Being multilingual in psychotherapy: an applied linguistic view

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Outline

• Background literature:
  • Being multilingual...
  • ... in psychotherapy and counselling

• Study design

• Client perspectives:
  • Role of language choices
  • Using more than one language: Elena
  • Therapist facilitation

• Conclusions & implications for practice
Living with more than one language (1/2)

• **Multilingualism:**
  • “the bilingual is not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals” (Grosjean, 1992: 51)

• **First languages (L1):**
  • “language embodiment”: early memories, sensations & emotions (Pavlenko, 2012)
  • memories told in L1 are “more numerous, more detailed and more emotionally marked” (Schrauf, 2000,: 387)
  • multilinguals prefer to express their deepest feelings in early language(s) (Dewaele, 2008, 2013)
Living with more than one language (2/2)

• Later languages:
  • early acquisition and a naturalistic learning environment can lead to “emotional resonance usually associated with the L1” (Dewaele, 2013)

• Language encodes experiences:
  • recall in original language increases emotional intensity (Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2004)

• Multilingual identity:
  • majority report sometimes feeling like a different person when using different languages (Pavlenko, 2006; Dewaele, 2016; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017)
  • experiencing “a double self” vs. accepting a “sense of multiplicity” (Burck, 2004)
Multilinguals in psychotherapy (1/2)

• Buxbaum (1949): “Verbalizing experiences in the language in which they take place makes them real; whereas expressing them in a second language enables them to be kept as unreal”

• Function of client language choices (Costa, 2014; Dewaele & Costa, 2013):
  • access emotion
  • create distance from trauma
  • index aspects of identity
Multilinguals in psychotherapy (2/2)

• Absent languages
  • “aspects of self and relationships are left out” (Burck, 2004: 333)
  • “the severity of the psychological distress and the intensity of the affect could be missed” (Emilion, 2016: 51)

• Languages facilitate integration (Costa, 2014; Iannaco, 2009; Kokaliari et al., 2013)
  • “Individuals and families can switch between their own languages even when the therapist is monolingual” (Burck, 2004: 335)
PhD study

• **Research questions:**
  1. How do clients perceive the impact of language choices on their therapy?
  2. What part do therapists play in enabling or disabling clients’ linguistic behaviour?

• **Mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano, 2011)**
  • Internet questionnaire on language practices in therapy (non-clinical population)
  • Interviews
Who is this for?

- **BME access to mental health services**
  - over-represented at secondary care level, under-represented at primary care level (DH, 2011)
  - disempowered inc. through the lack of status of their first language(s):
    - “The different statuses of languages [...] affected speakers, and offered different subject positionings to individuals, intersecting with racialization processes” (Burck, 2004: 326)
- Ethics of recruiting vulnerable people
Data analysis

• **Quantitative data:** SPSS statistical software
• **Qualitative data:**
  • Social constructionist paradigm: “socially constructed nature of reality” (Patton, 2002)
  • Transcription & interview diary (Prior, 2016)
  • Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Survey sample

• 109 multilingual adults
  • majority female (n= 92), White (n= 82), mean age: 41, educated professionals (64%) & students (22%)
  • 1/5 had a mental health-related occupation
  • English: L1 (43%), L2 (44%), L3 (11%) or L4 (2%)
  • 1/3 simultaneous bilinguals (L1b before age 3)
  • Therapy mainly in Europe (UK: 56%; France: 13%)
Survey: role of language

• 2/3 multilingual clients (L1 & LX therapy) used more than one language in therapy (Rolland et al., 2017)
• switching “occasionally” within a session
• 'Have you reflected on the role that language choices played in your latest therapy?’ (n = 103)
  • some had discussed in therapy (10%), majority were thinking about it for the first time (56%)
• ‘Please describe your thoughts: then (if applicable) and now' (n = 64)
Language role: thematic analysis

1. L1 link to past self and memories vs. LX link to present self and experiences
2. Creating a new identity and imagining the future in LX
3. Expressing emotions (L1 vs. LX)
4. Retelling in language of experience
1. Past vs. present

“I could have chosen an Italian speaking therapist, but I didn't. Italian was used in therapy to connect to earlier parts of my life, or relationships I conduct in Italian, but I felt more comfortable exploring my present self in English.”

(ID82 on L2 English therapy with L1 Italian & L3 French)
2. Past vs. future

“Preferring to do therapy in my second language is an emotionally and therapeutically encumbered choice. My second language is linked to the future, rather my native language brings me back to the past. The native language ties me to a system. the second language means autonomy and self-power”

(ID133 on L2 English therapy with L1 Italian & L3 Spanish)
3. Expressing emotions (L1 vs. LX)

“when I had a therapist in Switzerland I felt a lot of shame and discomfort - but was this to do with the subject matter or the language used (Swiss German). Probably both, this is not my birth language and difference/migration has always been an issue so talking in that language embodies that issue. Speaking in Italian with an Italian therapist however, felt very liberating, to be able to express my emotions in that language.”

(ID155 on L2 therapy vs. L1b therapy)
4. Language of experience

“Now I've started to think about it, I feel very appreciative of the patience and attitude of my therapist towards me as a Hindi speaker. I think he understood that Hindi was the language through which my experiences were mediated and the importance of Hindi to me and therefore to the therapy.”

(ID150, L1 English therapy with L2 Hindi)
Using more than one language: Elena (1/4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 (from age)</th>
<th>L3 (from age)</th>
<th>Therapy country</th>
<th>Main therapy language</th>
<th>Interview mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>English (3)</td>
<td>Spanish (18)</td>
<td>UK (ongoing)</td>
<td>English (L2)</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- **Humanistic/integrative therapy:** ‘existential crisis’
- **Language use outside therapy**
  - Italian & English: home & inner speech;
  - English: work & diary
Using more than one language: Elena (2/4)

• “My second language is linked to the future, rather my native language brings me back to the past”
• Some switches to Italian and Spanish: “I say sometime 'I would not know how to say it'. By this, I mean that I struggle to describe an internal process but my therapist often asks if I were to know how to say it in my native language, encouraging me to go back to my native language”
“since after the survey, I’ve started to bring some terminology in Italian in my own therapy, just to reconnect with parts of myself that I didn’t either explore, or I didn’t want to explore. So really the, the survey helped me to bring, erm, properly like maybe some names or fairytales or poems, erm, that, er, or lullabies from when I was a child, that I didn’t mention before in therapy” (L49-54)
“We explored, erm, the different reasons of maybe my, my willing to distance from some experiences. [...] I’ve done the survey, er, some weeks before going back to my own country. [...] So we did explore actually how I could go back to my country and [...] since I do associate to go back, er, going backwards in time, so going back as a child, erm, how could I actually, erm, go back but with my experience as an adult? [...] So actually I could, we did explore I could own my language as an adult.” (L58-70)
Therapist facilitation

• Therapist invitation:
  • ‘it was an expression in French. And I was pleasantly surprised when my therapist asked me to say it in French. It felt she wanted that part of me not to be neglected or suppressed.’ (ID5, L1 French, L3 English therapy)

• Therapist response:
  • ‘therapist had no response to my small tentative switches’ [...] ‘I resented having to translate what I might have expressed impulsively in my language. Over time, I removed it, became guarded and stopped therapy’ (ID151, L1 Marathi/Hindi, L2 English therapy)
Conclusion & implications for practice

• Complexity of language associations, linked to individuals’ experiences.
• Exploring language implications with clients can lead to new perspectives & insights; not doing so can lead to alienation.
• Some clients may be less aware/more protective.
• Therapists to consider their role in enabling linguistic freedom & how to attend to therapeutic implications of language choices.
Future research

• Clinical populations
• observation of client-therapist dyads
• power relations (e.g. minority languages)

• Training evaluation:
• impact of supervision incorporating multilingualism on therapists’ confidence and clients’ experience
References (1/3)

References (2/3)

• Iannaco, G. (2009) Wor(l)ds in translation - Mother tongue and foreign language in psychodynamic practice, Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations, 15:3, 261-274, DOI: 10.1080/14753630903024432


