm sure they can, and I'm sure they have to for their classes, but for me, the question is what would I rather read and which method would I be able to relate to the most.

Counter storytelling disrupts seemingly true, but severely oppressive stories, narratives, ways of understanding that were established by empowered groups long ago. By pointing to the important roles that systems of oppression like white supremacy, like racism, like sexism, capitalism, and so on, play in that story by providing an alternative explanation to a particular instance, it's pointing to those broader systems of oppression that makes it so crucial to disrupt these seemingly true stories about people like me, which we know are not true.

My mentor, Dr. Aja Martinez writes about how storytelling is an important teaching tool. In her book *Counter Story* (y'all should go check it out) she mentions how Derrick Bell, a renowned law scholar and critical race theory founder, uses stories and counter storytelling to help students understand the complicated legal jargon in the Constitution.

I use my counter stories to teach about racism, white supremacy, hyper policing, segregation, inequitable schooling practices, and more. People tend to relate more to stories, and those stories become lessons, and more importantly, those stories become an avenue for necessary conversations about social injustices.

One of the most important aspects of counter storytelling is that it is committed to social justice and counterstories inspire to make change, social change.

Counter storytelling helps us identify problems, especially the root of those problems. Some people can be unaware that a problem exists until they come across a story that explains that issue in a way that's so relatable to them.

Counterstories become a foundation to operate, to actualize real change at a school, at a workplace, or even at the house, at home. Counter storytelling can inspire people to be proud of who they are and where they come from, and to encourage them to not change themselves, but rather help them change the environment that they are in so that they are welcomed in that environment for who they are.

I am Martín Alberto Gonzalez, and my research uses counter storytelling to shed light on and challenge systems of oppression like white supremacy, racism, classism and other systems of oppression that negatively impact the experiences of Latinx students in K through 12 settings, but also in higher education.