Short Communication

Spanish language proficiency among providers and Latino clients’ engagement in substance abuse treatment

Erick G. Guerrero, Tenie Khachikian, Tina Kim, Yinfei Kong, William A. Vega

1. Introduction

Providers’ language proficiency seems critical to meaningfully engage clients in substance abuse treatment (SAT), yet empirical evidence is limited. Emerging research has shown that linguistic proficiency is associated with engagement and treatment outcomes among Spanish-speaking Latinos accessing health services (Iwashita, Brown, McNamara, & O’Hagan, 2008; Santiago-Rivera, Altarriba, Poll, Gonzalez-Miller, & Cragun, 2009). Although federal data have suggested that more than half of SAT providers offer services in Spanish (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2010), service quality in terms of Spanish language proficiency is suspect. Because Latinos are the largest bilingual–bicultural ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and the fastest-growing group entering publicly funded SAT, it is critical to understand indicators of quality of care such as program service standards and counselors’ Spanish language proficiency. This study relied on program- and client-level data collected in Los Angeles County to test whether providers’ Spanish language proficiency played a direct and mediating role between professional accreditation and client wait time and retention. These preliminary findings provide an evidentiary base for the role of providers’ Spanish language proficiency and Latino engagement in treatment for a population at high risk of treatment dropout. Implications related to health care reform legislation, which seeks to enhance linguistically competent care, are discussed.

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reduce general underutilization of behavioral health services (Alegría, Mulvaney-Day, Woo, et al., 2007; Kouyoumdjian, Zamboanga, & Hansen, 2003). Beyond offering services in Spanish, Spanish language proficiency is critical to accurately communicating critical health information to clients and meaningfully engaging them in their health care (Alegría, Mulvaney-Day, Torres, et al., 2007; Garland et al., 2000; Williams & Collins, 1995). Despite significant representation of Spanish-speaking Latinos in California, offering inpatient and outpatient social services in Spanish is not a standard practice (Guerrero, Pan, Curtis, & Lizano, 2011). Los Angeles County has the largest Latino population (4.7 million) and one of largest publicly funded SAT systems in the nation (Crévecoeur, Finnerty, & Rawson, 2002). The county is home to a highly ethnically diverse population, yet about 42% of individuals attending treatment programs are of Latino descent (SAMHSA, 2012). In 2010, 66% of the 457 treatment facilities in the county reported offering services in Spanish (SAMHSA, 2010). Yet, there is limited information about the quality of Spanish language services, particularly counselors’ Spanish language proficiency and its impact on the adult population, which has limited English proficiency (Suarez-Morales et al., 2007).

Limited Spanish language proficiency among providers creates barriers for Latino clients to trust providers and initially engage in services (Colon, 1997). Services in Spanish are generally available in minority communities in Los Angeles County (Guerrero et al., 2011), and proficient Spanish-speaking counselors may be able to expedite the intake process and reduce wait time for Spanish-speaking clients. Thus, Hypothesis 1 posited that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency would be negatively related to client wait time.

In addition, language barriers limit clear communication by Latinos during the intake or treatment process with monolingual or limited Spanish-speaking counselors, potentially leading to client dropout. Even for bilingual English–Spanish clients, providers’ Spanish language proficiency helps establish trust, ensures accurate communication (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2009), and reduces risk of dropout (Su, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991; Sullivan & Lasso, 1992). Thus, Hypothesis 2 posited that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency would be positively related to client retention in treatment.

Higher access and engagement in treatment is also related to program capacity to provide high standards of service as measured by premier professional certifications that reflect client-centered and evidence-based procedures (Guerrero, 2013). Professional accreditation by the Joint Commission (TJC) in SAT is considered a proxy for standardized quality of care and has been associated with delivery of evidence-based treatments (Friedmann, Jiang, & Alexander, 2010; Knudsen, Ducharme, & Roman, 2006) and culturally responsive care (Guerrero, Pan, Curtis, & Lizano, 2011). Los Angeles County in 2010 had 91% of the sample.

2.2. Analytic sample

Of the 147 programs completing surveys, 50 programs with Spanish-speaking counselors (n = 103) were randomly selected to complete the Spanish proficiency test. Only one counselor was selected from each program, ideally the counselor with the longest tenure in the program. Forty programs agreed to have their senior counselor complete the test. Counselors reported on 1903 client treatment episodes in 2010–2011 and analysis showed no statistically significant difference in average client treatment duration compared to unselected clients (p > .05).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Dependent variables

We examined two dependent variables: (1) client-reported wait time to treatment and (2) client retention in treatment. Client wait time was measured at intake as days spent on a waiting list before starting treatment (78% of clients reported no wait). Our retention variable reflected the number of days between admission and discharge notes as noted by counselors.

2.3.2. Explanatory variables

Counselors’ Spanish language proficiency was tested using the Language Proficiency Assessment (LPA) of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. This assessment is generally taken by college students and executives to qualify for admission at international universities or employment. The LPA in Spanish was conducted via phone as a 30-minute computer-generated and recorded interaction featuring contextual questions within a structured conversation. Counselors responded to questions and recordings, which were later evaluated by two expert raters. The validity and reliability of a rater-based assessment is a function of raters applying a shared mental model structured in the test. The interrater reliability of the phone-based test was .94 and internal consistency was α = .96 (Surface, Harman, Watson, & Thompson, 2009; Thompson, Surface, & Whelan, 2007).

A measure of professional accreditation indicated whether each program had TJC accreditation. TJC is a premier accreditation body, particularly for SAT programs, which are generally not considered health care organizations.

Client demographics included as independent variables were gender, Medi-Cal eligibility, history of mental health issues, homelessness status, alcohol as primary substance problem among 21 different substances, and prior treatment episodes. Program characteristics were counselor proficiency in Spanish, acceptance of Medi-Cal, acceptance of private insurance, accreditation, methadone treatment, and residential treatment.

2.4. Data analysis

We used Stata to conduct multilevel negative binomial regression analyses using NBREG with a log link function (Stata, 2013). The CLUSTER option was used to account for the multilevel structure of the data (clients nested in programs) and obtain more accurate estimates of standard errors (Blakely & Woodward, 2000). Negative binomial regression with robust standard errors was used to analyze wait time and retention in treatment.
retention measures that were overdispersed, i.e., their variance was much greater than their mean (Cameron & Trivedi, 2009; Xiang, Lee, Yau, & McLachlan, 2007).

In the first model with wait time as the dependent variable, a negative binomial regression model was established. In the second model, wait time served as an independent variable and the dependent variable was treatment duration. The third and fourth models relied on path analysis to examine the indirect effect of TJC accreditation on wait time to enter treatment (Model 3) and treatment duration (Model 4) via Spanish language proficiency, adjusting for other variables. Path analysis was conducted using the “mediation” R package. This approach involves creating a mediator model and an outcome model to calculate the direct and indirect effects while adjusting for control variables (Pearl, 2001; Robins & Greenland, 1992).

### Table 1
Program (N = 40) and client (N = 1903) variables in substance abuse treatment, 2010–2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M (SD), % or n</th>
<th>Response format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish proficiency</td>
<td>8.82 (1.03)</td>
<td>Proficiency scores from 1 to 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medi-Cal</td>
<td>67.16</td>
<td>Accepts Medi-Cal reimbursement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private insurance</td>
<td>32.95</td>
<td>Accepts private insurance reimbursement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>13.87</td>
<td>Accredited by TJC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient</td>
<td>91.22</td>
<td>Provides primarily outpatient services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methadone</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>Provides primarily methadone services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>Provides primarily residential services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment duration</td>
<td>97.2 (93.17)</td>
<td>Days in treatment, 7/1/2011–12/30/2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wait time</td>
<td>1.90 (6.19)</td>
<td>Days waiting to initiate treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medi-Cal eligibility</td>
<td>36.31</td>
<td>Eligible for Medi-Cal insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36.63</td>
<td>Self-identified as female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health issues</td>
<td>13.40</td>
<td>Previous diagnosis of mental health issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>11.25</td>
<td>Unstable housing status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>17.45</td>
<td>Alcohol as primary problem among 21 substances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior treatment episodes</td>
<td>1.35 (3.41)</td>
<td>Number of previous treatment episodes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* All measures were self-reported.

*b* The Joint Commission.

### 3. Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of key program and client characteristics. The average proficiency score reported by these 40 programs was 8.82 (SD = 1.03); however, only 13.78% had TJC accreditation. Wait time to enter treatment was minimal (M = 1.90 days), but its standard deviation was relatively large (6.19 days). We observed considerably large variation in treatment duration as well (M = 97.12 days, SD = 93.17).

Our findings supported Hypothesis 1, which posited that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency would be positively related to client wait time. Table 2 summarizes the results of two negative binomial models. In the first model with wait time as the dependent variable, higher proficiency in Spanish had statistically significant effects on reducing waiting time (IRR = 0.697, 95% CI = 0.512, 0.948), adjusting for other program and client variables. However, TJC accreditation significantly increased wait time (IRR = 6.906, 95% CI = 2.300, 20.736). Medi-Cal eligibility was associated with reduced wait time (IRR = 0.582, 95% CI = 0.381, 0.889). Homeless clients received treatment faster than others (IRR = 0.486, 95% CI = 0.274, 0.862), as did clients with alcohol as their primary substance problem (IRR = 0.579, 95% CI = 0.403, 0.833).

Finding supported Hypothesis 2, which posited that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency would be positively related to client retention in treatment (IRR = 1.153, 95% CI = 1.043, 1.275). Accreditation was also associated with treatment duration (IRR = 1.649, 95% CI = 1.008, 2.698). Clients receiving methadone treatment (short-term or 1-year detox) had shorter treatment duration relative to those receiving regular outpatient treatment (IRR = 0.188, 95% CI = 0.101, 0.351). However, clients receiving residential treatment had higher average treatment duration (IRR = 2.431, 95% CI = 1.093, 5.405). Medi-Cal eligibility increased treatment duration (IRR = 1.685, 95% CI = 1.425, 1.993).

Findings provided support for Hypothesis 3, which posited that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency would mediate the relationship between professional accreditation and client wait time and retention. Program accreditation was associated with increased wait time, both directly (β = 10.91, p < .01) and indirectly (β = 2.56, p < .01) through Spanish proficiency (indirect effects shown only in text). The direct effect of program accreditation on client treatment retention was positive as
expected ($\beta = 60.30, p < .01$), but the indirect effect was negative ($\beta = -11.87, p < .001$). Therefore, program accreditation decreased treatment retention via Spanish proficiency. However, its overall effect (direct and indirect) on retention was positive ($\beta = 47.72, p < .001$).

4. Conclusions and Implications

This study showed that counselors’ Spanish language proficiency was significantly related to process-of-care outcomes. In programs with language-proficient counselors, Latino clients reported shorter wait times and higher retention rates. This relationship was not necessarily proximal, necessitating further exploration of other quality-of-care measures at the program level. A path model found that although professional accreditation increased client wait time, it also increased client retention in treatment overall. These results add to emerging evidence that professional regulation and quality measures of culturally responsive care can have an impact on treatment engagement among Latinos (Campbell & Alexander, 2003; Guerrero, 2013; Guerrero & Andrews, 2011; Guerrero, Campos, Urada, & Yang, 2012).

Explanation of mixed findings, albeit conjectural, suggests that mismatches between professionally accredited programs (14% of sample) and counselors with low Spanish language proficiency (35% of sample) do not create the service delivery environment necessary to fully engage Latino clients in treatment. A combination of quality-of-care factors such as a well-trained workforce, strong program development (Friedmann et al., 2010; Knudsen et al., 2006), and culturally and linguistically competent service delivery (Campbell & Alexander, 2003; Guerrero, 2013) are necessary to improve minority client outcomes.

4.1. Limitations

Several limitations associated with study data must be acknowledged. First, measures were derived from cross-sectional data, precluding analysis of causality or directionality. However, the large sample size provided robust estimates. Second, client measures were not directly related to counselors’ Spanish language proficiency. However, we selected the primary counselor assigned to Spanish-speaking clients at each site. Although Spanish language proficiency was tested as an indicator of program quality, the single measure was not fully representative of each program’s linguistic competence.

Another limitation was social desirability associated with supervisors reporting on program measures and surveying only one supervisor per program. Although not optimal, we attempted to reduce response bias by completing validity checks (using funding data, counselor reports, and printed materials at program sites) with 91% of the sample during site visits.

Despite these limitations, findings have significant implications for health care policy and service delivery. Health care reform and other state initiatives have highlighted the importance of linguistic competence and compliance with high professional standards to effectively engage Spanish-speaking clients. As the addiction field searches for treatment quality indicators to promote evidence-based health care policy, this study provided evidence that providers should invest in counselors’ Spanish language proficiency to improve engagement among Latinos in publicly funded SAT programs.

Role of funding source

Funding for this study was provided by two different sources, (1) Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services at the School of Social Work, University of Southern California and (2) Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Control. Neither of these two institutions had further role in study design; in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; nor in the decision to submit the paper for publication.

Contributors

Dr. Guerrero reviewed the research literature, framed the scope of the paper, and was the primary text author. Tenie Khachikian and Tina Kim provided additional literature review, critical review, and support in writing the manuscript, including revisions. Yinfei Kong provided primary statistical analyses, wrote the methods section, and reviewed manuscript drafts. William Vega provided critical review and support for all revisions. All authors reviewed and approved the final draft.

Conflict of interest

Erick Guerrero: No conflict declared.
Tenie Khachikian: No conflict declared.
Tina Kim: No conflict declared.
Yinfei Kong: No conflict declared.
William Vega: No conflict declared.

Acknowledgments

We thank Director John Viernes, Ben Lee and his research staff at Substance Abuse Prevention and Control, who kindly provided the client data necessary for our analysis, as well as feedback on the final draft. We also thank the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health for generously providing the program data for our study. Finally, we thank Eric Lindberg, who assisted with the preparation and proofreading of the manuscript.

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