

Language as a Form of subtle Oppression among Linguistically Different People in the United States of America

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Abstract

This paper posits that counselors frequently impose their language style and preferred dynamic onto their clients. Moreover, little is known about how language usage and communication patterns have been used by the dominant culture in the United States to oppress and discriminate against ethnic minority groups. This is especially true for clients of color whose primary language is not Standard English. A review of the literature on language dynamics and variations provides a cogent argument to explain how language has been used as a tool to oppress linguistically different people.

Resumen

Este artículo postula que consejeros profesionales imponen con frecuencia su idioma y dinámicas preferidas a sus clientes. Poco se sabe acerca de cómo el uso del idioma y los patrones de comunicación han sido utilizados por la cultura dominante en Estados Unidos para oprimir y discriminar

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a grupos de minoría étnicos. Esto ocurre mayormente con clientes de color cuyo idioma materno no es el inglés. Una revisión de la literatura en las dinámicas del idioma y sus variaciones proporciona un argumento para explicar cómo el idioma ha sido utilizado como un instrumento para oprimir a personas que son lingüísticamente diferentes.

Key words

Language, oppression, ethnic minority groups, United States.

Palabras clave

Lenguaje, opresión, grupos de minoría étnicos, Estados Unidos.

Introduction

The impact of language usage, dynamics, and communication patterns in the counseling relationship when working with ethnic minority populations is without a doubt an important variable that no longer can be neglected (Axelson, 1999; Orasanu, Fischer, & Davison, 1997). A number of studies suggested that language and communication patterns are strongly related to thinking patterns and to people's worldviews that consequently have a direct impact on how people behave (Gross & Miller, 2002; Kaplan, 1989). The most recent census data indicates that 13.82% of the total United States population speaks other languages beyond English, with approximately 7.52% of the overall population being Spanish-speaking (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). While, the issue of language has been addressed, the complexity of language has only been touched upon briefly. While recently some studies have suggested for counselor⁶ to pay attention to language difference, it seems like most of publications have appeared in non-main stream journals (such as Multicultural counseling and group counseling) suggestions have been provided on how to deal with language differences and variations of language when counseling ethnic minority clients (Phan & Torres-Rivera, 2004; Santiago-Rivera & Vazquez, 2000).

⁶ *Counselors assist people with personal, family, educational, mental health, and career problems. Their duties vary greatly depending on their occupational specialty, which is determined by the setting in which they work and the population they serve.*

Fuertes (1999) suggests that accents may be a positive factor in counseling ethnic minorities because they may produce closeness between the client and the counselor when working with clients for whom English is their second language. There is also some stronger evidence suggesting that clients who are not proficient in Standard English may be misdiagnosed and the treatment offered maybe different from counselors and other mental health professionals (Gopaul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood, 1998; Sue, 1981). Furthermore, the use of language as a major form of subtle oppression among linguistically different groups has been largely ignored by most social scientists. The dynamics of language have been used in the United States as a vehicle to impose, disseminate, and maintain the status quo of the “dominant culture” (Urciuoli, 1996). Consequently, counselors may not be exempt from dominant cultural ideas about language and thus may unintentionally perpetuate negative attitudes toward clients whose primary language is not English (Locke, 1992).

Language Dynamics

Language is the primary means by which counselors and psychotherapists provide help in the United States, given the fact that “talk therapy,” continues to predominate as the major source of treatment for clients (Wiener, 2001). Moreover, talking and explicit verbalization of one’s thoughts and feelings are prioritized as the essential forms of communicating and understanding others in this culture (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). This value-laden expectation often creates conflicts when working with culturally diverse clients whose first language is not English. Language variation can mean the difference between receiving or not receiving services (see Sue & Sue, 2003). These variations are in addition to language values and characteristics of the language, such as speaking directly, secretly, loudly, softly, rapidly, and muttering, whining, yelling, swearing, and touching while speaking (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999).

Languages also influence the way in which people think, write, and how they express their feelings (Kaplan, 1989; Ramos-Sánchez, 2007; Torres-Rivera, Smaby, & Maddux, 1996; Wehrly, 1995). That is, the language in which the culture communicates determines the thinking process and patterns of processing information, in particular when

thinking about abstract concepts such as time, love, relationships, and other concepts that are usually dealt with during the counseling process (Boroditsky, 2001; Torres-Rivera, 1996). For instance, most English-speaking people are linear thinkers, while most people who speak Semitic languages are more complex and far from linear in their language, as well as in their thinking. Similarly, Asian languages are indirectional, and romance languages are curvilinear (please see Boroditsky, 2001; Kaplan, 1989; Torres-Rivera, Saracini, Wilbur, & Phan, 2002). Therefore, the implications of miscommunication based on language variation are more complicated than simple misunderstandings, as results could lead to misdiagnosing and misapplication of treatment to linguistically different clients. For example, in a demonstration tape one of most prolific multicultural expert in the field described a white doctor instructing a Filipino nurse to perform a particular type of medical procedure. The Filipino nurse nodded her head as a sign of agreement. Later the doctor returned to see if the nurse was performing the procedure correctly and discovered that the nurse continued to do the procedure wrong (Sue, 1995). The expert later explained that for the Filipino nurse to tell the doctor that she did not understand his instructions may be seen as a sign of disrespect. Communicating such a message may have conveyed that the doctor was a bad teacher (Sue, 1995).

Ethnographic studies suggest that how people talk about language, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and how they share their life experiences depends greatly on who interprets language (Urciuoli, 1996). In addition, the way in which people tell their stories depends on their worldview. All too often, counselors' interpretations of culturally diverse clients' worldviews have been shaped by the macrosystemic influences of ethnocentric monoculturalism (Clay, Olatunji, & Cooley, 2001; West-Olatunji, 2001). Counselors working with clients whose first language is not English are in a position to shape their clients' lives by their interpretation of the client's language. Furthermore, a number of studies about racial microaggressions indicated that language and communication styles could be use as a form of microaggression against people who English is not their primary language (Constantine, 2007; Constantine, & Sue, 2007; Sue, 2007).

Linguistic studies present evidence to support the notion that the

language in which a person is thinks has a direct impact on his/her thought process. For example, when a person speaks in English about a table, he/she will refer to the table as an “it”. If the same person changed from English to Spanish and continued the conversation, the table now becomes female, and the context of the conversation changes completely because the table is no longer an “it” but rather a “she” (Boroditsky, 2001; Gross & Miller, 2002). Linguistic prejudices are usually encapsulated within Eurocentric concepts such as, concreteness, linearity, and abstractness. As a result, language is objectified along with the people using the language, making them inherent targets for unconscious discrimination. Again a form of microagresion based on language use or communication style (Sue, 2007).

Similarly, people in the United States seems to give languages different hierarchical positions in regards to another language based on socioeconomic status (see Urciuoli, 1996). This is different from people which primary language is not standard English, for example, low socioeconomic status bilingual Latinos in the United States use Spanish and English fluidly and move from one language to another without much difficulty and without the belief that one language is better than the other (Santiago-Rivera, 1995). While this phenomenon is not only limited to Spanish speaking people, some ethnographic studies indicated that it is less derogatory to Western European languages (Horsman, 1981; Urciuoli, 1996). However, in the U.S., society language objectification customarily places Spanish and non-Western European languages in an inferior position to English. Examples of this objectification can be found in negative interpretations of accents, mistakes, and/or incorrect grammar as signs of ignorance (Flores, Attinasi, & Pedraza, 1981; Zentella, 1988). On the other hand, when English speaking individuals commit similar mistakes, the person is simply using “improper English” and no other meaning is attached to the mistakes (Urciuoli, 1996). Most Latinos in this country who have been in the United States for five or more years do speak English, yet many people from the United States typify their way of speaking English as “broken English,” or mixed English with “heavy” accents. As stated previously, this is far from Standard English as defined by the dominant culture. This kind of definition is based primary on assumptions about class and race made by those who have power and control over how language should be used including appropriateness and

delivery (see Sue, 2007). This phenomenon is not only limited to Spanish speaking people, but to all non-white minority groups' such as African Americans who do not speak Standard English, low socioeconomic status Asian Americans, and bilingual Native Americans.

Many ethnic minority groups in the United States have endured exclusion because of the language they speak, the color of their skin, and their socioeconomic status since their arrival to the United States. Prejudice and racism are displayed as important actions that occur in everyday social transactions such as greetings and casual conversations. Therefore, one can say that verbal communication is a complex system of significant social transactions (Urciuoli, 1996). Communication is a political phenomenon because how the spoken and written language is interpreted depends greatly upon the people holding the political power. Language is action and thus, language concepts are reality and not simply concepts. Human behavior depends on life experiences, which are shaped and re-shaped by those who control the power. Emphasizing the importance of looking at language as a process, not only in terms of language type, helps the counselor understand how power is gained and maintained as it relates to oppression and prejudice. For all ethnic minority groups, this variable is an important one, as their reality is shaped by the conditions that limit where and how they live, work, earn money, and where they send their children to school. Ultimately, their lives, present and future, lay in the hands of those who control the power (Draguns, 2001; Fischman, 1999; Torres-Rivera, 1996; Preciado & Henry, 1997; Urciuoli, 1996).

Language variations

Most bilingual people are creative in finding creative ways to communicate with others (Boroditsky, 2001; Urciuoli, 1996). For example Latina/o bilingual clients illustrate this creativity in their ability to fluidly move from one language to the other. If one examines the patterns of applying English phrases to Spanish and Spanish phrases to English and the use of code-switching, creativity can clearly be seen along with other variables such as gender role bias among Latina/o clients (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007; Torres-Rivera, 1996). Therefore, by understanding this fluidity will help counselors to capitalize on the creativity and

adaptability of her/his bilingual clients. It is important to also realize the need to the use of code-switching and how this may be seen as inappropriate in formal counseling sessions given the negative stigma of “broken” English for linguistically diverse clients.

African American language variations. African American communication patterns can be described as high- context, for the message depends more on the situation and the person than on the content of the message (Sue & Sue, 2003).

High-context communication relies on nonverbal and group identification to understand the message being delivered. English speaking countries such as the United States, on the other hand, function with low-context communication that focuses more on the verbal component of the message and the explicit expression of words, whether written or spoken (Hall, 1976; Sue & Sue, 2003). It is important for the authors of this article to stress that the emphasis on the verbal component of the message it is a function of the language and not necessarily of the culture. Interestingly, research is being conducted at Stanford University that looks at how language affects thought processes (Boroditsky, 2001; Gross & Miller, 2002; Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). As a consequence of these studies, it seems necessary for counselors to be aware not only of this type of language use, but also that because of societal pressures to conform to Standard English demands, many African American clients may feel the use of Black English is inappropriate during the counseling sessions (Koch, 2000). This particular believes removes the benefits of originality and expressiveness during the counseling session and may serve as a drawback.

African Americans who speak Black English or “Ebonics,” follow different rules in phonology, syntax, and semantics than those who speak Standard English. For example, many African Americans who use Black English do not discriminate and produce many sounds that Standard English speakers are not familiar with in order to make sense of the message that is being sent to them. For instance, “test” is pronounced “tes” and he is going is pronounced “he goin”). Similarly, Black English speakers tend not to use Standard English subject-verb agreement, negation, articles, and tenses. Last, but not least, is the tendency of

Black English speakers to use the verb to be differently than those using Standard English (Gopaul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood, 1998). These differences create difficulties for counselors who are not familiar with this type of language and/or the communication style that is usually attached to this particular language. Also, Black English is spoken with affect and animation, versus Standard English, which is spoken loudly, quickly, and unemotionally. Black English communication during counseling is far more important than simple semantics because the client's language system does not occur in a vacuum. That is language represents the ability of human species to abstract and symbolize their experiences, which is future linked to multiple processes of cognition including information encoding and perceiving, the form and manner of information storage, the retrieval and interpreting of information, and problem-solving (Bauer, 2008). Therefore, the variations in the lexical, syntactical, and semantic aspects of language may very well influence human thoughts. Thus, in order to ensure effective communication during the counseling session, the client must feel connected and understood by the counselor. Without that connection the meaning of the client's statement will be lost (Harper, Braithwaite, & LaGrande, 1998).

Asian American language variations. Many Asian Americans seem to speak softly, indirectly, and in a low-key manner. Silence does not usually give an invitation for someone else to speak, but rather allows time for the speaker to collect her or his thoughts to convey a message (Leong, Iwamasa, & Sue, 2000) That is, a number of Asian cultures do not promote open expression and display of feelings, because this sometimes is seen as a sign of immaturity and lack of wisdom (Lee & Zane, 1998; Sue, 1995). In addition, many Asian Americans may feel uneasy with direct confrontation, challenges, and interruptions during communication discourses (Baruth & Manning, 1999).

Even though many Asian American parents encourage their children to learn and use Standard English as their primary means of communication, thus, it could be a good practice for counselors to understand that the primary language of the family continues to be their native language (i.e., Vietnamese, Korean). Commonly it is the experience of the authors of this article that many counselors assumed that because the Asian American client is proficient in conversational English that her or his thinking

patterns are similar to those whose primary language is English. For the most part, Asian languages are high context, relying heavily on nonverbal communication. For instance, in the Japanese language, the focus of the communication among people is often concentrated on reflection, other-centeredness, indirection, indecision, and apology. This is important to recognize because the basis of Japanese relationships are often based on the above characteristics (Lee & Zane, 1998) and accounts for the interdependence of the Japanese culture.

Counselors who understand Asian American language structure, such as indirectionality, syntax, communication styles, and word terminology, have a greater ability to apply effective interventions during group work with Asian Americans. In fact, as stated earlier, knowing the dynamics of the language could result in a better understanding of the patterns of thought processes among clients and thereby enhance case conceptualization of client needs.

Native American/Indian language variations. Indian people's communication styles are very similar to those of Asian American people. Native Americans tend to be soft-spoken, indirect, and at times share long narratives to convey a point. Also, levels of verbal engagement may depend on the level of acculturation.

A great deal of misunderstanding about Native Americans languages and traditions seems to be the norm among counselors (Herring, 1997; Garrett, 1998; Garrett & Garrett, 2002; Pope, 2002). Many people seem to associate Native Americans with spirituality instantaneously (Herring, 1997; Garrett, 1998; Garrett & Garrett, 2002; Pope, 2002). While it is true that spirituality is strongly present in Native American traditions, the idea that all Native Americans are spiritual is as nonsensical as saying that all white people are not spiritual. Another myth and/or misconception is one of the "noble savage" (Garrett & Wilbur, 1999). Who can deny or fail to remember watching one of John Wayne's movies in which the "Good Chief" provided help to the great American hero with the following greeting: "Me Chief Rattlesnake is happy to help you...." Moreover, counselors with some experience in the addictions field and familiarity of the Big Book cannot refute that the last part of the Big Book mocks the way in which Native Americans use Standard English

by using broken English to present the Native American story. Although the intention is to assist Native Americans with alcohol problems, inadequate knowledge of Native American language variations maintain misconceptions that may impede the application of effective interventions. These are but a few examples to illustrate that many Native Americans are bilingual and that their bilingualism has been misconstrued by the dominant culture. The bilingualism of Native Americans in the United States has survived staunch efforts by the church and the government to eliminate not only their language but Native American religion and culture as well (Irwin, 2000).

Over 150 Native American languages are spoken in the United States today, supporting the reality that Native Americans are bilingual people. Although many differences exist among the tribes or Nations and languages in Native American cultures, there are some common characteristics that may help counselors who work with bilingual Native American clients. The language and thought processes of Indian people indicates interconnectedness (Garrett, 1998). Consequently, counselors need to understand that the Native American belief that everything is alive, everything has a purpose, and all things are interconnected is reflected in their language.

Latino/Hispanic language variations. Spanish speaking people are the largest linguistically different group in the United States. According to Baruth and Manning (1999), 50.8 % of all Latinos speak Spanish skillfully and do not speak English at a proficient level. When looking at the three largest Spanish speaking groups in the United States (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans), it is clear that the percentages of people in the United States using Spanish to perform their daily transactions is even larger. Spanish, as with other languages, is very different from English because of its nonlinearity, syntax, phonology, and semantics. Semantics also differs from within Spanish speaking people, such that an individual of Mexican descent may use the name “carnal” to refer to his brother, in comparison to an individual of Cuban descent who uses “hermano”.

As a more expressive language, Spanish is considered to be a high-context language. The dynamics of narrative communication for Spanish

speaking people are sound and solid and are not a characteristic of a deficient way of communicating as many monolingual people have suggested. Of equal importance for counselors working with bilingual Latino clients is the awareness of different narrative forms of communication in the Spanish used by Puerto Ricans, which tend to be more historically present and dramatic than the narrative forms of Spanish communication that Mexicans and Chileans use.

Implications of Communication Dynamics for Counselors

The communication process is a complex one. Traditionally, communication has been simplified as having two components with at least six subcomponents that influence the process. For instance, in a situation involving two communicators, one is the source of the message and the other is the receiver. The process is simplified as an idea or the need to communicate arouses the source communicator. The source communicator makes the choice to communicate the idea using verbal means and past experiences to find the exact symbols to communicate the idea to the receiver. Aural stimuli or the need to communicate and receive symbols in a distorted form arouses the receiver communicator. The receiver communicator then uses memory and past experiences to give meaning to the symbols, stores the information, and finally sends feedback to the source communicator.

While the process appears simple enough, complications still exist as other influential variables affect the communication process. Let us assume that other variables related to this process are included, such as the physical state of the participants, past and present experiences, mental sets, socioeconomic status, formal education, expectations, cultural influences, and the channel used to send the message (for example, the environment in which the communication takes place). With the inclusion of these variables, the communication process no longer appears to be a simple exchange of symbols but rather a powerful process. In other words, let us assume that the counselor has learned to use some common phrases in one language but lacks proficiency in the meaning of the language and the appropriate use of the phrases (Goapul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood, 1998; Santiago & Vazquez, 2000). The counselor, while confident in her or his ability to deliver the appropriate

intervention with the bilingual group, feels uncomfortable with using “unknown” terms in the session. These added variables introduce increased tension for the counselor to deliver her or his interventions to a group of non-English speakers and at the same time non-English speaking clients may feel pressured to grasp the information and/or help that the counselor attempts to put forth. The counselor holds the position of an expert while the expectation of the client involves his or her performance and evaluation. In this example, the dynamics of bilingualism come into play as an important role in the counseling process. When people feel pressured to perform, the natural tendency to immerse themselves into familiar territory (which is their native language) occurs. People from different cultures address problems according to their worldview, which is deeply rooted in their culture. Some cultures use a direct approach, while other cultures use an indirect or non-confrontational approach to solve a problem. The United States society, for the most part, uses a direct confrontational approach to deal with problems, while Asian Americans, Latinos, and Indian people prefer an indirect approach.

Although the complexity of bilingualism during counseling may seem daunting, the ability to apply this understanding and knowledge is viable. Some bilingual experts contend that counselor professionals must be proficient in the language of the client in order to deliver quality care. The relationship between the client and the professional counselor who is not bilingual suffers a great deal because symptoms could be misinterpreted. Negative outcomes due to invalidating clients’ experiences have been well-documented with clients suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders (Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996). Thus, the primary implication for counselors who are not bilingual is that lack of integration between affect and the experience of their clients does not mean that some type of pathology exists in the client. Rather, the language in which the client is forced to deliver the message may not accurately convey the message, feelings, and affect that the client truly wishes to express. Comprehension of the complexity of different language and communication patterns is not only important but essential in the counseling relationship with ethnic minority populations.

Conclusion

An understanding of how language and communication patterns are used in a specific culture is vital for the comprehension of the language. As it has been presented throughout this manuscript, language shapes experience, and experience shapes language. In the counseling process, language predetermines modes of observation and interpretation of experiences, recreating experiences, and empowering clients to imagine and create new experiences (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999). Therefore, it is important that counselors have a clear understanding of cultural and linguistic differences in their clients as well as in themselves. Although generalizations have been the rule in throughout this manuscript, counselors must understand that language differences do exist within various ethnic minority groups and essential to consider.

In addition, since the counseling process usually concentrates on the abstract parts of the client's life (i.e., relationships and self-esteem), the strong empirical evidence indicating that native language influences the way in which people think about these abstract domains further necessitates counselors' addressing language as an essential component for effective deliver of services (Boroditsky, 2000, 2001). Accordingly, counselors who are not aware of such relationship aspects and are unable to use different metaphors, language analogies, and other structural alignment, may render themselves ineffectual due to miscommunication or an inability to help clients understand what is being said or asked from him or her.

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