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or alternatively

“The English language enables me to visit my pain”.
Exploring experiences of using a later-learned language in
the healing journey of survivors of sexuality persecution.

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Abstract

-Aims and Objectives: This qualitative study explores the experience of using a later-learned language, English (ELX), in the therapeutic journey of refugee survivors of sexuality persecution, to enhance understanding of the role of language in their rehabilitation.

-Design/Methodology/Approach: This is a multiple case study of three refugees, persecuted in their home country because of their sexual orientation, who are regular attendees of a therapeutic community, Room to Heal, based in London. A qualitatively driven mixed-method research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996) and ethnography was employed.

-Data and Analysis: Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the first author. They consisted of questions about the relationship between the participants' languages, emotions and sense of self.

- Findings/Conclusions: Participants shared common positive experiences characterised by feelings of the ELX being a liberating tool that empowered them and enabled them to bear witness to their trauma; express their same-sex love more easily; be more self-accepting and contributed to the [re]invention and performance of a 'new' self.

- Originality: The originality resides, firstly, in the unique profile of the participants –victims of persecution because of their sexual orientation; secondly, in the unique context- a therapeutic community supporting refugees; and thirdly, in the methodology which adopts a qualitatively driven mixed-method design combining IPA and ethnography.

- Significance/Implications: The findings support an embodied perspective of languages and highlight the need for therapists to be aware of multilingualism and its effects. The reduced emotional resonance of a later-learned language (LX) may offer its users a way to access trauma and build a new self within the therapeutic process.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Therapeutic community, LGBTI, emotion, emotional resonance

Introduction

The chilling words of Dian in the title are a reminder that code-switching to a later-learned language (LX) can offer a lifeline to multilinguals who have suffered unspeakable things in their first language (L1). Marcos (1976) had already observed that consecutive bilinguals switched languages during psychotherapy to distance themselves from emotionally charged experiences. The LX, acquired later in life, allowed them to “feel ‘protected’ by the linguistic

detachment” (p. 558) it offered. Further evidence of this “emotional-detachment effect” has emerged in the broader areas of psychology and multilingualism research (Caldwell-Harris, 2015; Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2021). Surprisingly, however, many psychotherapists remain unaware of the role of strategic code-switching among multilingual clients (Costa & Dewaele, 2019; Rolland, Costa & Dewaele, 2021; Rolland, Dewaele & Costa, 2017). The current study aims to get a better understanding of the role a LX plays in the therapeutic journey of three LGBTI refugees. Our participants, two men and one woman, have endured persecution because of their sexual orientation. The originality of the current study resides in the unique profile of the participants, the micro-context of the research- the therapeutic community *Room to Heal* based in London, and the methodology and the analyses.

Literature review

Some definitions and basic concepts

We adopt Pavlenko’s (2005) view that multilinguals are people who use a LX outside of the learning context, and whose LX proficiency may range from minimal to maximal. Multilinguals’ proficiency levels in their various languages may also vary across discourse domains. In other words, they may be more fluent in specific languages for certain discourse domains (Grosjean, 2012). Moreover, we do not view multilingualism as a state but rather as an on-going, dynamic process (de Bot, 2017). Multilinguals’ languages have different levels of emotional resonance and switches from one language to another can lead to feelings of difference as language is often a marker of identity (Dewaele, 2013, 2016a; Pavlenko, 2005, 2012; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017).

Feltham (2012) describes psychotherapy and counselling as “mainly, though not exclusively, listening-and-talking-based methods of addressing psychological and psychosomatic problems and change, including deep and prolonged human suffering, situational dilemmas, crises and developmental needs, and aspirations towards the realization of human potential” (p. 3). The aim of psychotherapy is to help people move on from trauma and achieve positive therapeutic change. Psychotherapy can take place in Therapeutic Communities (TCs) defined as “structured psychologically informed planned environments (...) where the social relationships, structure of the day and different activities are all deliberately designed to help people’s health and well-being” (<https://therapeuticcommunities.org>).

Asylum seeker refers to immigrants who have fled their home country due to persecution and are seeking refuge and safety, without the grant of legal status and public benefits. Thus, an asylum seeker is someone who has applied for refugee status in his or her host country and is awaiting a decision on his or her application from the Home Office of that country. Whereas, the term “refugee”, is defined by the United Nations Convention (UN, 1951) as somebody who has been granted refugee status in his or her host country. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTI) individuals persecuted on the grounds of sexuality can claim asylum as a sexual minority through membership of a “particular social group” in the 1951 UN Convention (Schuman & Hesford, 2014, p. 17).

In many countries a person is still not free to love who they wish. Male homosexuality is illegal in around 86 countries, whereas for women in around 46. Punishment varies from fines to life imprisonment, flogging and the death penalty, which remains in force in 7 countries for men and 4 for women (Amnesty International, 2008). Amongst survivors of persecution for LGBTI status, findings show that people experience higher incidence of verbal, sexual and physical abuse by parents and care-givers at home, peers and personnel at school, and in the wider community in their home countries (UNHCHR, 2011). Moreover, while the majority of non-LGBTI asylum seeker populations have the support of immediate

family, friends or other members of their persecuted group, LGBTI asylum seekers are often alienated and isolated from the support of others (Hopkinson et al., 2016). In short, LGBTI asylum-seekers experience an accumulation of trauma, “characterized by multiple events in multiple areas of life, over time, which continue even after attempting escape to a new country” (p. 5).

Room to Heal: a therapeutic community, supporting survivors of torture.

Room to Heal, the micro-context of this study, is a non-residential TC which supports refugees who have survived torture and other human rights violations. It is based in London, one of the most inclusive, diverse cities in the world (Perfect, 2015). The primary function of Room to Heal is to provide a mental health service. The organisation follows several principles found in the TC model of treatment (see Kennard, 1998). For example, respect for the human rights and dignity of its members; a flattened hierarchy between staff; open, non-hierarchical communication between staff and members.

An essential principle behind the TC model is that everything within the environment (community) can contribute to the healing process, from the staff, to the buildings, down to the choice of cutlery (Gale & Sanchez, 2005). Members at Room to Heal interact in small closed groups, in open large groups and in community forums and are given opportunities to meet each other in different settings. The learning experiences and encounters in TCs aim to promote behavioural change. Thus, TCs can be considered as both therapeutic and educational settings (Soyez & Broekaert, 2005). In belonging to Room to Heal, the survivors can restore meaningful relationships with themselves and others, and overcome the legacy of their traumatic experiences (Room to Heal, 2019). The community work is complemented by trauma therapy (both individual and group therapy), creative activities (e.g., gardening and yoga) and casework support (e.g., support in accessing legal aid and the housing services). All therapy sessions, both individual and group, are held in English.

Emotions in multiple languages

According to psychological constructionist theory, it is through the naming of emotions and emotional concepts that emotions can be perceived, predicted and experienced (Barrett, Lindquist & Gendron, 2007). In affective linguistic conditioning words and phrases acquire affective connotations and personal meanings through association and integration with emotionally charged memories and experiences (Barrett, 2009). Both the process of conceptual development and affective linguistic conditioning contribute to language embodiment, in which words trigger both sensory images and physiological reactions. Findings from cognitive psychologists and multilingualism researchers using a wide range of epistemological and methodological approaches suggest that the L1 of multilinguals is typically felt as more emotional, authentic and potent compared to LXs and that physiological reaction to emotion words are stronger in the L1 (Caldwell-Harris, 2015; AUTHOR, 2013; AUTHORS 2021; Pavlenko, 2005, 2012).

Pavlenko (2012, p. 409) defined affective processing as the “somatovisceral responses triggered by automatic appraisal of verbal stimuli, which may or may not register as subjective feelings at the level of higher cognition”. Thus, it is a “subjective process driven by individuals’ needs, goals, and linguistic and cultural categories—shared by appraisal and psychological constructionist theories, albeit at different levels of categorization— (that) allows us to understand variation in experienced language emotionality” (p. 409). Pavlenko (2005) suggests that essential modulators of emotional experience in each language used by multilinguals are their linguistic, affective and socialisation histories.

Pavlenko (2012) pursued this avenue of research and argues that the L1 feels more embodied than the LX because it is acquired in the period of intense affective socialization of early

childhood. It is a process which involves the integration of “phonological forms of words and phrases with information from visual auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinaesthetic, and visceral modalities, autobiographical memories and affect” (p. 421). From this perspective, multilinguals’ early languages develop together with autobiographical memory and emotion regulation systems. In contrast, LXs are acquired later in life, typically in classrooms, and LX words and expressions acquired in these settings lack the rich multimodal integration and feel more detached as a result. Variation in emotional resonance of the LX has been linked to age of onset/acquisition; language dominance; context of acquisition; frequency of use; size of networks and language socialization (AUTHOR, 2013).

In practise, multilingual people may switch languages (often unconsciously) to distance themselves from heavily-charged emotions or inversely, to deepen emotions (Bond & Lai, 1986; Marcos, 1976). Hence, the LX has the potential to facilitate disclosure when dealing with heavily charged emotional material in the L1 (Byford, 2015). So, the detached LX can prove to be a liberating tool for some individuals. Evidence of the “emancipatory detachment” that a LX can offer can be found in the translingual memoirs of multilingual writers (Pavlenko, 2005). For such writers their LX is beneficial in offering “new, ‘clean’ words, devoid of anxieties and taboos, freeing them from self-censorship, from prohibitions and loyalties of their native culture” (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 20). Some multilinguals may even abandon their L1 because it limits the expression of prohibited or relinquished parts of the self (Espín, 1999, 2006). Similarly, the experience of extreme trauma can lead to outright language rejection. Schmidt (2000) found that German Jews who had left Germany when the persecution of the Jews had already reached a peak were more likely to have stopped using German than those who had left the country earlier.

LX and sexuality

Examples of the liberating effect of a LX come from the field of gender studies and immigration. In crossing borders, the person also crosses emotional and behavioural boundaries (Espín, 2013) which offers women the opportunity to transcend established gender norms and create new identities. Espín (1999) found that most of the immigrant women she interviewed preferred their LX when talking about their sexuality. In contrast, in sexual interactions many of the respondents reported that they preferred their L1, finding that the detachment effect of LX English made it impossible to “make love in English” (Espín, 2013, p. 210). Her bilingual lesbian clients preferred to talk about their sexuality in the LX, even if most of the sessions were carried out in the L1. The author asks to what extent it is related to the distancing effect of the LX, or the characteristics of English as a language, and, finally how far it is linked to the new cultural context, which offers a place to express one’s sexuality more freely. Although she finds no clear-cut answers, she concludes that the access to more than one language allows a person to go beyond the boundaries of “what is sayable and tellable” (p. 211). Similar patterns emerged in King’s (2008) study of three Korean gay men. These men could not construct a gay identity in Korea and so learned English and moved to an English-speaking country to be free to be themselves. This sense of liberation is also to be found in the use of the LX. Dewaele (2016b) argues that swearing or using taboo words in the LX illustrates “the new-found freedom to express oneself without violating L1 norms” and thereby offers LX users potential “emotional selves which they can deploy according to their needs” (p. 475).

Sociocultural and psychosocial effects of multilingualism

Multilingualism has deep psychosocial effects which could be relevant to the therapeutic experience. For example, a majority of multilingual people report feeling like they are a different person when they switch languages (Dewaele, 2016a). Koven’s (1998) seminal study showed that complex sociolinguistic repertoires allow speakers “to perform different

kinds of ‘selves’ in each language” (p. 411) drawing on an array of registers and codes. Similarly, Benet-Martinez et al. (2002) state that multilinguals gain access to multiple cultural meanings and can switch between different culturally-appropriate behaviours accordingly. So, not only does performance change depending on the language used but it is often linked to a different sense of self (Dewaele, 2016; Kramersch, 2009; Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017; Pavlenko, 2005, 2006). The use of a LX can strengthen the sense of agency, allowing a person to become somebody else when they speak and use another language (Kramersch, 2009). In some ways, Kramersch adds, it creates a possibility of an escape route from the L1 self-and/or the option to explore the self from a different perspective. The self, within a new language, is almost forced into constantly being engaged in reflection on the self. Therefore, an ability to sustain self-reflexivity may become heightened in the multilingual individual (Burke, 2011).

A pivotal moment in this changing sense of self, comes when the LX is internalised as thought and inner speech. Emotional inner speech in the LX emerges later than general inner speech in the LX (Dewaele, 2015).

Language and therapy

Therapeutic interventions, strategies and concepts are always applied within a specific social, organisational and cultural context (McLeod, 2014). It is therefore crucial for the therapist to construct a contextualised and detailed picture of the clients’ experiences and one would imagine, in the case of the multilingual client, this would involve the therapist having knowledge and understanding of what it means to live across languages and cultures (Muran, 2006). The aim of clinical and trauma work is to help people move on from trauma and achieve positive therapeutic change, including expanding conscious awareness in clients with respect to the details of their experience. Research shows that reflecting on a multilingual’s relationship with their languages and the significance of these relationships for their lives is an important and productive area for therapy. Inviting a self-reflexive stance to language and its effects can open up a range of resources for the therapist and client (Burck, 2004).

Research question

Constructing this study was a process guided by the following main question:

Can a LX contribute to the healing and reparative space offered by a therapeutic community Room to Heal for survivors of torture?

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to explore the subjective, lived-experiences of our participants and enter into their “lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1990). To allow both methodological and data triangulation and to develop a thorough research base, we opted for a mixed-method design, combining interpretative phenomenology and ethnography (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). Indeed, triangulation, of phenomenological and ethnographical data enriched our interpretation of the multilingual experiences of the people in our study, whilst at the same time allowed us to consider those experiences in terms of the participant group, their cultural background, and the micro-context of the therapeutic community they belonged to. We agree with Bager Charleson, McBeath and Vostanis (2021) that it is important to build bridges across methods used in the field of psychotherapy and that “mixed methods research offers opportunities to combine unique, individual and generalisable shared perspectives on mental health and emotional well-being” (p. 49).

Thus, in this project, the core component and theoretical framework is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996), whereas, the supplemental component (which was conducted simultaneously) uses strategies from ethnographic fieldwork. We selected IPA, underpinned by a critical realist epistemology, as it allows for a nuanced illumination of peoples' experiences in a distinct context and in people who share a particular experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Its idiographic concern is to understand the concrete, the particular and the unique, whilst maintaining the integrity of the person (Eatough & Smith, 2006). Consequently, the main aim of an IPA study is to generate rich phenomenological data, rather than generalisability (Smith, 1996).

The first author worked as a volunteer at Room to Heal which facilitated the ethnographic component. It helped trust to develop between researcher and participants (see Langridge, 2007). Specific strategies used included persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and interviews with the staff.

Access to participants and ethics

Access negotiations were long and difficult. Room to Heal's policy is to protect their members from anything which could prove potentially harmful, disruptive or inconvenient to their lives within the community. The study purpose was explained together with the possible benefits for the participants and ethical issues, such as the protection of participants' identities

After formal access was obtained informal access with the members of Room to Heal, was negotiated. The first author was the cook for the community on a Tuesday. Therefore, after a designated Tuesday lunch, an information sheet, was handed out to the members who were present, and a short introduction about the intended research and what participating in it would involve was given.

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' research institution, and the researchers complied with Room to Heal's Vulnerable Adults at Risk policy. Members were able to give their own consent to participating in this research.

Before the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and to read and sign a Consent Form. On the consent form it was stated that the participants had the right to withdraw before or during the interview. Emphasis was given to the fact that they did not have to give a reason for their choice and that there would be no negative consequences. After the interview, participants were asked if there was any content in the interview about which they felt uncomfortable. No concerns were raised by participants.

They were made aware that any data collected would be kept confidential, no demographic information would be taken off-site, audio recordings would be password protected and potentially identifying information would be removed from subsequent transcriptions. Moreover, that research supervisors would have access to anonymised transcripts. All data was anonymised, and pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher for use in the interview transcripts and analyses.

Data collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews which is usual in IPA studies (Smith et al., 1999). They were prepared carefully, taking into consideration the issues of ethics and power (Rolland, Dewaele & Costa, 2019). Topics covered participants' psycholinguistic histories, their thoughts, feelings and experiences about their multilingualism, their experience of the community and using a LX within the individual and group therapy sessions there. Crucially, the interviews did not deal with the trauma. The interviews were carried out in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in 2018. The interviewees spoke openly and

with consideration as to what they wanted to say. Many participants, following the interview, mentioned how it had encouraged them to reflect on their multilingualism - a previously unknown and unthought-of topic for the majority.

Data Analysis

Initially, the transcripts were read and re-read to obtain a holistic view of the participant's account. During this process the first researcher made notes related to what seemed interesting or significant in the text. Then, the transcripts were examined further and conceptual themes created which were thought to capture the essence of the participant's account. Then, both convergences and divergences were recognised across the data and a list of superordinate and subordinate themes produced (Smith et al., 1999).

Participants

Three participants out of a larger group of 15 were selected, on the basis that they had been the victim of sexuality persecution (Cook, 2019). Brontes, Dian and Gabriel were fluent in English and had a university education or were studying at university at the time of the data collection. All three had been part of Room to Heal for several years. Brontes founded a LGBTI organisation fighting for the human rights of LGBTI people around the world.

Findings

Overall, two levels of themes were identified: superordinate and subordinate. The three superordinate themes were "Challenging", "Moving On" and "Empowering" (Cook, 2019). The current study focuses on the single superordinate theme "Empowering", which best represents these three participants' subjective experiences of the positive role the ELX (English as a later-learned language) played in their healing journey. This superordinate theme consists of five subordinate themes: 1) "bringing suffering into words"; 2) "feeling free to express love"; 3) "more free to be me"; 4) "a kinder inner speech"; and 5) "changing and moving on". The interdependence of themes made it difficult to separate some of the text into its component parts without losing deep meaning. Consequently, some excerpts representative of a certain theme may contain elements of another. This demonstrates the strong relationship between each of the themes.

Bringing suffering into words

This first subordinate-theme is directly linked to the therapeutic process and alliance and shows how the detachment effect of the LX can enable the person to talk about traumatic experiences. Brontes' torture occurred in Luganda and Swahili. He prefers not to talk about his torture in these languages as it reawakens the horror far too vividly for him. The distancing effect of ELX enables him to speak out and to explore areas he would have hidden:

...expressing myself in English about the things which happened to me which are horrible -I think I cut out-that there is not much emotion towards it if I am speaking in English but if I was speaking in Luganda there would be a lot of emotional attachment toward it [In English] you don't feel it-

Brontes was empowered by the distancing effect of the ELX to express and examine his difficult life experience:

it doesn't hit you. It's like telling a story which didn't exist but if I say it in Luganda...

Brontes emphasized the importance of speaking out and that the very act of doing so was cathartic in his ELX:

B: it wasn't easy when you talk about something which is... but the thing is to talk about what is going on inside you with someone and express it and get it out even if

you don't do anything about it - but it has come out - it doesn't pain you inside like when you don't have anyone to share it with but you share it with someone and there is that element of hope inside you.

Researcher: the hope of what?

B: of telling someone and just reducing the burden inside me.

Likewise, Dian described how she felt more able to regulate her emotions in ELX and not become overwhelmed by them. ELX allows her to speak out about her difficulties and trauma and confront her pain. She reported:

the English language is my place of safety, it is that sense of safety which enables me to visit my pain [in the ELX] I know how to go to a safety place- So actually by speaking English and feeling a sense of safety I am able to face my pain...

Free to express love

Brontes experiences another aspect of his being multilingual, that is access to different emotional concepts which are interconnected with different cultural models. He feels that a different language can not only offer freedom from the internalised oppression embodied in his L1, but also a myriad of fresh new words with which to express himself. Brontes' ELX not only frees him from his shame with the distance it creates but gives him new words to express his love. Words which are not bound to a culture which prohibits and vilifies same-sex love. Brontes explained that:

...there are many, many words in English I can use to express my love...in Luganda, to express my love for someone the words I am going to use are kind of like related to swear words, to some kind of like taboo words which I grew up not wanting to or being stopped from saying and inside you, you adopt it and if you are saying to someone like so- so- so you are shaking, it's like shocking or something it's quite difficult like...it's kind of easier for me to express myself, my love towards someone in English.

For Brontes, the ELX with its new words and detachment effect allows the expression of previously hidden selves. It becomes a language of personal freedom. He is now able to express his same-sex love in his ELX with an ease which is not available in his L1. He himself mentions two reasons for this: First, in his L1 he feels the 'shame' of his difference, and that shame is embodied in his L1. If he tries to express his feelings or love for another man in his L1 it literally makes his "body shake". Second, the ELX offers more words to talk about his love and his emotions than his L1 which is devoid of these words – those that do exist are all taboo and hold strong negative connotations.

Likewise, Dian described the emotional deprivation she experiences in her L1 and how those feelings prevented her from expressing the most intimate and important of human emotions - love. She said that in in her L1:

Everything feels deprived, even emotionally I feel deprived, so I am and was not-able to express anything... let alone love...

Again, Dian's perceptions of her languages show how the L1 has embodied the feelings of shame regarding her sexual identity and it is in the ELX where she can finally find and express her authentic self.

Kinder inner speech in the LX

Gabriel used the ELX to overcome the restraints and inhibitions of the culture in which he grew up, embodied in the harsh, L1 inner speech. Indeed, his L1 is anthropomorphised and watching disapprovingly over his shoulder:

... I feel like the language is a person watching me- if I use my mother-tongue- so it's going to judge me, it's going to talk to me, telling me...I'm a bit nervous

about using in my L1, – I see my mother-tongue as a person that scares me and judges me- [on the other hand] I feel really comfortable using English.
Gabriel's inner speech in the ELX allows him to be kind and comforting with himself.

More free to be me

This subordinate -theme relates to the way in which the ELX influenced how the interviewees' senses of self were restructured through the use of the ELX. In Bronte, Gabriel, and Dian there was a strong feeling that the ELX made them freer and enabled them to speak and behave in ways different from their usual modes. Moreover, the feelings of a new-found sense of personal freedom, agency and strength in the language were very pronounced. Dian reports how in her ELX she was:

... finally, able to express myself and find my own identity, which has never been done or possible in my country or possible in [my L1]. It's not just like I don't know how to do it in [my L1], but it's the feeling it's all too charged in [my L1]. English is my language of safety. [my L1] is my language of persecution.

So, it is in the context of her ELX she is finally able to express her sexuality freely and find her identity without been bound by the shackles of shame she feels in her L1. Indeed, these three people were very explicit about how the ELX was not only a safe place from which they could navigate their emotions more easily but it was also the place where they could feel true to themselves. Gabriel reported:

it's in English I have learned to express myself as a person- through the medium of the language and that is why I am more comfortable; I feel I am more myself when using the English language.

Gabriel feels he can be free to be himself in the ELX, even if as yet he does not feel as fluent in this language as in his L1. His L1 forces him to feel in a way that is not true to himself, to who he is:

When I speak [my L1] I feel, more manly, more masculine and more –yeah- and when I speak English it's more me, who I am- I am very comfortable with my soul- but I wouldn't say that I could express everything I feel, because of my knowledge sometimes I lack the right words to express myself...but I still feel more free in this language

Conversely, the ELX endowed him with freedom and a means to depart from the restrictive oppressive constraints embodied in the L1 and his country of origin. In his ELX he feels the lightness of a cloak, in his L1 the heaviness of armour. He said when he switches into his L1 from his ELX that it is:

... like taking off an English cloak to wear armour- it's like I'm taking off my identity, you know my identity is emerging from English, that's who I am, it's where I feel safe and how I feel safe.

Researcher: So, when you speak in [your L1]?

Gabriel: It's like the old language and you're always raised to be like a warrior, to be powerful. When I speak [my L1] I always feel sort of different...as though I am wearing lots of armour (laughs).

Gabriel refers to the ELX as being the medium through which he connects to his authentic, gay self. Gabriel's example shows how the detachment effect of the ELX liberates him from the harsh oppressor, embodied in his L1. The reference to armour seems to indicate he feels suffocated and weighed down by his L1. Gabriel described that he feels his L1 is no longer relevant to his present self. He has moved on. It is a language deeply embedded in his past oppressed self.

Changing and moving on

The final subtheme deals with the dynamic interplay between languages and lived experience. The next excerpt shows how Gabriel is moving on and how his feelings and attitude towards his L1 have evolved:

Researcher: Would you like to have the opportunity to speak more [L1]?

Gabriel: I'd love to. When I first came here, I didn't want to speak [my L1] at all because of my past but now after this journey of experience and after my studies now because of my studies...it makes me comfortable it gives me confidence to bring out my [L1] self... I listen to songs in [L1] – it's to do with my dance.

Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to shed light on participants' language experiences within the process of their rehabilitation. The findings suggest that the ELX contributed to the reparative, healing space offered by the community. The perceived detachment effect of the ELX helped facilitate disclosure of the participants' traumatic past during therapy sessions. Moreover, the ELX was connoted as liberatory, enabling the expression of previously hidden selves. It also offered new, fresh words with which to express same-sex love. New words which were free of guilt and shame. Moreover, being positioned outside of their L1 from the perspective of another one, allowed for heightened self-awareness. It confirms previous research that multilinguals' languages are therapeutic assets and can be used as a tool to explore a person's sense of self, enhancing self-awareness and understanding (Costa & Dewaele, 2012; 2019; Dewaele & Costa, 2013).

The most striking finding was how the perceived detachment effect of the ELX helped the participants disclose their traumatic experiences during therapy. The distancing effect of the ELX enabled the participants not to feel overwhelmed by their emotions and allowed them to regulate how they felt. Just how deeply emotions are embodied in words and language emerges from Brontes' interview. Indeed, when he tries to talk about his extreme experiences in his L1s, he cannot bring his suffering into words, they embody his fear and shame, and he is inhibited. Instead, using the ELX for disclosure allows him to bypass the linguistic/cultural obstacle and make progress on his therapeutic journey. Conversely, the possibility for Brontes to use his L1, because it does embody his dreadful past experiences, could help him to "fully grasp and face" (Burke, 2011, p. 334) what happened to him. In other words, a person may prefer to use one language at one moment in their healing journey but another, at a different point in that journey.

The emotional distance offered by the ELX also contributed to the participants being able to explore areas which otherwise would have been left unseen, and express things which would have been left unsaid, especially the expression of same-sex love. The language experiences of our three participants show to what extent words can trigger both sensory images and physiological reactions, which confirms Pavlenko's (2012) argument that affective processing is a subjective process driven by individuals' needs, goals and linguistic and cultural categories. In other words, the source of the emotion is not in the words per se but in the lived experiences with the words and, therefore, it varies across speakers and contexts. The abuse and persecution of an LGBTI person often begins early in life, during the period of intense affective socialization of childhood (Pavlenko, 2012). They experience higher incidence of verbal, sexual and physical abuse by parents and care-givers at home, peers and personnel at school, and in the wider community in their home countries (Alessi et al., 2016). Thus, the traumatic memories and experiences of sexuality persecution of the participants in

this study are deeply embodied in the language in which they occurred. The emotional scars are still raw in their L1. Furthermore, like the German Jews in Schmid's (2002) seminal study of language attrition, Gabriel's trauma is so heavily engraved in his L1, that when he reached the safety of British shores, he consciously avoided using it. On the other hand, the ELX is perceived as liberatory. Indeed, it is experienced as a new kinder space that allows re-invention of the self. For Dian, the detachment effect of the ELX renders it a clean slate, devoid of others' voices and judgements about her. For Brontes and Gabriel too, the ELX allows the expression of previously hidden selves. Brontes is now able to express his same-sex love in his ELX with an ease that was impossible in his L1. The participants have been socialised into the English language and culture, in the inclusive, supportive community of Room to Heal, and the wider context of London, where sexual diversity is more freely expressed. It suggests that both the local context and the distancing effect of the LX lead to the language being perceived as liberatory. Thus, also supporting Kramersch's (1993) view that in relocating themselves in a new language and culture, peoples' perceptions of the world and [themselves] are profoundly changed and that in doing so it can be possible to develop a new healthier sense of self and identity (Burck, 2005; Espín, 2013).

Regarding heightened self-awareness, an important therapeutic goal, the ELX gave the participants the possibility to view themselves differently. This is very visible in the way Gabriel describes the differences between his differing inner speeches in his L1 and the ELX. The former condemning and judgemental, the latter kind and accepting. Seemingly, therefore, Gabriel's ELX gives him a tool for self-reflection (cf. Burke, 2005; Kramersch, 2009).

Furthermore, Brontes' and Gabriel's experiences show that multilingualism is a dynamic construct (cf. de Bot, 2017; Pavlenko, 2005) and thereby, how they think and feel in their respective languages' changes depending on the context and the discourse domain (cf. Grosjean, 2012) but changes also over time (Dewaele, 2015). Brontes prefers to carry out his activism in his L1 as it takes him back to his African roots of which he is proud, and it is a means to spread his message where it is most needed. Brontes, in the context of his intimate relationships with other men, preferred to use his ELX. However, in the context of fighting for human rights through the LGBTI organisation he founded, he referred to consciously wanting to use his L1, Luganda. He felt pride in using it and it made him feel closer to his roots and origins. On the other hand, Gabriel is slowly starting to appreciate his L1 again through his growing love of poems and songs in the language. It resonates with Pavlenko's (2005) observation that the sense of who we are and how we relate to the social world is in a constant state of flux and that feelings (including those related to languages) do not stand still but evolve as the person moves on and changes (p. 225).

Participants' changing language preferences support an embodied view of language and emotions where context and language are intertwined. Dian describes her L1 as her language of 'persecution' and her ELX as her language of 'safety'. For an LX to become a language of safety, it needs to be combined with an environment which is kind and supportive and respects peoples' human rights, including the right to love who one pleases. Finally, previous studies underlined the need to raise awareness of multilingualism into counselling and psychotherapy training courses (Bager-Charleson et al., 2017; Costa & Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2020). This study suggests that, in addition, counsellors and psychotherapists need to be aware of the multitude of reasons why refugees who have suffered persecution may prefer one language over another to talk about specific topics, and how these preferences may also evolve over time, reflecting a shift in their identity and sense of self.

The current study is not without limitations. First, this is one of the first attempts to combine IPA with ethnography, thus as yet validity has not been properly established. Second, the size

of the sample and the methodology do not allow generalisations. However, the fact that the three participants spoke similarly and with such intensity indicates just how strong the transformative change linked to the use of an LX was on these individuals. Further research is needed to establish whether these findings can be replicated in other or larger samples of LGBTI refugees in a similar situation.

The main implication of the current study is that psychological interventions which enable LGBTI refugees to recognise their own experience across languages, could well promote engagement and rapport within the context of their rehabilitation and help their recovery.

Conclusion

This small-scale qualitative study on the under-researched population of LGBTI refugees in the context of their healing journey highlights the complex interactions between languages, emotionality, emotional expression, sense of self and self-reflexivity. Awareness and understanding of multilingualism can provide useful lenses for professionals to see the person within the refugee, and discover the uniqueness and complexity of the person's story. It could empower both the person working with refugees and the refugees themselves. Therefore, we hope this research may inform policy makers, service providers (in particular, therapists and counsellors working with refugees and asylum seekers) and the general public to understand and respond more appropriately to the needs of such people.

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