In whose words? Struggles and strategies of service providers working with immigrant clients with limited language abilities…

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In whose words? Struggles and strategies of service providers working with immigrant clients with limited language abilities in the violence against women sector and child protection services

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ABSTRACT

Newcomer and immigrant clients with limited language abilities face communication barriers that can compromise their capacity to make informed decisions about themselves and their children with serious implications for their families. These clients most likely had high proficiency of language in their country of origin but are learning the language of the new host country. Using a phenomenological design to elicit descriptions from and interpret experiences of Canadian-helping professionals, we conducted four focus groups first with child protection workers, and second with violence against women service providers. Analyses of these data uncovered five themes: (1) enhancing client engagement and self-agency; (2) advantages and drawbacks in use of interpreters; (3) creative and intensive translation strategies; (4) structural challenges and (5) gender and cultural considerations. Results are organized into an ecological framework in putting forward implications for policy and practice. The over-arching finding supports that important training and preparation are necessary for service providers to deliver language-sensitive services. As well, funding levels need to be increased to better match service delivery goals. Newcomer and immigrant clients whose language needs are not adequately met potentially face safety issues and/or fragmentation of their families.

INTRODUCTION

Newcomer and immigrant clients with limited language abilities[1] face serious communication barriers that can leave them compromised in informed decision-making about their lives, and the lives of their children and families. These clients most likely had high proficiency of language in their country of origin but are learning the

[1] Language ability is a term frequently used in the literature, although other commonly used terms include language proficiency, barriers and challenges. The authors have chosen to use language abilities in reference to the client's level of expressed and receptive language.

language of the new host country. With the significant influx of immigrants into Canada from non-English-speaking or non-French-speaking countries over the past 15 years, language challenges are now common-place necessitating the use of interpreters or translators in courtrooms, healthcare settings and social service agencies. Canada's largest source of immigrants during the past 5 years has come from Asia with increasing numbers from Africa, the Caribbean and Central and South America all of which are represented in the city where the study was conducted (Statistics Canada 2011). One area that has seen particular attention paid to in issues of language and culture is that of violence in families. In the arena of child maltreatment, family

issues are further complicated given the high frequency of exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV). For example, children investigated by child protection services (CPS) for exposure to IPV are the most frequently reported and substantiated form of child maltreatment, along with neglect in Canada (Lefebvre *et al.* 2013). Provincial and national studies show that up to 29% of child welfare investigations concern children referred for IPV exposure (Trocmé *et al.* 2008; Alaggia *et al.* 2015), with 41% of all substantiated investigations being those with IPV exposure as the primary referral concern (Lefebvre *et al.* 2013). This puts these families in direct contact with both Children's Aid Society CPS (i.e. investigation and risk assessments) and violence against women (VAW) services (i.e. shelters and victim advocacy). Once child exposure to IPV has been identified, more often than not, investigations occur with the mothers advised to seek shelter services or to seek community-based services to facilitate the ending of abusive relationships (Jenney *et al.* 2014). This is done to protect themselves and their children from further abuse and to also stave off more intensive CPS involvement. With the significant rates of reported cases involving both children and their mothers, at the intersection of child abuse and IPV, it is unclear how service providers deal specifically with language issues.

Child protection and VAW service provision to clients with language challenges are a young area of research. However, a small body of literature is beginning to emerge. Studies involving child protection clients have found language barriers as one of the factors contributing to service concerns in child protection systems (Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Pomeroy & Nonaka, 2013). For example, studies of immigrant parents and service providers in the USA note that in the child protection system, bilingual services were rarely available; parents experienced fear of losing their children because of their lack of knowledge due to compromised language comprehension, and experienced general fear due to limited English abilities (Earner 2007; Ayón *et al.* 2010). In addition, there is some research to suggest that significant events and their related emotional content may in fact be encoded in the language in which these experiences occur and that talking about and resolving such difficult experiences may be best achieved within that language (Marian & Neisser 2000; Schrauf 2000). Emotion-laden content contains the very issues that may be of particular significance when addressing the presence of woman abuse or child maltreatment.

Lack of language abilities has also been identified in some studies as impinging on service access for women and their families (Vidales 2010; Jatoi & Breitkopf 2011;

Rizo & Macy 2011; Bhuyan & Velagapudi 2013; Reina *et al.* 2014). Use of interpreters to deal with language barriers can come with a host of issues including access problems, caseload burden and inconsistent interpretation quality resulting in inadequate services for these families (Humphreys *et al.* 1999; Kriz & Skivenes 2009). Further exploration on how helping professionals experience these language barriers in various service sectors, and the various responses they have engaged in, is not as available.

The focus of this investigation grew out of a larger study that specifically investigated service provision to child protection clients when language barriers existed (Maiter *et al.* 2015). Data from those study findings raised questions about VAW service provision to mothers whose children had been identified by CPS for IPV exposure – putting these families in contact with two service systems. Thus, we further sought to explore how VAW workers in shelter and community-based services respond to the language needs of clients with limited language abilities. Using focus group data from child protection workers, we compared these data with the VAW workers' data for further connections and insights.

Theoretical framework

The framework of acculturative stress theory and conservation of resources theory of stress (Hobfoll 1998) within the context of the migration experience guided the study. Acculturative stress is understood to be experienced from early in the migration process and is exacerbated by limited language abilities impacting employment stability and integration into both economic and social aspects of the host country (Segal & Mayadas 2005). Hobfoll's (1998) conservation of resources theory of stress posits that there are points of vulnerability throughout the migration process by which the material and emotional resources of immigrants are at risk of being depleted in the process of relocation, 'these are the very resources that are required for more successful settlement and positive long-term outcomes –such as health and mental health, and material security' (Maiter *et al.* 2015, p. 2).

Additionally, for the second stage of the project involving VAW services, we utilized Heise's (1998) integrated, ecological framework as a tool for a comparative analysis in organizing and understanding diverse research data, especially those involving VAW issues. Ecological frameworks explore the intra and interpersonal factors as well as environmental/cultural factors and structural forces that help explain social

phenomenon and human behaviour especially in issues such as child maltreatment (Bronfenbrenner 1986). We ultimately offer a model based on our analysis for further consideration in future research.

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was chosen to collect contextual, process data from service workers. This approach is compatible to deepen understanding of the complexities of language challenges in service provision – especially with vulnerable populations such as children at risk of child maltreatment and mothers who are targets of IPV. This paper reports on findings from this two-stage qualitative study using focus group methodology. We present our research questions, findings and recommendations for changes in practice and systems.

METHODS

Using a phenomenological design to elicit descriptions from, and interpret experiences of helping professionals working with clients with limited language abilities, we conducted focus groups first with CPS workers, and later with VAW workers, in a large Canadian urban centre. Although Canada has two official languages – English and French – the province of Ontario, where the study was carried out, English is the primary language. The over-arching research goal was to understand processes of relationship building and service provision with minority ethno-cultural families, who are recent newcomers or more established immigrants to Canada, involved in the child protection system where language is identified as a barrier, and to inform improved practices for counselling and service provision (Maiter et al. 2015). The protocols for the project were approved by the institutional ethics review boards of the two universities involved – University of Toronto and York University. The same methods that were used for the first stage of the study with CPS workers were used for the VAW service providers in the second stage.

Focus groups were utilized as these are viewed as an effective means of obtaining rich data from individuals in order to understand their decision making processes and shared experiences in this specific context of child protection work (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). The focus groups were conducted by the lead investigators and co-facilitated with research assistants. Interviewers were of various racial and ethnic backgrounds including South Asian, Jamaican and Asian. Interview questions probed for the following: strategies employed when working with families not fluent in English or French (Canada's two official languages), what assistance is

used, when they made use of formal interpreters, interpreter availability, advantages and drawbacks in use of interpreters, impact of these services on CPS work and delivery of VAW services, and relationships and communication with clients. A modified interview guide was used with the VAW workers, closely based on the original guide used with CPS workers in the larger study (Maiter et al. 2015).

Measures to ensure trustworthiness of the study[2] and dependability of the data included the following: prolonged engagement (Drisko, 1997) through substantial contact with the research sites, forming partnerships with the child protection agencies and VAW services and having initial key informant interviews, combined with the researchers' substantial histories of social work practice in these service sectors. Dependability of data was enhanced through verbatim transcription and note-taking (Drisko, 1997). Transcriptions were imported into N⋆VIVO (QSR International Inc. Burlington, MA: USA), a software for organizing data to ensure the quality of analysis. The quotes of participants assured confirmability, while peer de-briefing was conducted during the process of evolving analysis and findings (Drisko, 1997). Saturation of the data was assessed to be achieved when no more new themes emerged (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Description of study participants

We conducted four focus groups between 2012 and 2014 (a total of 26 participants). Two were with CPS workers for the initial stages of the study (CPS FG 1 and CPS FG 2) and two additional groups with VAW service workers (VAW FG 3 and VAW FG 4). In VAW FG 4, three of the VAW workers were also 'seconded' for 2 days a week to a child protection office to provide immediate response to high needs child-protection clients requiring VAW services. One of the criteria for high needs was newcomers with limited language abilities. Workers in all sites combined noted that the languages spoken by their clients included Spanish, Portuguese, Tagalog/Filipino, Vietnamese, French, Italian, Polish, Arabic, Tamil, different African languages and Ukrainian.

CPS FG 1

Seven participants, six female and one male, who on average had 7.5 years of experience in the specific CPS, mean age of 46 years, all had post-secondary education,

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[2]The section on trustworthiness is taken from an earlier manuscript, and a similar version of this paragraph appears in Maiter et al. 2015.

all at the university level and all in social work. Three were born outside of Canada, and five spoke languages other than one of the two official languages of Canada, English or French (Portuguese, Spanish and Patois). The workers who were born outside of Canada had their full citizenship and on average had been in Canada for 32 years or more.

CPS FG 2

Three participants, all female, who on average had 7.2 years of experience in the specific CPS, mean age of 35 years, all had post-secondary education, all at the university level and all in social work. All were Canadian born, and two spoke languages other than one of the two official languages of Canada, English or French (Portuguese and Spanish). The workers who were born outside of Canada had their full citizenship and on average had been in Canada for 30 years or more.

VAW FG 3

Seven participants, all female, who on average had almost 8.7 years of experience in the VAW service specifically, mean age of 41 years, all had university level education, some at the community college level (2) and half had specialized degree/diploma in social work and/or for an assaulted women and children counsellor. Five were born outside of Canada, and two spoke languages other than one of the two official languages of Canada, English or French (Portuguese and Spanish). The workers who were born outside of Canada had their full citizenship and on average had been in Canada for 24 years or more.

VAW FG 4

Nine participants, all female, who on average had just over 9 years of experience in the VAW service specifically, mean age of 46 years, all had post-secondary education with slightly less than half at the university level and slightly more at the community college level, and two with specialized degrees/diplomas in child therapy and/or for an assaulted women and children counsellor. Eight were born outside of Canada, and seven spoke languages other than one of the two official languages of Canada, English or French languages (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Dari and Pushto). The workers who were born outside of Canada had their full citizenship and on average had been in Canada for 28 years or more.

Findings

In the comparative analysis of the focus group data of CPS workers and VAW service providers, five pre-dominant themes emerged from the data: (1) enhancing client engagement and self-agency; (2) advantages and drawbacks in use of interpreters[3]; (3) use of creative and intensive translation strategies; (4) systemic/structural challenges and (5) gender and cultural-based considerations.

1 Enhancing client engagement and self-agency: Both VAW and CPS participants recounted the overall importance of interpreter services in their work with clients. Once all options had been exhausted, they would quickly access interpretation services from private organizations. To start, CPS workers noted clear benefits to positive client engagement when clients are able to tell their stories in their preferred language:

> They [clients] are able to share their thoughts and what's happened to them where they're confident in being able to share rather than having to struggle in a different language or finding words to say things (CPS FG 2).

This confidence in clients' sharing in their preferred language through an interpreter was echoed by VAW workers:

> Well I think they feel really, really supported. They feel they have somebody who can share ideas and problems and situation - maybe more comfortable (VAW FG 3).

On the other hand, some clients preferred to struggle with English to increase their abilities, so to promote client self-agency workers would first proceed with English sessions first as described by the following participant:

> They rather sit with you and speak English to them slowly. . . as my colleagues said earlier they [clients] want to learn English so they don't want you to get the interpreter for them (VAW FG 3).

In contrast, there were instances noted when client engagement was hindered when using interpreters. Client engagement is complicated in child protection work because emotionally charged issues are communicated

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[3]For the purposes of this paper and for consistency in reporting the findings, we use the term interpreter for someone who provides language translation services – although some study participants use the term interpreter and translator interchangeably. We use the term translation tools for aids in translation such as computer-based technologies.

through an interpreter when the interpreters sometimes feel aligned with the client against the CPS worker:

> Sometimes the interpreter feels almost like they're representing the client … and they end up building a little bit of rapport which can be tricky. Unfortunately perhaps we're talking about how [we are] going to be moving towards Crown Wardship for a child and obviously a client is quite upset. Then I've actually seen an interpreter also impacted by that . . . (CPS FG 2)

Violence against women workers also shared stories of clients who, because of the nature of IPV, felt uncomfortable revealing their circumstances to numerous different interpreters. For this reason, some VAW workers recounted taking the extra step of re-scheduling the original interpreter as explained by this study participant:

> So then we have to call the interpreter service and ask if that one particular person can come because she already knows the woman's story . . . if they can do it in the evening for her because she does not want to talk about her situation with the different interpreter. (VAW FG 4)

In both service sectors, workers would go the extra mile for client engagement and supporting client self-agency by lengthening work sessions to the time required to communicate effectively or re-arranging appointments to find appropriate interpreter services.
Advantages and drawbacks in use of interpreters: There were many advantages cited in using interpreters as reported by service providers in both sectors.

> I have found that interpreters have been helpful to give me sort of a better understanding of where that client is coming from, their world perspective if the interpreter is from that particular community, or knows that region, or has that understanding. (CPS FG 1)

> A lot of women who come in the shelter are very isolated before they come. They can express themselves so somebody will understand them. I think that the interpreters are playing a very good role in this. (VAW FG 4)

> For me, having an interpreter as part of that meeting and allowing me to interact with the family… it allows me to stay more focused on the tasks at hand which is also inclusive to note taking. (CPS FG 1)

> I remember having a client that spoke a certain language in sign language so there were two interpreters. So there was an interpreter that interpreted from one sign language to another sign language and an interpreter that interpreted to English, spoke English. It was phenomenal -just amazing. (VAW FG 4)

However, there were also distinct trends in problems with the use of interpreters. One involved the presence of an additional person and questions about the accuracy of the interpretation:

> The barrier is . . . that women don't feel comfortable with the second person in the room and the problem sometime is that you get different interpreters every session (VAW FG 3)

> It's just the sense that you get that things aren't being interpreted the way that that you think that they would be or you know the client says something that's quite lengthy and you get back like 2 or 3 words. (CPS FG 2)

Role confusion was often cited as problematic in the therapeutic relationship. As explained in the following texts:

> But sometimes we've had situations where interpreters don't have boundaries, and you get the sense that things are being passed that you're not saying, (VAW FG 4)

> Sometimes the interpreter feels almost like they're representing the client … and they end up building a little bit of rapport which can be tricky. (CPS FG 1)

Ideally, service providers in both sectors had ways in which the interpreter services should function as summarized by one worker: 'They have to be aware of professional ethics, confidentiality, cultural attachment, being objective, no comments . . . no counselling.' (CPS FG 1)
Use of creative and intensive strategies:
One strategic approach unique to VAW workers was their use of computerized translation tools – a strategy that was not mentioned by child protection workers.

> Sometimes if it's an emergency -immediate need for interpretation and we're not able to get an interpreter to come out, we'd use the online translator. So we'd go online, Babble Fish, and based on the woman's language, we do the match in terms of that language to English or from English to that language. It's not 100% accurate, but at least there's some kind of idea in terms of the message that is being sent or that you're receiving. (VAW FG 4)

> I think they feel more confident that we have access to the computer and can kind of type in, at least to say if it's "no that's not what I'm asking" then they try explaining in their own little English. Then I'll ask again, "okay, yes, yes that's, that's what I need" (VAW FG 3).

Although computerized translation tools such as 'Google Translate' or 'Babble Fish' were frequently used by the VAW workers, this use would not extend to any legal matters that needed to be conveyed. Only interpreters

were used for those matters to ensure complete accuracy and comprehension of information.

The underlying explanation for the CPS workers not using translation tools is that the bulk of their work occurs outside of their offices – often in homes of their clients. Whereby VAW workers often met with their clients in the shelter offices where they had ready access to computers and could work side by side.

Both service sectors relied to varying degrees on workers who spoke the same language as their clients and noted the advantages of that connection especially for client engagement:

> Yes definitely when the client comes here fleeing from intimate partner abuse, and they have somebody in the same language [counsellor] that maybe can understand a little bit more how they feel and everything, yes absolutely I think it's a big support. Big support. (VAW FG 4)

Yet this could also be a double-edged sword as described by the following participant:

> I'm supposed to be closing [their file] and they don't want to close because you've become part of the family now so that also becomes an issue and it's, you know, it gets kind of fudged because I'm your worker I'm not an extra family member… I've been invited to baptisms, like they show me wedding pictures and I'm like what am I doing here. (CPS FG2)

Identification of structural challenges:

Child protection services workers and VAW service providers concurred on several systemic and structural challenges such as scheduling, time constraints, lack of interpreter availability and training in the use of interpreters: '. . . that is there's a few different issues, one is like scheduling because of my schedule, the client schedule, and the interpreter scheduling.' VAW FG 3. Additional complications occur when workers speak the client's language but should not be relied upon to provide professional interpretation services:

> . . . I actually do know what the translator is translating so I am not using the translator for myself it's when there's a meeting and my supervisor doesn't speak the client's language or just anyone else doesn't because I used to do a lot of translating in our meetings and then we came to realize that was a huge burden to me. I was exhausted because I was translating for everyone around the table constantly as well as trying to do my own role. (CPS FG 2)

Time surfaced frequently as a systemic issue – 'I mean meetings are twice as long because you're saying everything two times back and forth . . .' (CPS FG 1) – and as further explained by another worker, 'There is a lot more time that comes with interpreting and translating.'

(CPS FG2). This is further complicated because this time does not seem to be compensated for

> I have colleagues who speak Portuguese or Spanish and therefore gets more cases. They might have a higher number of cases than other people on their team because we need someone who speaks Portuguese to take that case so that's a little bit inequitable. (CPS FG 2)

Another sub-theme that came through frequently is the lack of training workers in both sectors cited, training necessary in how to use interpreters appropriately and effectively.

> I've been working here for several years, and I have to say that there really hasn't been any formal support in terms of training to be able to work collaboratively with translators. (CPS FG 1)

> I personally haven't got any training. It kind of you adapt to use it and before the meeting the interpreter kind of explains her role and lets you know how she works because everyone's different. (VAW FG 3)

A further sub-theme that emerged consistently is the lack of immediate interpreter services:

> Often interpreters aren't available so trying to do the best that we can with those circumstances and sometimes we've needed to use, you know, if the family says that there's a neighbour that speaks English or if there's another family member. (CPS FG 2)

> They can't like get the very short requests for next day… usually between 2 to 3 days. But, if it's same day, it's hard to get one. That's why sometimes I have to approach other people if they are available so I can provide the best help for that client. (VAW FG 2)

In some cases, these required extreme and costly measures to address language translation needs:

> There are some challenges sometimes something just doesn't exist so when I need a parenting capacity assessment, no one exists. I've spent so much time looking, one time we flew someone in from another province. (CPS FG 2)

Gender and culture-based considerations:

Gender factors came into play in expected and unexpected ways, and as well workers described how gender and culture intersect especially in cultures with highly embedded patriarchal values:

> I know we're talking about language and culture, but gender comes into play too in all of this. And it's also once you understand one's particular framework, cultural framework, you understand also gender too . . . (CPS FG 1)

And the intersection of these two issues manifested in several ways. For example, workers reported that some female clients had more difficulty working with male interpreters – especially female clients who had experienced IPV.

> I've had men show up for interpreting and that's, I mean, everyone can pretty much guess how that's awkward for the woman. And then I mean if we're there and, you know, depending on culture and the woman's views of having men and what she does not want to say. (VAW FG 3)

This was followed up in one particularly alarming example cited by a service provider:

> And they made an appointment and it was a man from the same country as this woman who was interpreting. And she had a little bit of English so she stopped and she said 'he's pretty much … he's telling me that this is my fault." (VAW FG 3)

Child protection services workers mentioned issues that some male clients had with female service providers:

> Not wanting to meet with me because I'm just a woman, this has come from certain cultural groups . . . the man not wanting to meet with me because I'm just a woman. (*CPS FG 1*)

In terms of culture, a frequently recurring sub-theme was that of privacy and confidentiality issues related to cultural connections. Although the sample of service providers studied work in a large city of over 3 million people, interpreters are nonetheless hired from the cultural communities that clients often live in because they share the same language. Fear that the clients' private affairs would be aired in their cultural community was a concern often cited – despite reassurances that interpreters are trained to maintain confidentiality: 'I have had clients in the past who refuse to have an interpreter from a certain community because of privacy issues.' (VAW FG 3). More specifically, this concern was described in the following examples:

> We also have a woman… she's worried because she has a family member who works for the interpreting services and she's in a shelter and she's worried that this woman in the [cultural] community -they talk. So she's worried that things are going to get leaked and passed on. (VAW FG 4)

> Because to them [clients], if child welfare is involved with their family it could bring out a very bad image for them in the [cultural] community, so that is one of the things they don't want to have the same cultural worker [interpreter] working with them. (CPS FG 1)

Another cultural consideration identified was the value system of the interpreter from their cultural perspective. Some interpreters refused to translate sexually explicit terms. For example,

> I'm very open and we were talking about masturbation and the interpreter said I cannot interpret that. And I said I'm sorry but you're here to interpret and you don't have to interfere with the counselling. And she said no, I can't. (VAW FG 4)

In this particular case, there were child sexual abuse concerns, and having access to sexually accurate language was important to the case details.

It is difficult to disentangle gender and culture and combine impact on language. Thus, examples of these interacting influences were not presented in tidy linear ways, but rather in layered complexities.

Ultimately, these findings were mapped onto an ecological framework (Fig. 1) and are elaborated in the Discussion section.

DISCUSSION

Working with newcomer and immigrant clients with limited language abilities presents unique challenges that need to be dealt with effectively and sensitively in order to ensure the highest standards of practice and service provision. While both CPS and VAW workers strive to meet these challenges to the best of their abilities, they are dealing with realities that either facilitate or interfere with client engagement and self-agency, hinder or aid quality and timeliness of services, deliver services in the face of lack of training and factors related to gender and culture that can create barriers.

Results of this study can be best organized within an ecological framework because language issues and service provision can be understood from the individual intra-personal level, the inter-personal relational level, combined with environmental and cultural influences, and structural realities. The thematic analysis uncovered impact on the worker–client relationship beginning with the individual client's ability to acquire new language skills and communicate as the starting point for how and what services are delivered (intra-personal); the role of the service provider and their mandate and skill level for therapeutic alliance building (inter-personal); environmental and cultural impacts such as the physical settings, belief systems and attitudes; access to and quality of language interpreters and translation tools and structural level factors such as funding and training opportunities (or lack of). As well, important attitudes and values relating to culture and gender are clearly at play.
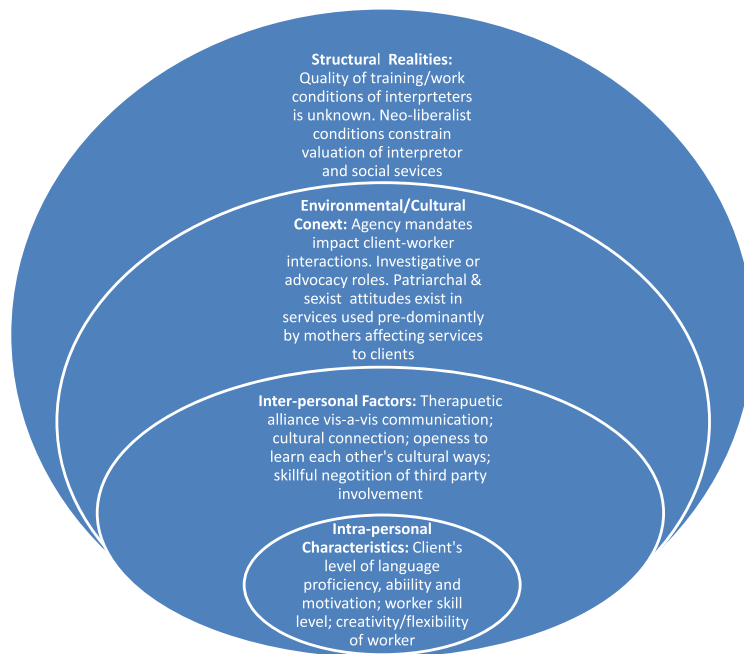
Figure 1 Ecological framework for understanding social service delivery to clients with language challenges.

Structural Realities: Quality of training/work conditions of interprteters is unknown. Neo-liberalist conditions constrain valuation of interpretor and social sevices

Environmental/Cultural Conext: Agency mandates impact client-worker interactions. Investigative or advocacy roles. Patriarchal & sexist attitudes exist in services used pre-dominantly by mothers affecting services to clients

Inter-personal Factors: Therapuetic alliance vis-a-vis communication; cultural connection; openess to learn each other's cultural ways; skillful negotition of third party involvement

Intra-personal Characteristics: Client's level of language proficiency, abiility and motivation; worker skill level; creativity/flexibility of worker

Individual level factors

Client language abilities and their ability to communicate are the starting point for the relationship with service providers. The level of abilities they are at determines how and what services are delivered to mitigate language barriers and to facilitate effective communication. As well, the role of the service provider will impact the relationship. CPS workers operate in investigative roles, while VAW workers function in advocacy roles. Both roles hold mandates to assure safety – child safety as well as safety for vulnerable women – and both have legal implications for their clients should legal processes need to be activated for child apprehension decisions or restraining orders that may need to be secured. Further, immigration status hangs in the balance for many clients who have precarious status. All these issues make effective communication an even more powerful dynamic. The use of interpreters becomes a part of this dynamic, and it is unclear how they are trained in their particular organizations and therefore may not be familiar with child welfare policies and risk issues for vulnerable women. They may also be influenced by their own beliefs and value systems.

Inter-personal level factors

The therapeutic alliance is largely influenced by how open communication can occur. The presence of a third party in that relationship be that with a family system or individual both facilitates and/or impedes engagement

as shown by the findings. Cultural connection, ease of language communication and support were cited as positive influences of interpreters and translation tools. However, quality of translation, confidentiality, privacy concerns and role confusion are factors cited as impediments to that relationship. As well, context and meaning are incredibly important when dealing with cultural interpretation issues. Interpreters in some cases may be interpreting subjectively.

Additionally, role clarity, possible blurring of boundaries between objective professional and cultural ally and role confusion on the part of the client not understanding the professional capacity of the various relationship(s) complicated the inter-personal interactions between social service worker and interpreter. It was also frequently cited that some clients do not want interpreters from their cultural community as they believed they would talk about their family situations in their community despite assurances from the workers that confidentiality would be maintained. Without the belief that confidentiality would be adhered to, building trust in the relationship was certainly compromised.

Environmental and cultural level factors

The context in which services are provided figured prominently in the analyses with specific environmental factors emerging. Very specifically, the setting they are interviewed in can have an impact. Based on these data, matters as basic as where workers meet with their clients

can either free them up to be more creative in their translation strategies or constrain them to use limited strategies – as in the case of CPS workers who meet with most of their clients in the client's home environment and within an investigative capacity. VAW workers tend to meet in the shelter or their office with ready access to computers and Internet access. CPS and VAW agencies within the large urban context have more ready access and resources to obtain such support, while workers within many other communities, rural or remote, are limited in what is available to them.

Cultural factors also emerged in the data especially in terms of specific practices and beliefs of various cultural groups. Interpreters from cultures with more deeply embedded patriarchal values sometimes displayed less sensitive responses to women in shelter services. The need for gender matching was disregarded by some interpretation services. Other times, blatant sexist attitudes were apparent.

Structural level factors

It is also important to consider the funding environment when thinking about accessibility to cultural interpretation for clientele. On a higher level of abstraction in the analyses, issues such as funding for adequate training on all levels came up repeatedly. Some of the more senior workers cited a time – prior to neo-liberal cutbacks to social services – when training to use interpreters was provided. Currently, these senior workers mentor junior workers by passing on their knowledge, but predictably, this will not be sustainable. Given the lack of training, it is not surprising that corresponding institutional protocols for interpreting and translation do not exist. This lack of training and protocols seem to be indicative of the de-valuing of human services in a neo-liberal climate of service provision. The federal government has been cutting funding to immigrant services over the past decade and has made good on their promise in 2010 to cease funding: 'At least 10 Greater Toronto immigrant service agencies have been told by Citizenship and Immigration Canada that their programme funding will not be renewed next year, with up to 35 others across Ontario also facing significant cuts' (23 December 2010, Toronto Star).

Limitations

The views of workers in child protection and women's services are represented in these findings that are part of the picture – albeit an important part. However, the service recipients' views are missing, and their experiences need to be investigated in future research to get a fuller understanding of the breadth of barriers and facilitators in service provision when language challenges exist. The study was held in an urban centre and thus does not capture the issues that would exist in service provision in rural and remote settings.

Implications for policy and practice

These study findings show that while some progress has been made in attempts to adequately respond to the needs of clients with limited language abilities, more work needs to be done. Workers from both sectors of child and adult services recognized the increasing language needs of their clients and used a host of strategies to respond as best as possible. Workers speaking the languages of client user groups were utilized when available and appropriate, however at times, producing role blurring and confusion. Translation tools via the Internet were employed but with limitations. Interpreter services were also available for workers to access, but often, these services could not meet agency demands or client expectations, given the diversity of encounters that workers have with their clients. It is also important that blame for inadequate services not be off-loaded onto interpreter services. At this point, we are not clear on how they are trained, and presumably, a significant number are immigrants and perhaps precariously employed. These factors need to be further investigated. In summary, specific suggestions are made for improving practice:

- provide training for workers in multiple contexts with specific protocols,
- organizational commitment to support the worker–client relationship when language challenges exist and
- increased funding for service provision for clients with language challenges.

The most formidable obstacle identified in the interview data was the lack of formalized training in two significant areas. First, training for bilingual workers in developing relationships with their clients, and maintaining clear roles and boundaries, was identified as necessitating specialized training. Second, training for workers in both service sectors in how to use interpreters effectively and appropriately is necessary. Educating service providers on how and when to access interpreter services and ways in which to build good working relationships with professional interpreters was repeatedly recommended in the interviews. These training needs were identified as bi-directional in nature, in that training of interpreters working with both vulnerable children and women was cited especially in terms of confidentiality and boundary observation.

A related component of this is the strong recommendation to garner organizational support for bilingual staff for the additional challenges and the necessary compensation/recognition for the extra burden of time this often results in. In general, for all workers, caseload burden is not consistently recognized by reduction in cases or compensation. This can lead to a cumulative effect of workers avoiding labour intensive cases without the appropriate assignation of time.

Finally, funding levels need to match service delivery goals. If these clients are not adequately and effectively served in initial stages of social service contact, they will go on to use more services over a longer period that could have been avoided – taxing the systems involved with more costs over time.

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