

Needs Assessment of Spanish Language Training for Psychologists and Other Professionals in a University Community

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Populations of native Spanish-speakers and Latinos in the United States are growing and moving into parts of the country that are not prepared to provide services to them. Little information is available for psychologists who are interested in increasing competence in working with linguistic minorities. Faculty members and graduate students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania were surveyed to determine if training in the areas of Spanish language and working with Latino populations would benefit the university community. Responses indicated that many people were interested in obtaining training and that psychologists in particular seemed to see the importance and utility of such training. Those developing training programs must consider that respondents were not willing to spend much time or money to obtain training.

The Latino population in the United States is growing rapidly and is projected to constitute 20% of the overall population of this country by the year 2010 (Dingfelder, 2005). In the United States, Spanish is spoken by about 12% of the population, is the second most common language in 43 states, and some areas of the United States are populated by a majority of Spanish speakers (Wikipedia, downloaded 2005). Given this information, it appears that there may be an increasing need for individuals in service industries, such as the field of psychology, to have cultural competency in working with Latino populations. In addition, proficiency in Spanish may be necessary to work effectively with the growing population of native Spanish speakers.

A literature search on therapy or other mental health work with bilingual (Spanish and English) individuals in their native language yielded few results. The available literature suggests that therapists and mental health professionals should consider factors such as the ability of a client to speak in English if it is not his or her native language, keeping in mind that the emotional content of speech may be lost or confused in translation from Spanish to English (Santiago-Rivera, 2001). The current literature does not give much attention to how language might be used by therapists during therapeutic interventions, even though it is clear that language can be important when considering obstacles to successful therapy. Other researchers have noted that therapy may be more meaningful for bilingual indiv-

iduals if it is conducted in their primary language, or if the individual is permitted to switch between dominant and non-dominant languages to clarify his or her expressions (Guttfreund, 1990). Several researchers interviewed for recent articles on therapy with Latino clients indicated that Latinos drop out of therapy more often than European Americans and that the rate of drop-out may be due to clients not feeling understood, either from a cultural or linguistic perspective (Dingfelder, 2005; Dittman, 2004).

Given the shortage of research in this area, it would not be surprising to find that many therapists are unsure of how to proceed with Latino clients. As Latinos continue to move into areas that are not currently populated by linguistic and cultural minorities, there is an increased need for Spanish language and cultural competence training for professionals in a variety of fields (Bender & Harlan, 2005). Part of this training includes learning how to take into account appropriately the importance of language and cultural meaning with those for whom Spanish is their first language (Zuniga, 1992). This is particularly necessary when dealing with the emotional content of speech and the affect observed when individuals speak their native language (Guttfreund, 1990). Another aspect involves preparing professionals to speak Spanish fluently within their professional realms (Bender & Harlan, 2005).

Because the literature on working with bilingual individuals is so scarce, and because there are many different factors involved in such work, a needs assessment was conducted to determine what type of training is desired by professionals and graduate students in a variety of fields, and in psychology in particular. This pilot study was conducted at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

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Method

Participants

This survey was sent to all IUP faculty and graduate students with valid email addresses. Requests for participation were sent to 2,895 individuals and 13.1% of those individuals responded.

Measure

Participants were asked to complete a web-based survey that requested information on demographics, work habits, and interest in trainings/workshops on both working with Latino populations and learning Spanish. Respondents were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to provide a more complete picture of those individuals participating in the study. Information gathered included ethnicity, native language, experience with other languages, and the departmental affiliation of the respondent. Additional information was sought to establish whether respondents worked with minorities on a regular basis, had encountered individuals who spoke little or no English, and had worked directly with Latinos. Information was also obtained to assess interest and willingness to participate in a workshop designed to teach Spanish and skills for working with Latino populations.

Design

Participants were contacted via email and asked to follow a link to a web-based survey. One week after initial contact a reminder email, which included a second request for participation, was sent to individuals who had not responded. All emails and data collection were handled by a third party, StudentVoice, so that anonymity could be assured.

Data gathered from respondents were analyzed globally to assess the composition of the university community and its need for training. Information from respondents in psychology departments on campus was analyzed in greater depth because a training program specific to psychologists was the ultimate goal of this needs assessment.

Results

University-wide Analysis

Data collected from the needs assessment survey were analyzed in terms of percentages of people endorsing a certain item. Three hundred eighty people from 65 departments on campus responded to the survey. They represent 13.1% of the population of faculty and graduate students at IUP. The majority of respondents identified themselves as European-American (80.5%). Asian-Americans (9.2%), African-Americans (2.9%), and Latino/Hispanic individuals (1.8%) were the largest minority groups represented. Several individuals (3.2%) surveyed declined to answer the question regarding ethnicity.

Respondents identified 20 native languages, with English listed as the majority language (86.3%). Chinese (3.2%) and Arabic (2.1%) were identified as the second and third most frequently spoken native languages. Over 79% of participants indicated some level of experience, ranging from beginner status to fluent, with one of 18 second languages spoken by respondents. Of those who spoke a second language, 40.2% spoke Spanish, 17.5% spoke French, 9.9% spoke German, and 2.6% spoke Italian. Only 10.7% of the respondents who indicated that they spoke Spanish were fluent.

Two hundred fifteen respondents (56.6%) indicated that they worked with minority individuals on a regular basis. A group of respondents (46.8%) indicated that they had interactions with people who spoke little or no English. Spanish was the primary language of 34% of the non-English speakers encountered. A majority of people (59.7%) indicated that it would be beneficial for them to speak Spanish, and 66.1% of respondents indicated that they would like to begin or continue learning to speak Spanish. Additionally, 57.6% of respondents indicated that they would benefit from training on working effectively with Latino populations.

Respondents were surveyed as to their interest in a hypothetical conference that would include training in both Spanish-language and working with Latino populations. Almost half (47.9%) of the respondents were willing to pay for a conference, and over a third were interested in a training that lasted one day or less. Approximately 18% of respondents said they would be interested in attending a weekend-long training, and a longer, one week training interested 10.5% of respondents.

Analysis of Psychology Departments

Respondents from psychology departments or programs comprised 22.4% of the total sample, or 85 individuals. Of that group, 78.8% of individuals were female and 22.4% of individuals were male. The majority of respondents in this group indicated that they were European-American (90.6%) and were native English speakers (97.6%).

A majority (71.8%) of respondents indicated that they had some experience with one of seven other languages. The language most represented was Spanish and 40% of respondents endorsed some level of experience with the language. Most psychology department respondents who indicated that they spoke Spanish considered themselves beginners (44.1%). No one indicated fluency in Spanish.

Less than half of the respondents in the psychology group indicated that they worked with minorities (30.6%), had encountered non-English speakers (28.2%), or interacted with Latinos (23.5%) on a regular basis. Of those who worked with minorities, only 7.7% indicated that they worked with Latinos. However, of those who had encountered non-English speakers, 62.5% indicated that they encountered people who spoke Spanish.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF SPANISH LANGUAGE TRAINING

Despite the low numbers of psychology department respondents who worked regularly with minorities, most people indicated that they would like to have training in working with Latino populations (78.8%) and/or in Spanish language (77.6%). Roughly 46% of respondents indicated that they were willing to spend up to \$100 on training and 29.4% of were willing to devote one day to such training. An additional 27.1% of respondents were willing to spend one weekend on training. Ability to earn continuing education units would make 61.2% of people more willing to participate in training in Spanish or in working with Spanish-speaking/Latino populations.

Discussion

Indiana University of Pennsylvania is comprised of people from a variety of ethnic groups and who speak a number of different primary languages. Although IUP is a small, rural school, the faculty and graduate students seemed motivated to gain the knowledge necessary to work with minority groups, and with Spanish-speaking and other Latino populations in particular. Many individuals indicated that they had some experience speaking Spanish, had worked with Latinos in some professional capacity, and were interested in additional training in Spanish and in working with Spanish-speaking and Latino minority groups. Over 50% of individuals surveyed said that they thought it was beneficial to speak Spanish and that they would like to learn to do so.

When the responses of individuals who identified themselves as members of a psychology department were analyzed, similar findings were encountered. The subsample of psychology department respondents indicated that they were more homogeneously European-American and English-speaking than the total sample. A greater proportion of respondents in this category indicated some experience speaking Spanish, although no respondent was fluent. As was found with those from other departments, psychology department respondents indicated some amount of regular work with Latinos and some encounters with individuals who speak only Spanish. However, a much larger percentage of psychology department respondents indicated an interest in training in Spanish, an interest in working with minority cultures, a greater belief that speaking Spanish could be beneficial to their careers, and a greater desire to learn to speak Spanish.

Given the support for trainings in Spanish language and in interacting with Latinos in a professional capacity, it was interesting to note that less than 30% of respondents were willing to spend more than \$100 and less than 35% of respondents were willing to devote more than one weekend to such training. The ability to earn continuing education credits seemed to be an influential factor contributing to whether an individual would be willing to participate in a training session. When compared to information gathered at the university level, psychology department members were not

willing to spend as much money to receive training as other respondents. However, respondents from the psychology department showed a greater interest in trainings in Spanish language and in working with Latinos than did respondents from the university as a whole.

Based on the information gathered, particularly from the psychology subset of respondents, it appears that there is an interest in training in Spanish language and in working with Latino populations. Unfortunately, many of the individuals surveyed did not feel that they could devote much time or money to training in this area. Future research might explore what would make people more willing to attend language training and how an effective Spanish language and cultural skills training program could be developed at a minimum cost. Additionally, it may be worth exploring intensive immersion workshops for Spanish language training as so few individuals seemed to have the time for or the willingness to devote the time to longer, more traditional training programs.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, potential participants were contacted by email, which would preclude participation by those individuals who do not regularly access their university-issued email accounts. Also, it is possible that those individuals who chose to participate did so because they already had an interest in this area and so were more willing to take the time to respond. Thus, response bias was a concern with this study and limited its generalizability. There was also no way to differentiate between respondents who were graduate students and respondents who were faculty. It is likely that individuals in training programs might have a different pattern of responses than those individuals working in the field and teaching at the university. Additionally, IUP is located in a small-town area surrounded by rural communities. A different pattern of results might have been found at a larger university or at a university in a more urban or coastal location. It might be interesting to compare results from this study with results from another university. Finally, members of many other departments on a university campus might be unlikely to encounter individuals on a regular basis whose primary language is Spanish. Last, limiting the survey to individuals in service, medical, or mental health areas might also yield both different overall results and results more relevant to the needs of mental health service providers and their clients.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study highlighted the interest in increasing cultural competency that exists even among members of a rural university community. It may provide a starting point for

References

future research into the training needs of mental health professionals and how best to meet those needs. The fact that a number of individuals at a small university expressed interest in this study indicates that there might be more support for training in Spanish language and cultural competency among professionals and students in urban areas and at large schools.

Information gathered from this study will be used to develop a pilot workshop designed to teach mental health professionals basic Spanish language skills and cultural competency for use in working with Latino populations. With that in mind, the response bias encountered in this study may not be as problematic as it could have been because those individuals with an interest in this type of workshop are probably the individuals most likely to participate in the survey. Despite the limitations of this study, valuable information was obtained and can be used in the development of future studies and programs.

As the population of Spanish-speaking individuals throughout United States grows, there will be a greater need for training people who provide services to the community. This is especially true in rural areas where fewer professionals may have had exposure to foreign languages or contact with diverse cultures. Development of bilingual or multilingual training programs for mental health practitioners and other service providers in the community should be a priority.

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