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The impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes in multilingual couples: A conceptual framework for research

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected world, the dynamics of relationships are undergoing significant transformations, particularly within multilingual couples where language proficiency plays a crucial role. This review presents a conceptual framework aimed at exploring the intricate interplay between language proficiency and therapy outcomes in such relationships. Understanding the impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes necessitates a multidimensional approach. Firstly, it requires an examination of the linguistic competencies of each partner within the relationship. Proficiency in multiple languages can influence communication patterns, affective expressions, and the negotiation of conflicts, thereby shaping the therapeutic process. Additionally, cultural factors intertwined with language proficiency further contribute to the complexity of therapeutic dynamics within multilingual couples. Furthermore, this conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of considering the socio-linguistic context in which therapy takes place. The power dynamics associated with language use, including dominance, fluency, and language preference, can significantly influence the efficacy of therapeutic interventions. Moreover, language barriers may hinder the expression of emotions and the resolution of conflicts, posing unique challenges to the therapeutic process. Moreover, the framework underscores the significance of therapist competence in navigating linguistic and cultural diversity within multilingual couples. Therapists must possess not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural sensitivity and awareness to effectively address the unique needs and challenges faced by these couples. Culturally responsive therapeutic approaches, such as multilingual therapy modalities and language mediation techniques, can facilitate a more inclusive and effective therapeutic process. This conceptual framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes in multilingual couples. By acknowledging the complex interplay between language, culture, and therapy, researchers and practitioners can better understand and address the unique needs of these couples, ultimately enhancing the efficacy and inclusivity of therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: Language; Proficiency; Therapy; Multilingual; Couples; Framework; Review

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the phenomenon of multilingual couples is becoming increasingly prevalent, presenting unique challenges and opportunities within therapeutic contexts (Asiimwe *et al.*, 2023). The intersection of language diversity and intimate relationships necessitates a nuanced understanding of how language proficiency impacts therapy outcomes. This introduction provides an overview of the rising prevalence of multilingual couples, underscores the importance of language proficiency in therapeutic settings, and outlines the purpose of the conceptual framework proposed in this research.

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As globalization continues to facilitate cross-cultural interactions and migrations, the prevalence of multilingual couples is on the rise (Elhami and Roshan 2024). These couples encompass individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds who navigate their relationships in the context of multiple languages. Factors such as international mobility, intercultural marriages, and the blending of linguistic identities contribute to the growing diversity observed within intimate partnerships (Sirari 2022; Breger and Hill, 2021).

Language proficiency holds significant implications for the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, particularly within the context of multilingual couples. Communication lies at the heart of relationship dynamics, and language serves as a primary medium through which individuals express emotions, resolve conflicts, and establish intimacy (Metzl 2020; McKenna *et al.*, 2022). In therapy, language proficiency influences the clarity of communication, the depth of emotional expression, and the ability to navigate cultural nuances within the relationship.

The purpose of this conceptual framework is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language proficiency shapes therapy outcomes in multilingual couples. By exploring the intricate interplay between language, culture, and relationship dynamics, this framework aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which language proficiency influences therapeutic processes and outcomes (Mende and Schmidt, 2021). Furthermore, it seeks to inform therapeutic practice by offering insights into the challenges faced by multilingual couples and proposing strategies for enhancing the cultural responsiveness of therapeutic interventions.

This review will begin by elucidating the dimensions of language proficiency within multilingual couples, examining its cultural and socio-linguistic implications. Subsequently, it will delve into theoretical frameworks relevant to understanding the role of language proficiency in therapy outcomes. The review will then explore the impact of language proficiency on communication patterns, emotional expression, conflict resolution, and therapeutic rapport within multilingual relationships. Additionally, it will address the socio-linguistic context of therapy and the importance of therapist competence in working with multilingual couples. Finally, the review will outline methodological considerations for research in this area and discuss the practical implications for therapeutic practice and future directions for research.

2. Understanding Language Proficiency in Multilingual Couples

Language proficiency plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of multilingual couples, influencing communication patterns, emotional expression, and relational interactions (Stepkowska, 2021). This section delves into the complexities of language proficiency within such relationships, exploring its definition, dimensions, cultural implications, and socio-linguistic dynamics.

Language proficiency refers to the level of competence and fluency an individual possesses in a particular language. It encompasses various dimensions. Linguistic Competence dimension assesses the grammatical, lexical, and syntactic knowledge of a language. It reflects the ability to comprehend and produce linguistic structures accurately. Beyond linguistic accuracy, communicative competence evaluates one's ability to use language effectively in social contexts (Yuzar, 2020). It involves skills such as turn-taking, maintaining conversational coherence, and adapting language use to different communication settings. Pragmatic competence pertains to the ability to interpret and produce language in accordance with social and cultural norms (Alsuhaibani, 2022). It involves understanding nuances such as politeness strategies, indirect speech acts, and cultural connotations of language use. In the context of multilingual couples, language proficiency extends to competence in multiple languages. Individuals may exhibit varying levels of proficiency in each language, depending on factors such as exposure, upbringing, and language learning experiences. Understanding the nuances of language proficiency in multilingual couples requires considering the interplay between these dimensions and their impact on communication dynamics within the relationship (Stepkowska, 2021).

Language is deeply intertwined with culture, serving as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, norms, and identities. Therefore, language proficiency in multilingual couples carries significant cultural implications; Language proficiency influences how individuals express and negotiate their cultural identities within the relationship (Noels *et al.*, 2020). Differences in language fluency may reflect divergent cultural backgrounds, leading to negotiations of cultural identity and belonging within the couple. Multilingual couples often navigate intercultural communication challenges arising from differences in language proficiency and cultural background. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and communication barriers may emerge due to cultural differences in communication styles, nonverbal cues, and linguistic conventions (Sharipzianova 2020). Language proficiency can also serve as a marker of cultural capital within the relationship, influencing power dynamics and social hierarchies. Individuals with greater linguistic competence may hold social advantages, leading to imbalances in decision-making, authority, and influence within the couple.

The socio-linguistic dynamics within multilingual couples are shaped by a complex interplay of language, culture, and relational factors (Karpava 2022; Titone and Tiv, 2023); Multilingual couples engage in language choice and language switching, adapting their linguistic repertoire to different communication contexts and social settings (Krulatz and Duggan, 2021). Language choices may reflect pragmatic considerations, emotional expression preferences, or efforts to maintain cultural connections. Multilingual couples grapple with decisions regarding language maintenance versus language shift within the relationship. Factors such as language dominance, societal language attitudes, and language transmission to future generations influence choices regarding language use and language transmission within the family unit (Ndzotom Mbakop and Kamgang Ndada 2021). Multilingual couples negotiate linguistic norms and conventions, reconciling differences in language proficiency, dialectal variations, and language ideologies. These negotiations may involve compromises, accommodations, and shared language practices aimed at fostering mutual understanding and linguistic harmony within the relationship.

In summary, understanding language proficiency in multilingual couples requires acknowledging the multifaceted nature of language competence, its cultural implications, and the socio-linguistic dynamics that shape communication patterns within the relationship (Panicacci 2021). By examining these dimensions, therapists can better support multilingual couples in navigating the complexities of language and culture in their interactions and enhancing their relational well-being.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes in multilingual couples requires a theoretical foundation that integrates communication theories, cultural competence frameworks, and systemic and relational theories in therapy (Padilla, 2022).

Communication theories such as Social Exchange Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory provide valuable insights into how language proficiency influences interpersonal interactions within multilingual couples (Giles *et al.*, 2023). Social Exchange Theory helps elucidate how individuals may exchange linguistic resources, such as language support or translation assistance, within the relationship (Wong *et al.*, 2023). Communication Accommodation Theory, on the other hand, highlights how language proficiency affects accommodation strategies, including convergence, divergence, and maintenance, in response to communication partners' language abilities (Elhami, 2020).

Cultural competence frameworks, such as the Cultural Competence Continuum or the Multicultural Competence in Counseling Model, offer a lens through which to understand the cultural dimensions of language proficiency within therapy (O'Hara *et al.*, 2021). These frameworks emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity, awareness, and humility in working with diverse populations, including multilingual couples (Odunaiya *et al.*, 2024). By integrating cultural competence principles, therapists can navigate the cultural nuances of language use, address linguistic disparities, and promote cross-cultural understanding within the therapeutic process.

Systemic and relational theories, such as Family Systems Theory, provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between language proficiency and relational dynamics within multilingual couples (Hatoss, 2024). Family Systems Theory posits that individuals are interconnected within a larger relational system, wherein changes in one part of the system can ripple throughout (Paley and Hajal, 2022). In the context of multilingual couples, language proficiency influences communication patterns, power dynamics, and relational roles within the dyad or family unit. By considering systemic and relational dynamics, therapists can explore how language proficiency shapes relational processes, power dynamics, and therapeutic interactions within multilingual couples.

4. Impact of Language Proficiency on Therapy Outcomes

The impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes in multilingual couples is multifaceted, influencing communication patterns, emotional expression, conflict resolution, and therapeutic rapport (Nascimento 2021).

Language proficiency shapes communication patterns and styles within multilingual couples, impacting the clarity, depth, and effectiveness of communication (Yurtaeva and Charura 2024). Differences in language fluency may lead to asymmetrical communication dynamics, wherein one partner dominates or controls the conversation due to greater linguistic competence. Additionally, language barriers may hinder the expression of complex thoughts or emotions, resulting in communication breakdowns or misunderstandings within the relationship (Adanlawo *et al.*, 2021).

Language proficiency influences the expression and interpretation of emotions and affective experiences within multilingual couples. Individuals may struggle to articulate their feelings or convey subtle nuances of emotion in a language in which they are less proficient (Patel and Fan 2023). As a result, emotional expression may be constrained or distorted, affecting the depth of emotional intimacy and connection within the relationship. Language proficiency influences the resolution of conflicts and negotiation strategies employed within multilingual couples. Communication barriers stemming from language differences may escalate conflicts or impede conflict resolution efforts (Nasution *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, language proficiency affects negotiation strategies, such as compromise, collaboration, or avoidance, employed by couples to navigate disagreements or differences of opinion. Cultural nuances embedded within language use impact therapeutic rapport and alliance within multilingual couples (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Differences in language proficiency may reflect underlying cultural values, norms, and beliefs, shaping the therapeutic relationship and dynamics. Therapists must navigate cultural nuances of language use, including linguistic politeness, indirect communication styles, and cultural connotations, to foster trust, rapport, and therapeutic alliance with multilingual couples. By addressing the impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes, therapists can tailor interventions to enhance communication, emotional expression, conflict resolution, and cultural responsiveness within multilingual couples, ultimately promoting relational well-being and satisfaction (Kieslich and Steins 2022).

5. Socio-Linguistic Context of Therapy

The socio-linguistic context of therapy in multilingual couples encompasses power dynamics associated with language use, language barriers, and the significance of language mediation and interpretation services (Di Paolo 2022). Language proficiency can influence power dynamics within therapy sessions, as individuals with greater linguistic competence may hold advantages in communication and expression (Okoye *et al.*, 2023). In multilingual couples, disparities in language proficiency may exacerbate existing power differentials within the relationship, affecting decision-making, authority, and control (Denzongpa *et al.*, 2020). Therapists must be attuned to these power dynamics and strive to create an equitable space for communication and expression within therapy sessions.

Language barriers present significant challenges in therapy for multilingual couples, impeding effective communication, emotional expression, and therapeutic progress (Kiaer and Ahn 2023). Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and communication breakdowns may arise due to differences in language proficiency, leading to frustration, resentment, or disengagement within the therapeutic process (Oladipo *et al.*, 2024; Tula *et al.*, 2024). Therapists must address language barriers proactively by implementing language mediation strategies, facilitating communication, and creating a supportive environment for language learning and development.

Language mediation and interpretation services play a crucial role in overcoming language barriers and facilitating effective communication in therapy for multilingual couples. Trained interpreters or language mediators can bridge linguistic gaps, facilitate accurate translation, and ensure that both partners can fully participate in therapy sessions (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, language mediation services promote cultural understanding, validate diverse linguistic and cultural identities, and enhance the inclusivity of therapy for multilingual couples (Mavioglu 2024).

6. Therapist Competence and Cultural Responsiveness

Therapist competence and cultural responsiveness are essential for effectively working with multilingual couples, requiring specific skills, culturally responsive therapeutic approaches, and strategies for building cultural competence in therapy (Erolin and Wieling 2021).

Therapists working with multilingual couples must possess a range of skills and competencies to navigate linguistic and cultural diversity effectively. These include proficiency in multiple languages, cultural sensitivity, awareness of linguistic and cultural biases, and the ability to adapt therapeutic techniques to diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, therapists must demonstrate empathy, openness, and respect for the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of their clients. Culturally responsive therapeutic approaches and interventions are essential for meeting the unique needs of multilingual couples (Danbolt, 2020). Therapists may incorporate techniques such as narrative therapy, systemic interventions, and mindfulness-based approaches tailored to the cultural and linguistic context of the clients. Moreover, therapists should collaborate with clients to co-create culturally relevant treatment goals, strategies, and interventions that honor their linguistic and cultural identities. Building cultural competence in therapy requires ongoing self-reflection, education, and training to address the complexities of working with diverse populations (Agner 2020). Therapists must confront their own biases, assumptions, and stereotypes about language, culture, and identity to provide culturally competent care. Strategies for building cultural competence may include participating in cultural

competency workshops, seeking supervision or consultation from culturally diverse colleagues, and engaging in continuous learning about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of clients.

By enhancing therapist competence and cultural responsiveness, therapists can effectively support multilingual couples in navigating the complexities of language, culture, and identity within therapy, ultimately promoting positive therapeutic outcomes and relational well-being (Haley 2022).

7. Implications for Practice and Future Directions

Therapists should conduct culturally competent assessments that include an evaluation of language proficiency and its impact on relational dynamics within multilingual couples (Singh *et al.*, 2020). This assessment can inform treatment planning and intervention strategies tailored to the linguistic and cultural needs of each couple. Therapists should strive to create a language-inclusive therapy environment where both partners feel comfortable expressing themselves in their preferred language(s). This may involve offering language mediation services, providing translated materials, or incorporating multilingual resources into therapy sessions. Therapists need to develop cross-cultural communication skills to effectively navigate language and cultural differences within multilingual couples (Verkerk and Faro, 2021). This includes active listening, empathy, and the ability to interpret nonverbal cues across diverse cultural contexts. Therapists should collaborate with multilingual couples to establish culturally sensitive treatment goals and intervention plans that address the unique needs and strengths of each partner (Gutierrez and Snead 2020). This collaborative approach fosters empowerment, ownership, and engagement in the therapeutic process. Training programs for therapists and clinicians should incorporate comprehensive cultural competence training that addresses language diversity, cultural humility, and the intersectionality of identity within therapy. This training should include experiential learning opportunities, case studies, and role-playing exercises to enhance cultural competence skills.

Training programs should provide therapists with training in language mediation skills, including techniques for facilitating communication, interpreting cultural nuances, and navigating language barriers within therapy sessions. This may involve workshops, seminars, or specialized certification programs in language mediation and interpretation. Ongoing supervision and mentorship are essential for therapists working with multilingual couples to receive guidance, support, and feedback on their clinical practice. Supervisors should possess expertise in multicultural therapy and provide culturally responsive supervision that addresses language-related challenges and opportunities within therapy (Amiri 2021).

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of language proficiency on therapy outcomes and relational well-being in multilingual couples (Boateng *et al.*, 2022). This research can provide insights into the trajectory of therapy effectiveness over time and identify factors that contribute to sustained positive outcomes. Research should focus on developing and evaluating culturally tailored interventions specifically designed for multilingual couples. These interventions may incorporate language mediation techniques, culturally sensitive therapeutic modalities, and technology-based interventions to enhance communication and relationship satisfaction. Future research should explore the intersectionality of language proficiency with other dimensions of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, within multilingual couples. This research can illuminate how multiple identities intersect to shape therapy outcomes and inform culturally responsive practice.

8. Recommendation and Conclusion

This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how language proficiency influences therapy outcomes in multilingual couples. It highlights the interplay between language, culture, and relational dynamics within therapy, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence, language mediation, and cross-cultural communication skills for therapists working with diverse populations.

Understanding language proficiency is essential for therapists to provide effective and culturally responsive care to multilingual couples. Language shapes communication patterns, emotional expression, and relational dynamics within therapy, influencing the efficacy of therapeutic interventions and the attainment of therapeutic goals. There is a pressing need for further research and practice advancements in the field of therapy for multilingual couples. By conducting rigorous research, developing culturally tailored interventions, and enhancing therapist training programs, we can advance the field and promote the well-being of multilingual couples worldwide. It is imperative that therapists, researchers, and policymakers collaborate to address the unique needs and challenges faced by multilingual couples and foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally competent therapy practices.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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