

'Translation is a kind of betrayal of my experience'

Multilingual clients' perspectives on the role of language in psychotherapy

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Introduction

Multilinguals often express affect and tell autobiographical narratives differently according to which language they are using (Pavlenko, 2007).

In psychotherapy, research has shown that multilingual clients value the opportunity to code-switch, particularly to regulate emotion (Dewaele & Costa, 2013).

The present study invited clients to reflect on the impact of their language practices – including, but not limited to code-switching – in therapy.

Materials and methods

International web survey of 109 self-selecting multilingual adults with experience of one-to-one counselling or psychotherapy. Most participants had therapy in a first language (L1, 59%) or foreign language (LX, 38%), although two thirds reported code-switching to other languages (Rolland, Dewaele & Costa, 2017).

Follow-on interviews held with five sequential multilinguals.

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of qualitative data from an open field ($n = 58$) and interviews.

Results

Reflecting on the role that language choices played in their latest therapy...

Theme 1: Satisfaction with 'language choices'

- No problem: L1 therapy was 'natural'; positive experiences of LX therapy.
- Lack of choice: no other languages offered; difficulty finding a language-matched therapist.
- Future therapy: language preferences, curiosity.



Theme 2: Identity: language, time and place

- L1 link to past memories and self: indexes client's authentic self or an identity that client seeks to reject.
- LX link to present or future self: language of current life experiences; opportunity for reinvention.

Theme 3: Language and emotion

- L1 link to emotions: increased intensity & ease of expression (e.g. anger).
- LX distance from emotions: protection or defence?

Theme 4: Language congruence

- Experiences felt more real when recalled and (re)told in the original language of encoding.

Conclusions

Language practices can facilitate or hinder access to memories, emotions and aspects of client identity, impacting on trauma repair and integration.

Therapist training should address multilingualism so that it can be harnessed as a therapeutic asset.

There were times when I thought it would have been more beneficial in English. However I learnt a lot about myself

I was not ready to search more for them to be English-speaking

I will prefer to have future therapy in my first language

Italian was used to connect to earlier parts of my life, or relationships that I conduct in Italian

I felt more comfortable exploring my present self in English

it might have been a strategy on my side to take some distance with my problems

speaking in Italian with an Italian therapist felt very liberating

translation is a kind of betrayal of my experience

it felt most natural to think and speak those thoughts in the language they had originally been expressed

Literature cited

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Further information

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