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A cross-disciplinary and multi-method approach of multilingualism in psychotherapy¹

By Jean-Marc Dewaele (Birkbeck College, University of London) & Beverley Costa (Mothers tongue)

Jean-Marc Dewaele and Beverley Costa share their experience of doing mixed-method research in a neglected area of psychotherapy.

Multilingual therapy
Mixed-method inquiry
Quantitative and qualitative approaches
Critical realism
Positivism
Social sciences
Hypothesis
Data collection
Likert scale
Factor analysis

Introductory comments: In this chapter Jean-Marc and Beverley will share their experiences of working with mixed methods in an under-researched area. As we shall see, her interest in larger sampling groups introduced her to some of the advantages of quantitative research. Together with Jean-Marc, who expands on the methods in detail in this chapter, Beverley was able to research multilingual therapy from several angles.

Practitioner perspective, by Beverley

In 2011, Mothers tongue, a multi-ethnic counselling service (www.mothers-tongue.org.uk), decided to conduct research into the experiences of multilingual and monolingual therapists and counsellors working with multilingual clients. In order to provide a context for the research project carried out with Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele in 2012 (Costa and Dewaele 2012), I will attempt to share some of my dilemmas as a therapist and thinking about the way in which we conducted the research.

Mothers tongue works therapeutically with clients from an average of 43 ethnic backgrounds and we deliver therapy in 15 languages. All of our therapists are multilingual and work regularly in all their languages with the clients. We are aware from our own practice that most models of therapy and most counselling and psychotherapy trainings do not attend to people's experiences of being multilingual. We also know from previous studies (Costa 2010; Nguyen 2012) that multilingual therapists can feel unsupported, unacknowledged and unprepared for working across languages, often in

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their mother tongue – a language in which they did not receive their training or their own counselling or therapy.

In order to strengthen the case for attention to be paid to this aspect of human experience, we decided that we needed to conduct research and gather robust evidence to support our claims that this is an area which merits further exploration.

So far in *Mothertongue*, we had argued for a form of research which is highly active and yields rapid results. Because of the pressing needs of the client group with whom we work, a long process of research-led practice can seem irrelevant, especially to those in need. We have therefore preferred to focus on action research methods which draw from educational provision, for example Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) and Paulo Freire's (1990) emancipatory educational ideas.

As a therapist, it is not surprising that I am drawn to qualitative forms of research. My natural inclination is to avoid models which incline towards the generation of generalisations. In Jean-Marc's words, 'positivists believe that inquiries should be value free'. In psychotherapy, we focus on attending to individuals' voices and their subjective experiences. We are also aware of the impossibility of taking a neutral stance. Our very presence in the encounter shapes it in some way. This would incline me more towards qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, which value the meaning which can be generated from in-depth interviews with a small number of participants, while taking into account the social constructionist view that meaning is made through interaction with each other and with the social world. We encourage our clients and ourselves of reality. However, with qualitative research, sample sizes are often very small. We wanted to create as big a body of evidence as possible for this under-researched area to be taken seriously. I had no experience of quantitative forms of research and I had my own prejudices. This was an initial hurdle.

Developing an appreciation for number

Nevertheless I have developed an appreciation for the credibility which greater numbers of respondents, achievable through quantitative methods, can bring to one's research findings, especially in an under-researched area such as the experiences of multilinguals in therapy. It provides a starting point from which people can begin to debate ideas, challenge and create new models. A mixed-method form of inquiry, which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, seems to fit well with reconciling and holding different perspectives. Holding tensions, after all, is what we therapists are constantly aiming to achieve in our work.

Reflection

Consider an area in your practice which could be explored both with a quantitative and qualitative approach.

In an attempt to find a way forward I started to look at the research being conducted in the field of Applied Linguistics into the emotional experiences of multilinguals. It struck me that the disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Psychotherapy could explore similar issues from different perspectives. Currently, they appear to be conducting these explorations in isolation from each other. For example, linguists may not focus on the relationship people have with their different languages and may focus more on the

benefits of, say, the bilingual upbringing of children without reference to the parents' relationship with their languages.

Therapists tend to ignore the issue of whether multilinguals encode emotions differently and experience the world differently in different languages (Dewaele 2010). They may ignore the power issues played out in families: the potential for inclusion and exclusion via languages, which some family members share with each other (Karamati 2004).

It seemed important to try to bring those two disciplines together. I was very fortunate that Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele from the Applied Linguistics Department, at Birkbeck College, University of London also thought it was a good idea. With this collaboration, we were able to think about the research subject across disciplines. I was also able to learn a great deal about conducting quantitative research from a highly experienced practitioner. Without this collaboration I would never have dared to embark on a mixed-methods inquiry.

Critical Realism

This collaboration has fitted well with a Critical Realism approach (Bhaskar 1979).

Through this approach, we have tried to refine our knowledge by using information and by observing and describing more fully that information via questionnaires and reflective conversations, in order to obtain as full and rich a description as possible. From that description, we have attempted an evaluative critique of what we have observed. We hope this will invite others to take part in that evaluative critique.

Ethical clearance

I want to end with a note about ethical clearance. At a recent conference a fellow-delegate asked me why I thought there was a small but increasing body of research about multilingual therapists' experiences, but practically nothing available on the experiences of clients. My explanation for this is that the processes for gaining ethical clearance for medical research with patients and clients are so arduous that it is off-putting for researchers who, like ourselves, have very limited resources. We have had to consider how we approach this hurdle with our latest, subsequent research, which is focusing on patients' experiences. Our solution has been two-fold:

1. To use a non-intrusive method of data collection. We have therefore designed a questionnaire with open questions for people to share their stories if they wish to. So far, we have collected some very rich information from over 200 participants.
2. To recruit participants from our multilingual colleagues rather than from sources of identified patients. We have therefore sent the call for participants to all our multilingual colleagues without knowing which, if any, of them has received therapy. People can decide for themselves if they wish to answer the questionnaire, via Survey monkey, which is entirely anonymous.

If we had not made an effort to find a way of working with quantitative methods, then, with the limited resources we have, there would be no data from multilingual clients and their voices and their experiences would not be heard or taken into account in the research literature.

Researcher' perspective, by Jean-Marc

The cornerstones in quantitative research

Hatch & Farhady (1982: 1) defined the term “research” as a systematic approach to answering questions. Farhady (2013: 1) highlights three key terms in this classic definition: “a question, a systematic approach, and an answer”. Farhady observes that the debates in social sciences are not so much on the “definition of the term “research” but on different interpretations of the key terms” (p. 1).

The quantitative research method is based in the positivistic paradigm. Paradigms are based on four cornerstones: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology (p. 1). *Ontologically*, positivists argue that “there is a real world, the reality of which is expressed in terms of the relationships among variables, and the extent of these relationships can be measured in a reliable and valid manner using a priori operational definitions” (p. 1).

Epistemologically, positivists place “a premium on objective observation of the “real world” out there” (pp. 1-2).

Methodologically, positivists prefer the use of deductive reasoning, “a system for organizing known facts in order to reach a conclusion” (p. 2). The conclusion can only be true if the premise upon which it is based is true. Positivists thus “emphasize the importance of a priori hypotheses and theories” (p. 2). By manipulating at least one independent variable (i.e. “the main or the cause variable which is under the control of the researcher” (p. 3)), the researcher measures its effect on a dependent variable (“i.e. the variable that depends on, or changes as the result of, the manipulation of the independent variable” (p. 3)), controlling for other moderator variables “that may influence the outcome of the dependent variable without being necessarily manipulated” (p. 3). This procedure allows the researcher to establish valid cause–effect relationships and generalize them as laws (p. 2).

The final cornerstone is *axiology*, which “deals with the ethics and asks how moral a person a researcher should be in the world” (p. 2). Positivists believe that inquiries should be value free: “In other words, the researcher’s values, interpretations, feelings, and musings have no place in the positivist’s view of scientific inquiry” (p. 2).

Research questions, research design, data collection and analysis

The quantitative researcher starts with a question “which is formulated about the relationship between at least two variables” (p. 2). A variable is “any attribute that changes from person to person (...), place to place (...), or time to time” (p. 2). In social sciences we mostly deal with abstract variables “that is, not directly observable or measureable but inferred from observations and measurements”; with discrete or categorical variables such as gender; and continuous variables can take any value such as frequencies, number of languages known...

At the heart of the investigation lie the research questions “about the relationship between the variables to indicate either a cause–effect relationship or just (...) togetherness between them” (p. 2).

Once the research question is formulated with well-defined variables (allowing replication), “it is converted into a research hypothesis to be tested. A hypothesis is a tentative statement about the outcome of research and can take two forms: null and alternative” (p. 3). A null hypothesis H_0 , “is generally stated in the form that the manipulation of the independent variable will not have an effect upon the dependent

variable”. The alternative hypothesis, “stipulates an effect, either positive or negative, of the independent variable on the dependent variable” (p. 3).

Once the research hypothesis is formulated, the researcher chooses a systematic approach, a research design, to test the research hypothesis (p. 3).

The quality of the design will depend on many factors “including the nature of the research question, the type and number of variables, the number and groups of subjects participating in research, and the type of collected data interact to form an efficient design that will optimize the outcome of research” (p. 3).

The data collection is the next stage. This is of crucial importance “because the validity of the findings of research will depend very much on the quality of the collected data.

Therefore, great care should be exercised in selecting appropriate instruments for data collection” (p. 8). Statistics will be needed to analyse the data (Dancey & Reidy, 2011).

Finally, the quantitative researcher will have to interpret the findings and discuss their implications for improving the theory and their applications to practice (p. 8).

It is important to underline that “the validity of the findings depends on the validity of research” (p. 8). In other words, statistical significance does not automatically lead to a firm law. It is better to be careful in making conclusions, avoiding strong and sweeping statements because of the inherent limitations of any research design.

The strengths and weaknesses of quantitative research

The quantitative approach has major strengths: it is “systematic, rigorous, focused, and tightly controlled, involving precise measurement and producing reliable and replicable data that is generalisable to other contexts” (Dörnyei, 2007: 34). However, quantitative methods have two main weaknesses. Dörnyei (2007: 35) concludes that:

First, “they average out responses across the whole observed group of participants, and by working with concepts of averages it is impossible to do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life”.

Second, they “have a rather limited general exploratory capacity because they cannot easily uncover reasons for particular patterns or the dynamics underlying a situation or phenomenon”.

Reflection

Consider the strengths and weaknesses with quantitative research with reference to your potential research interest.

Mixed methods research

The obvious way to overcome the limitations of quantitative research is by including a qualitative component to the research design: “I have also experienced again and again how much richer data we can obtain in a well-conducted and analysed qualitative study than even in a large-scale questionnaire survey” (Dörnyei, 2007: 47).

The integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses is called mixed methods research and is still in its infancy (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Leech & Dellinger (2013) underline that “it is important to consider validity evidence when conducting mixed methods research so that studies are rigorous and results and inferences are defensible” (p. 6).

Rather than talking about the “validity” of mixed method research, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) propose “inference quality,” defined as a combination of design quality (i.e., whether the study adheres to best practice) and interpretive rigor (i.e., how well the results can be trusted).

Dewaele (2010) has argued that for research into multilinguals’ feelings, language choices and perceptions it is important to combine quantitative and qualitative data. The former were obtained through the use of an on-line questionnaire with closed questions (with 5-point Likert scales) and open questions which allowed participants to add their own unique observations. More than 1500 participants contacted via social media and email filled out the questionnaire. As they came from all over the world, ranging in age from teenagers to elderly participants, the ecological validity of the resulting database was solid. The fact that the sample was not a representative sample of the general population (it having a high proportion of female, highly educated multilinguals) was not a problem, because this self-selected sample of highly linguistically and pragmatically aware multilinguals was best able to produce high-quality information. Wilson and Dewaele (2010) reported that self-selected participants are more likely to make an effort to provide complete, accurate and honest feedback.

One crucial element is obviously to use a good research instrument, where the closed questions have clear items with Likert scales, and where the open questions are unambiguous (Dörnyei, 2010).

The statistical analysis allowed the identification of general patterns in the data, namely the effect of sociobiographical variables, language learning history, current linguistic practice and psychological variables on the dependent variables (Dewaele, 2010). Once these patterns had been established, the quantitative data were complemented with interview data from 20 multilinguals who had filled out the questionnaire. This allowed more in-depth probing of reported linguistic behaviour and attitudes, and a better understanding of the unique combination of individual, social, pragmatic and cultural reasons linked to the dependent variables.

Costa & Dewaele (2012)

Costa & Dewaele (2012) followed a similar approach: an on-line questionnaire was designed, aimed specifically at psychotherapists, with closed questions with Likert scales related to the participants’ beliefs, attitudes and practices.

A previous version of the questionnaire had been submitted to four experts (two psychologists and two applied linguists) who rated each of the original 89 items on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from “poor validity” to “strong validity”) and commented on them. After that the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 10 therapists. The final version was cut to 27 items, and put on-line on Survey monkey. Indeed, as a rule of thumb, filling out questionnaires should not exceed 10 to 15 minutes (Dörnyei, 2010). The items were statements, and the participants were asked to express their degree of disagreement or agreement with the statement: for example: *I think that therapists with bilingual skills are able to understand clients in a different way than therapists who are monolingual;* and: *It is easier to express strong feelings and emotions in a second language;* and: *From my experience, I feel that levels of empathy between clients and therapists are affected by the language in which the therapy takes place.*

Tell us to what extent you agree with the following statements regardless of whether you have had therapy with a multilingual therapist. If you have not had therapy with a multilingual therapist, we are still interested in your ideas.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I avoid certain topics when talking to a therapist with whom I do not share a first language (L1).	<input type="radio"/>				
I avoid certain topics when talking to a therapist with whom I share a L1.	<input type="radio"/>				
Therapists with whom I share a first language relate differently from therapists with whom I do not share a L1.	<input type="radio"/>				

Figure 3.1 Example of Likert scale questioning, taken from Costa and Dewaele (2012)

Activity

Consider how you might phrase some of your research questions using a Likert scale format. Would your research lend itself to this kind of questioning?

Participants were recruited through Beverley’s contacts in the profession. The questionnaire was anonymous but participants could leave an email address if they agreed to be interviewed on the issues covered in the questionnaire.

The main independent variable was the therapist’s language knowledge (mono- or multilingual). As this was one among many sociobiographical background questions (other questions included sex, age, nationality, language history, present language use, and theoretical orientation in their therapeutic work), the participants could not guess that mono/multilingualism was the main independent variable.

Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis, using a principal components analysis (PCA) was performed on the 27 items, followed by an independent t-test comparing the factor scores of the monolingual and multilingual therapists. The most difficult part in the PCA is the interpretation of the solution. In this case it was a four-factor solution accounting for 41% of the variance. By comparing the 5 items with strong positive and 1 item with a strong negative loading on the first dimension, it was determined that the first factor (with an eigenvalue of 4.7 and explaining 17% of variance) reflected therapists’ attunement towards their bilingual clients (Attunement versus Collusion).

The second factor was named “Shared understanding versus Acting on assumptions” (explaining 9% of variance). The third and fourth factors reflected “Freedom of

expression versus Difficulty of challenging”, and “The distancing effect of the second language versus “The advantage of a shared language”, explaining an additional 15% of variance. Individual factor scores on the various dimensions were used as the dependent variables.

Our null hypothesis and the outcome of our study

The null hypothesis was that monolingual therapists would not differ from their multilingual peers. An independent t-test showed that the 18 monolingual therapists differed significantly from their 83 multilingual peers on the first dimension, and hence that the null hypothesis could be rejected. The multilingual therapists were situated closer to the attunement end of the dimension compared to the monolingual therapists who were closer to the collusion end of the dimension. No statistically significant differences between both groups emerged on the three other dimensions, meaning the null hypothesis stood firm. Armed with that knowledge, Beverley interviewed one monolingual and two multilingual therapists and managed to probe their views and uncover possible causes for the patterns that had emerged in the quantitative analysis.

Recommended reading

Dörnyei, Z. (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book gives a comprehensive overview of the various stages of qualitative and quantitative investigations from collecting the data to presenting the results.

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