

Bilingual Identity Development of Language Minority College Students

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Introduction

What comes to mind when we hear the words "American college student"? Counselors and other student affairs professionals are continuing to discover the diversity hidden under this familiar label. The distinction is most often made on the basis of such observable characteristics as color and ethnicity, overlooking the less obvious traits: gender, sexual orientation, bilingualism, disability, etc. The danger is no longer in being blind to the differences, but rather in being nearsighted to the fine details therein, i.e., acknowledging diversity *within* diversity. Although a great deal of clinical attention and research have been devoted to the minority experience on college campuses, this phenomenon has been described in very "black and white" terms. In fact, the word "minority" itself has become synonymous with "persons of color," often at the cost of excluding the other, less easily identifiable minorities.

One such group – bilinguals – merits special attention, if only because of its increasing presence at American institutions of higher learning. No definitive figure exists for the number of students that

consider themselves bilingual, largely due to the current design of college applications that only inquire about race or ethnicity. However, in the population at large, in the year 2000 almost 47 million people aged 5 and above spoke "a language other than English at home" (Shin & Bruno, 2003, p. 1). Most were speakers of Spanish – 28.1 million, an unprecedented (for a minority of this size) 62% increase since the Census of 1990 (Shin & Bruno, 2003). Other ethnic groups also showed rapid growth (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Even if in the decade following the 2000 Census only a modest percentage of these individuals ended up in college, bilinguals would likely comprise a sizeable minority group therein. And as this new minority continues to grow, so would hopefully the college counseling professionals' ability to hear and understand their voices.

Literature Review

To date, a great deal of research has been devoted to bilingual children and some – to their parents (see, e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Lambert, 1975; Giles & Byrne, 1982; Landry, 1987; Hamers & Blanc, 1989; Landry & Allard, 1992). However, researchers in most of these studies seem to lose all interest in how their participants and their children develop by the time they reach high school. There seems to be a pervasive tendency to treat this developmental process as finite and strictly cognitive in nature, susceptible only somewhat to psychosocial influences. In other words, the existing research not only overlooks college-age bilinguals, but also (and most importantly) fails to heed a major experiential aspect of this cohort's bilingual development – personal identity as members of a minority group. And yet, non-English speakers immigrating to the US, along with their immigrant and American-born children, share in the common experience of being marginalized at American colleges and universities only because their "mother tongue" is not the majority language. Tolerance (though not always acceptance) on the part of the US monolingual majority is often contingent upon linguistic assimilation, i.e., identification with the majority English at the price of weakening, or even losing the connection with the minority heritage language.

Numerous minority development theories exist in the literature (see, e.g., Cass, 1979; Gibbs, 1987; Poston, 1990; Hall, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2003). The usual course of most such models is from discovery to empowerment of the marginalized identity, with concurrent decrease in resentment for the majority group. Minorities described by these models (e.g., African Americans) usually do not carry within themselves a combination of two or more conflicting identities related to the same type of characteristic,

as is the case with another racial minority – biracials. For the latter group, existing development models introduce the concept of integrating the minority identity (e.g., Black) with the majority identity (e.g., White) as the highest level of development (see, e.g., Gibbs, 1987; Poston, 1990; Hall, 2001).

Because of the apparent power differential between a person's heritage language and that of the society at large, biracial identity development theory by Poston (1990) was used to understand the development of bilinguals as a language minority (LM). This model helped to illustrate how bilinguals negotiate two disparate identities: one representing a minority group and one – a majority cohort. Additionally, gay identity development by Cass (1979) was used to approximate bilinguals' experience of "invisibility" – having to make the choice of either announcing their LM membership or concealing it (a.k.a. "passing"). To manage the stigma of being recognized as a minority, some gay and bilingual persons engage in passing for the heterosexual and monolingual majority respectively. Although this strategy does serve to protect minority individuals from discomfort or outright persecution, it also comes at a great psychological cost of shame and denial of how these persons truly see themselves (Maylon, 1982; Tyler, 2002), a.k.a., identity. Finally, Landry and Allard's (1992) model was used to locate study participants somewhere along the lateral linguistic proficiency continuum, ranging between dominance in their first and second languages.

Method

Following a preliminary screening, seven undergraduate students participated in semi-structured interviews to aid in understanding of their experience as bilinguals at North Carolina State University. Only respondents indicating a language other than English (L2) as their first or "native" (L1) qualified for participation. The sample included persons of both sexes, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, speaking the following six heritage languages with varying degrees of proficiency: African, Greek, Indian, Korean, Indonesian, Spanish. Applicable interview data were entered into an informant-by-variable matrix for qualitative contrasting, as described by Miles and Huberman (1984).

Results and Discussion

Research question number 1 dealt with the proficiency aspect of bilingualism. There were three participants who reported higher proficiency in their first language (L1 Dominant), two – in English (L2 Dominant), and two indicated equal proficiency in both (Balanced). The second research question

assessed the respondents' valorization of the two languages. All participants reported at least some valorization of both languages. Research question number 3 sought to obtain rich qualitative data on students' experiences as members of a LM. All five of the Dominant participants seemed to endorse the view of bilingualism as a minority experience. The participants who were labeled as Balanced, rejected this approach and seemed more likely to pass than to disclose. To manage the stigma associated with foreignness, the Balanced student (that identified as Caucasian) reported using his "American" appearance and lack of an accent to pass for the monolingual majority on a regular basis.

The likely psychological impact of the latter coping mechanism on this Caucasian American language minority (CALM) student is delayed bilingual identity development. This phenomenon has not been previously studied in CALM individuals and warrants further inquiry. Of the L2 Dominant respondents, one came across as ambivalent, while the other appeared to favor disclosure slightly. The remainder of the sample (all L1 Dominant) seemed to overwhelmingly endorse disclosure and reject passing. Among L1 Dominant participants, two of three seemed to describe their LM experiences in predominantly emotional terms. Conversely, the four participants reporting high proficiency in English sounded rather pragmatic in recounting their experiences. This was noted as a theme of *insignificance*, referring to advantages of being a part of LM. Several other patterns seemed to emerge from the data: *differentiation* (describing advantages of bilingualism), *skeptical* (referring to passing ability), *conditional* (describing both passing and disclosure), *communication* (being both impeded and enhanced by bilingualism).

Research question number 4 endeavored to further synthesize all of the above data in a conceptual framework unique to bilingual development. Participants exposed to both languages from birth or from an early age, tended to have a more balanced bilingual proficiency than those who learned a second language as adults. Nevertheless, the former individuals seemed to have less of an insight into their relative minority status as bilinguals. The study concluded that combining other minority development theories was a good initial framework for describing LM experiences of the seven university students in the sample.

Counseling Implications

College and university students request counseling services for a variety of reasons, presenting with concerns that span from academic to career to personal. The last area is the most expansive of the three,

as it may include issues ranging from coping with anxiety and depression, to concerns with relationships and identity. LM students in this study could benefit from a variety of interventions based on their differing levels of bilingual identity development, all other distinctions held equal. Thus, one participant's enthusiasm about disclosing seemed to be related to her anxiety about speaking English instead of Spanish, with which she identified very strongly. This is consistent with Poston's (1990) Enmeshment/Denial stage, where he describes an individual feeling ashamed and scared of the other identity, that may not be as fitting (p.154). In student's own words:

I can tell you what I feel inside, about my cultural shock, about not being able to say it in English what I can say in Spanish! It's a good therapy for me to say it and go over it... [A]nd I don't feel the pressure to speak fast or slow, I can feel identified with you because this [English] is not your permanent language!

Whether or not the interview was indeed therapeutic, it stands reason to conjecture that while at an intermediate stage of bilingual identity development, this student could benefit from a supportive conversation with another bilingual or a sympathetic ally.

To work effectively with the above participant and other accented heritage bilinguals in the sample, counselors may need to develop something as basic as their willingness to listen to these individuals (Derwing, Rossiter & Munro, 2002). Thus, only one participant seemed to make it clear that after 2.5 years in the US she had accepted her accent as something that distinguishes her as authentically Asian vs. making her an inferior member of society. In other words, regardless of others' reactions, this student seemed to be willing to embrace bilingualism as an integral part of who she is, suggestive of Poston's (1990) highest stage – Integration. Participants at the other stages of development, seemed to be affected to a greater extent by their accents or lack thereof, and would therefore be more sensitive to any subtle clues of discontent or approval respectively. Either of these attitudes on the part of the practitioner will likely encourage passing for monolingual majority, as seemed to be the case with the CALM study participant.

In addition to being cognizant of the different needs of LM students at different levels of bilingual identity development, it is important to follow some basic tenets of working with this student cohort. For example, depending on English proficiency and other factors addressed in this research, the affective

statements made by students in the session may not be representative of the full magnitude of their emotions (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). On a more pragmatic level, heritage bilingual students may not have the grasp of certain constructs that do not exist as such in their L1 (e.g., depression, identity, etc.), while American clinicians may hold those as self-evident. Perhaps the most effective technique for addressing the above two impediments to the therapeutic alliance is to invite LM students to express their thoughts and feelings in their heritage language as much as possible, with subsequent discussion in English (Santiago-Rivera, 1995). Using this paradoxical method gives the students an almost instant sensation of clarity (both cognitively and emotionally), in addition to sending a message of the counselor's valorization of their L1.

This study presented a practical approach for hearing the hidden identity messages of the seven bilinguals in the sample, as well as introducing counseling professionals to several techniques for heeding the message therein. Moreover, this research begins an important new chapter in understanding the diversity hidden within the phrase – American college student. Counseling as a field cannot afford to ignore the calmly growing bilingual diversity within already diverse American colleges and universities. Further research on bilingual identity development is warranted to equip clinicians in higher education with a comprehensive framework for meeting the emotional and intellectual needs of this emerging population.

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