STRIVING TOWARDS CULTURALLY MEANINGFUL MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCY IN COUNSELING AND HUMAN SERVICES: A CASE FOR FORMAL TRAINING

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Abstract— This study analyzes the relationships among three levels of bi/multilingual competence that were self-reported by 483 trainees and practitioners in the fields of psychology, counseling, social work, and family services. The results indicate that learning second/non-native language(s) in an academic environment does not correspond to self-perceived bilingual and/or culturally meaningful use of language. Further, self-identification as a bilingual professional does not necessarily imply culturally meaningful use of second/non-native language. The current results provide a guide for incorporating language training into preparation of human services professionals who work with linguistically diverse populations.

Index Terms— bi(multilingual) competence, counseling, multilingual training, human services.

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of multicultural training has been traditionally focused on ethnic, racial, gender and sexual identities (Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Buckley & Foldy, 2010) while neglecting the element of multilingual competence (Hurley, Gerstein, & Egisdóttir, 2013; Peters, Sawyer & Guzman, 2014). However, the appropriate use of language in counseling and human services has been linked to rendering appropriate diagnostic and treatment services (Shoeman, Chiliza, Emsley, & Southwood, 2008; Swazo, 2013).

The importance of multilingual competences in counseling, human services, and therapeutic professional practice stems from the fact that language is not always translatable, especially when describing emotions and critical contextual details (Kokaliari, Catanzarite, & Berzoff, 2013) or recalling critical life events (Shoeman, et al., 2008). The importance of the therapist's multilingual competence for effective therapeutic relationship has been well documented from the perspectives of both the therapist and the client (Perez Rojas, Gelso & Bhatia, 2014). Bilingual clients report that beneficial therapeutic experiences necessitate that a provider is at least partially able to understand their native language. Similarly, monolingual and multilingual therapists reported the importance of multilingual counseling as a vehicle for strengthening the counselor-client connection (Costa & Dewaele, 2014). Despite well-documented importance of professional multilingual competency for effective human services, the existing literature offers limited insight into the providers' self-identified levels of bi/multilingual competence. To address this gap, the current study was designed to analyze the relationships among the self-reported levels of bi/multilingual competence among trainees and practitioners in the fields of psychology, counseling, social work, and family services.

II. METHOD

A. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The study utilized the Multilingual Competence in Counselor Education and Allied Disciplines (MCCEAD), a questionnaire designed to measure the levels of bi/multilingual competence, along with other cultural-linguistic characteristics. The participants who choose to participate in the study signed a written consent and were subsequently administered the questionnaire (the responses were anonymous). Bi/Multilingual Competence in this study is measured at the following three levels: (1) Bilingualism, (2) Academic-Based Second Language, and (3) Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism. Bilingualism Level (Level 1) is indicated by the total number of endorsements (i.e., "yes" answers) to the items representing the degree of bilingualism (i.e., emerging, partial, or full). Academic-Based Second Language Level (Level 2) is measured by the total number of years of instruction in second language at both middle/high school and college. Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism Level (Level 3) is measured as the total number of endorsements (i.e., "yes" answers) to items representing the use of more than one language in a variety of social interactions with others and media across several culture-based contexts. Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism represents the social bi/multilingual interactions with others and media use (e.g., music, TV, printed materials), the use of native language of the ancestors when visited their homeland, and the readiness to emigrate to a foreign country based to the knowledge if this country's language and customs.

B. Participants

The total of 483 participants responded to the MCCEAD, with 411 students and 72 practitioners. The students were 111 undergraduates and 300 graduates enrolled in 3 universities in the U.S.A. The practitioners were affiliated through professional development activities with the large size state Midwest university mentioned above and a small private university in Central America. The students and practitioners represented the following disciplines: psychology (n=146), counseling (n=193), social work (n=61), and family services (n=83). The participants self-reported the following ethnicities: 71.5% were Euro American, 5.8% African American, 0.4% Native American, 15% Hispanic/Latino, 0.8% Middle Eastern, 0.6% Pacific Islander, 1.7% Asian, 3.3% Biracial, and 0.6% Other. Females comprised 84% of the participants and males 16%. The participants' represented a wide range of ages: 79% were 20-31 years old, 15% were 32-45 years old and 6% were 46 or more years old.

III. RESULTS

The values of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients indicate that all levels of Bi/Multilingual Competence are statistically significantly and positively correlated with each other (p value of .005 or lower). The correlation between Bilingualism (Level 1) and Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism (Level 3) is of moderate strength. The remaining correlations among the levels of Bi/Multilingual Competence appear to be weak.

Correlation between Level 1: Bilingualism and Level 2: Academic-Based Second Language equals r=.235, p=.000. Correlation between Level 1: Bilingualism and e Level 3: Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism equals r=.617, p=.000. Correlation between Level 2: Academic-Based Second Language and Level 3: Culturally-Embedded Bi/Multilingualism equals r=.134, p=.005.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current results support several suggestions for incorporating language training into preparation of human service professionals who work with linguistically diverse populations. First, the professionals' self-reported academic-based second language competence correlates weakly with both bilingualism and culturally-embedded bi/multilingualism. Clearly, learning second language in an academic environment (school and/or college) does not strongly relate to the professionals' self-identified bilingual or culturally meaningful use of language. Perhaps, professionals who have learned second/non-native language(s) through classroom-based instruction rarely experience subsequent extensive, authentic culture-based linguistic application of their language skills.

Secondly, human services professionals who self-identify as bilinguals are more likely to use language in a culturally meaningful way. However, self-identification as a bilingual provider does not necessarily imply culturally meaningful use of second language but only a moderate possibility of such use. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between the length and/or type of this instruction and the trainee's self-identification as a bi/multilingual professional. In sum, for professionals striving at using culturally-embedded bi/multilingual skills in providing human services, language training should expand beyond academic-based second language instruction and self-identification as a bilingual provider. These levels of bi/multilingual competence may not assure a professional's confidence in, and comfort with, providing psycho-educational, therapeutic, and/or treatment services in his/her client's native language. In order to strengthen professional confidence and expertise in providing services for linguistically diverse clientele, professionals would need to engage in culturally meaningful language-based interactions outside of classroom-based instruction and/or receive profession-specific language training.

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