Samuel Ortiz Webinar segments – takeaways

(there was an incredible amount of useful information in these videos, so I apologize ahead of time for the extensive reflection points)

An assumption concerning human development is that the trajectory that we follow as individuals resembles a typical pattern, which, once recognized, has inferential and interpretative utility for psychologists.

Ortiz sheds light on the statistical nature of these emerging patterns, which rely on an all-things-being-equal strength of a cluster of presentations in most cases.

The implication to the psychology practice is that neglecting cultural and language factors can lead to misinterpretation of the results. It is an additional setback when a student is exposed to a new cultural environment.

Along with the language differences a student faces when entering a new culture, these differences are bound to impact their performance on an assessment. The psychologist must carefully interpret the assessment results to the extent that the assessment tools do not account for language differences at a structural level and acculturation time.

Intimate knowledge and understanding of the examinee's culture and language would be tremendously valuable to the psychologist. However, Ortiz maintains that sensitivity to the cultural and language factors goes a long way in helping the psychologist reframe the circumstances when assessment tools point to ability and achievement deficits alone. In other words, Ortiz is telling us that most of our assessments suffer from this shortcoming, which is a cultural bias that does not account for language differences and acculturation time, presenting as deficits in performance.

The issues of cultural bias in assessment, raised by Ortiz, are particularly relevant today, as the demographic landscape is changing rapidly in our communities. Unaddressed cultural bias makes an assessment tool indefensible as an objective representation of the student's abilities.

Each psychologist should self reflect on their own biases related to the concept of intelligence:

- is IQ an inherently static, entirely heritable, immutable, innate quality?

- is it that one is either born with the abilities or not?

- does the level of understanding of one's culture and language have anything to do with one's intelligence?

- is the lack of understanding of the dominant culture relevant during testing?

- is having a different cultural experience relevant during performance assessment on these tools?

Another argument from the past is that Bilingualism is the issue and is responsible for the underperformance. Research shows otherwise (for example, researcher Stanislas Dehaene explains this during this presentation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25GI3-kiLdo)

A child learning to speak English can have difficulty labelling objects, an apparent relative weakness for this student in terms of scores. But it is also a presenting relative weakness in the ability to use the language for thinking since they have little language skill to transfer from their native language at this stage of their life.

The appearance of language command can be deceiving. There is a difference between just using the language for speaking vs using the language for thinking purposes: just speaking the language fluently is not enough to conclude that the child has mastered the language to the extent that they can use it to reason. Although a child has no issue decoding words, the ability to capture the word and utter it can be typical, but her understanding of the words that she says can be incredibly limited.

A typical obstacle that an ELL child may face is the ability to name pictures in English when naming such objects in their native language comes much more quickly. A timed subtest on this task could easily be interpreted as an underlying impairment when it may not be.

Using the newly learned language for thinking can be particularly difficult for an ELL, which could be apparent in a similar task. As different languages structure themselves differently, the child may grapple with this discrepancy.

Concerning the assessment measure, the reality that an ELL child does not speak English at home is a significant setback. At home, the child is likely to hear fewer words than they probably already know, so in that sense, the vocabulary enrichment is impoverished for the ELL child.

We are looking for the ability of our students to learn to speak the language and apply it to engage in higher cognitive processes, which is where ELL students incur a penalty due to sheer lack of exposure.

Language proficiency and pronunciation also do not go hand in hand, where pronunciation may be more tied to the stage at which a student learned the language. Accent only tells you when in their life the person learned the language.

Also interesting is our propensity to desensitize to grammatical errors that are ubiquitous in our environment; as a result, we endorse erroneous expressions resulting in desensitization despite the grammatical issues inherent in them.

Part of the issue with ELL children trying to learn a new language is that they lack proficiency in their native language, making it challenging to learn the second language because no language proficiency transfer occurs. Learning a language in this circumstance is akin to learning a language as an inborn, and one is expected to catch up in our schools.

Ortiz references the concepts, by Jim Cummins, of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which an ELL child can quickly meet due to the low threshold in attaining conversational proficiency but exhibit difficulty in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or academic proficiency, which requires the use of language to think.

If a child has spent time in their native language environment, the CALP is impaired in a way that BICS isn't, which can give rise to misconceptions about the child's scores and how we interpret them.

An ELL's assessment performance provides a clue to the underlying differences between the ELL population and the non-ELL population. The child's experience and culture will affect how they answer the questions, and they may miss obvious ones or make fundamental grammatical mistakes simply because their native language is structured differently.

Even when the child presents with underperformance in both languages, this could result from not receiving instruction in their native language either, at an early age.

Children do NOT learn languages faster and better than adults, although they may pronounce them better over time because that is developmental. The reason is that they have nothing to transfer; there is no CALP so an adult can learn it much faster than a child; because of that, CALP transferability.

Other useful takeaways from Ortiz assigned webinar videos:

- language isn't normed since it goes much deeper than language.

- non-verbal tests have a weakness in that they eliminate important parts of the language, and they still do present with cultural specificity (i.e. a Danish child is living in the country of legos and might perform better on Block Design as a result)

- the issue is not reliability but rather validity. A test can be surprisingly reliable and be consistently misrepresenting a population by excluding cultural and language factors.

- all other cultures are NOT a homogeneous group, only differing from the mainstream population

Concluding remarks:

If anyone is an authority with expertise on this topic, it has to be Dr. Samuel Ortiz, who has made it his life's work to address issues of cultural bias in assessments. Ortiz has not only written dozens of journal articles and books on the subject but also developed several tools which can help with some of the issues of diverse populations, such as the dually normed Ortiz Picture Vocabulary Acquisition Test (Ortiz PVAT) as well as many software tools which would be fascinating to investigate further *(Culture-Language Interpretive Matrix (C-LIM v2.0), the Processing Strengths and Weaknesses Analyzer (PSW-A v1.0), the XBA Data Management and Interpretive System (XBA DMIA 2.0), the SLD Assistant (v1.0), and the School Psychology Service Delivery Analyzer (SPSDA),* as listed on the Pearson website under his biography.

Because Ortiz argued so powerfully that assessment tools miss the mark when assessing culturally diverse populations, I wonder: to what extent would the children with actual underlying deficits be overlooked due to issues with assessment inadequacies. Going too far into remediation of Type I errors, or false positives, also gradually increase the risk of not detecting an underlying learning disability when it is there or the type II error. However, having listed all of Dr. Ortiz's accomplishments and expertise in the area, I am sure he is well aware of this and has solutions available. An example of this is a section in his last video (Part 5), where he proposes that the child is tested twice, first in the English Language and then in their own, in that order.