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LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN SOCIAL WORK AND LANGUAGE MINORITIES – THE CASE OF DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING PERSONS

Abstract

Modern society is characterized by multiculturalism, depicted by different languages, ethnic and language minorities, different identities and social and cultural backgrounds. In this environment, cultural and language barriers also appear in everyday communication. The primary task of social work is to provide services that meet the needs of vulnerable groups, including deaf and hard-of-hearing persons who mainly use sign language to communicate. They constitute a special minority group in addition to ethnic minorities and migrants. The topic of this paper is the impact of language barriers on social work, specifically in the work of social workers with speakers of language minorities (with special reference to deaf and hard-of-hearing persons). In the current literature, this topic is underrepresented and there is a lack of detailed analyses of the impact of language barriers on the client-social worker relationship. Furthermore, language and cultural differences can affect the process of establishing a positive relationship between the user and the social worker. Despite the fact that social work is based on humanity and empathy, the question arises whether discrimination occurs in the work of

social workers with speakers of language minorities and how it can be avoided. Drawing on recent literature, the paper examines the context of social work with language minorities and provides recommendations for improving communication in this field.

Keywords: interpreters; language barriers; language minorities; social work

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JEZIČNE PREPREKE U SOCIJALNOME RADU I JEZIČNE MANJINE – SLUČAJ GLUHIH I NAGLUHIH OSOBA

Sažetak

Moderno je društvo obilježeno multikulturalnošću koja se očituje kroz različite jezike, etničke i jezične manjine, rezličite identitete te socijalne i kulturološke pozadine. U tome se okružju u komunikaciji svakodnevno pojavljuju i kulturološke i jezične prepreke. Primarni je zadatak socijalnoga rada pružiti usluge koje zadovoljavaju potrebe ranjivih skupina, uključujući i gluhe i nagluhe osobe koje se uglavnom u međusobnoj komunikaciji služe znakovnim jezikom. Gluhe osobe čine posebnu manjinsku skupinu, pored etničkih manjina ili migranata. Tema je ovoga rada utjecaj jezičnih prepreka na socijalni rad u radu socijalnih radnika s govornicima jezičnih manjina (s posebnim osvrtom na gluhe i nagluhe osobe). U aktualnoj literaturi ova se tema smatra nedovoljno istraženom i uočeno je da nedostaju detaljnije analize utjecaja jezičnih prepreka na odnos klijent – socijalni radnik. Nadalje, jezik i kulturne razlike mogu utjecati na proces uspostavljanja pozitivna odnosa između korisnika i socijalnoga radnika. Unatoč tomu što se socijalni rad temelji na humanosti i empatiji, postavlja se pitanje dolazi li u radu socijalnih radnika s govornicima jezičnih manjina do diskriminacije te na koji se način ona može izbjeći. U radu se nakon analize recentne literature prikazuje kontekst socijalnoga rada s jezičnim manjinama te se navode preporuke za bolju komunikaciju u radu s jezičnim manjinama.

Ključne riječi: jezične manjine; jezične prepreke; prevoditelji; socijalni rad

Introduction

The paper focuses on language barriers in the field of social work (including the sign language community) when dealing with speakers of minority languages and other social service users. As a result of the burgeoning migrant movements, social workers, amongst other professions, had to expand their knowledge and skills. The incorporation of a variety of cultures and languages has set a challenge for social workers in communicating and truly understanding their clients' needs. The language barriers arising from the migrant crisis have been shown to constitute obstacles within the field of social work. Besides that, sign language has proven to be a necessary tool of communication in the field of social work as well. This resulted in inaccurate assessments due to the lack of interpreter usage, incorrect interpreter usage or because the social worker was not a sign language user. Furthermore, this paper deals with the obstacles that language minorities encounter due to language barriers or discrimination. The discriminatory aspect of social work practice when talking about working with minorities and people who have to be a part of interpreter-mediated interviews will be further analyzed. The research conducted on the topic indicated a considerable shortage of literature regarding social work with language minorities and how the potential language barriers affect their access to different services (e.g. social and healthcare services, educational options etc.).

1. Language and Language Minorities

Spradley (1979) states that different languages and cultural diversity create distinctive realities. If language is perceived as a tool not only in communicating, but also in manufacturing separate realities based on a minority's perspective of a community, one can argue that this awareness gives the social worker important insight into one's identity. Furthermore, the recognition of language as a defining factor in a person's experiences aids the social worker in moving beyond their personal or professional ethnocentrism (Green, 1999).

1.1. Language Minority - Definition

A language minority is defined as a numerically inferior group of people who speak a language that differs from the official language spoken by the majority of the state, which they reside (De Varennes & Kuzborska, 2019). On the other hand, a minority language is a term used for a language used by a minority including "lesser-used languages" which are not a dialect of the dominant language of a country (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2016). Smaller groups of people whose mother tongues are not the official languages of the country they reside in are referred to as language minorities. These definitions vary according to the field of research; nevertheless, the universal part is that minority languages do not have a national language status (Benedikter, 2008).

1.2. Language Minorities and Language Policy and Planning in Social Work

Research on language policy and planning (LPP) began as early as in the 1960s and has retained great importance for individuals and society to this day, what is supported by a considerable number of studies. According to Spolsky (2009) in Papa and Omazić (2021, p. 18) language planning can be seen as a form of "language management", an interdisciplinary topic connecting not only linguistics and sociology, but also politics, law, philosophy, economics and even ecology. Language planning as defined by Bussmann (1990) in Papa and Omazić (ibid.) includes

> …measures (taken most often by state institutions) that serve to develop and spread languages in interregional communication. These measures can include literacy, modernizing the language and expanding its reach. Language policies refer to political decisions and measures that regulate the status of languages in multilingual states, determine official languages in international institutions, and governing foreign language education.

Lo Bianco (2014, p. 316) indicates that social and political conditions affect language policy and that "the outcome of major political

and military events, and of technological and economic developments, appears determinative of the fate of the national languages taught in the countries involved." The prime example of this was the German language, which was (after a research study of 15 countries in 1850) by virtue of industrial science and competent state mechanisms made the first language of choice in all 15 countries that had been surveyed. However, following the defeats in the World Wars, the German language first ceded grounds to French and English in 1919, and then after 1945 entirely to English. Castles and Miller (2009) state that during the past several decades diversified human movement led to a phenomenon of contemporary globalization. Various types of population shifts (whether legal or illegal) that have transpired during this time, mass groups of individuals, families, and sub-national minorities have all contributed to the conversion of innumerable countries into plurilingual societies. This in itself has universalized the concept of multilingualism and multiculturalism within different communities. Countries that have become countries of immigration bear witness to this occurrence (e.g. Ireland, Japan, and Greece). They had to adapt to functioning with a number of new languages as well as diverse ethnic groups within only a few generations.

In addition, Lo Bianco (2014, p. 315) expresses his concerns that "globalization's consequences for languages extend across the full range of what count as languages, their status, their corpus and discourse forms, their spatial and sociological distribution, and cultural and ideological aspects." The author (ibid.) further explains how globalization also constructs intra-linguistic communication effects, such as the international adoption of English terminology with the help of media and education. In this regard, in 2013, despite their *Toubon law* of 1994 prohibiting the use of foreign languages in schools, France decided to allow teaching English classes justifying the decision as English being the Shakespeare's language. Lo Bianco (2000) suspects that the progressive multimodality of communication, as a result of contemporary globalization, is steadily obliterating linguistic diversity. This also includes the threat of extinction of numerous world languages, since according to the Ethnologue language atlas, human language diversity is decreasing rapidly.

2. Language Barriers in Social Work

If language functions as a barrier to accessing information for non-native speakers of an official language, it inevitably creates barriers in an individual's social and political life. The obvious barriers certainly include simple everyday life activities (e.g. shopping for groceries, medication), as well as accessing services a person has a right to (e.g. social services). In case of social work, not speaking the official language can lead the social worker to assumptions about the client's misinterpreted situation and misunderstanding if the clients cannot express themselves or are not aware of the social worker's assumptions. Moreover, situations like these can unintentionally subject the client to certain unnecessary interventions or exclusion. In addition, non-native speakers may be seen as inferior to native speakers as well as uneducated. These misguided beliefs extend to ideologies that portray them as intellectually challenged.

Based on the studies conducted by Harrison in Australia, it is not as uncommon for social workers to perceive language minorities who do not speak the official language as both academically underachieved and "simple". When language skills are seen as the equivalent to a person's professional efficiency and capability, minority language speakers can be disregarded as qualified candidates despite their qualifications (Harrison, 2007).

The question arises as to whether immigrants, language minorities, and non-native speakers should learn the official language of the country in which they reside (Harrison, 2007). Engstrom et al. (2009, p. 171) claim that although providing culturally and linguistically responsive services is seen as important, there is still a lack of research on the most effective approaches. Some common practices include hiring bilingual staff, providing cultural sensitivity training, and translating forms and educational materials into the languages spoken by clients. They also note that simply translating forms is not enough, and if staff are not available to speak to clients in their language, these materials are often useless. This is why many institutions rely on interpreters, who can be

helpful, but slow down communication. Moreover, they point out the problem when untrained support workers work in place of professional interpreters, as they may not recognize the importance of ethics, neutrality, and professional terminology. In conclusion, while there are a number of ways to improve communication with clients who do not speak English, it is not clear which approaches work best and thus further research is needed (Engstrom et al., 2009).

The results of the qualitative research conducted by Engstrom et al. (2009, pp. 171–176) aimed to determine how bilingual social workers engage with their language minority clients and what communication challenges they encounter. Given the limited research on the role of language in social work practice, the use of a qualitative method is appropriate, as it provides new insights and real-world experiences that would otherwise remain overlooked. Describing their own experiences, bilingual social workers help to understand challenges and meanings that others might not notice. The barriers listed in the study refer to a lack of staff who speak the client's language, over-reliance on non-professional interpreters, language switching, difficulties in translating professional and technical terminology, lack of language training and testing, and language services interference with core work.

2.1. Working with an Interpreter

Considering the fact that Europe is a continent of many cultures and languages, and the destination of mass migration, it is not surprising that social service providers are in perpetual contact with language minorities. As a result, working with an interpreter is inevitable and should therefore be adequately aligned for optimal work with the client, in addition to the necessity of using interpreters for deaf and hard-of-hearing clients, as well as for clients with a certain form of voice-speech impairment. In his study Glasser (1982) identifies the possible power imbalance that an interpreter may bring to the rapport with the client and points out the importance of the social worker being aware of this fact. The stated difficulty may aggravate if the interpreter is not adequately

trained in this type of work. This question of confidentiality guaranteed to the client arises at the beginning of the procedure with the social worker. With this in mind, Glasser (ibid.) refers to interpreting guidelines, which entail specific steps when an interpreter is involved in the procedures. The guidelines require a trained interpreter, and the social worker should speak to the client and not the interpreter. Nonetheless, the meaning of *cover terms* is discussed, and the procedure is repeated and summarized to avoid misunderstandings. The agenda is brief, and there must be extra time for further clarification. Finally, a summary of the interview should be written for any inquiries that may arise later. Green (1999) states that the client should be asked for rectifications of the gathered information and ambiguities are to be resolved immediately. The use of family members (especially children) as interpreters should be avoided entirely.

Westlake and Jones (2018) point out in their research of cases in the United Kingdom (conducted by Tupper et al., 2016) that clients whose mother tongue is not English are subject to lengthier assessments. Similar research in Norway confirms that migrant families who require an interpreter when working with a social worker can receive inaccurate assessments and are denied access to certain social services. The obstacle in improving these quandaries is the lack of research on social workers' collaboration with interpreters since social workers' self-reports are used instead of empirical studies on the contribution of the social worker. Given the results of multiple studies (Tupper et al., 2016), and a comparative study conducted by Kriz and Skivenes in 2010 in England and Norway, the importance of improving and focusing on the communication skills of practitioners has been proven to be imperative. The inclusion of interpreters in the practice of social work often includes obstacles such as the confusion of their role in the exchange, the question of confidentiality in the client-practitioner relationship and its possible disruption, the lack of reliability of the interpreter.

Humphreys et al. (1999) conducted research into the difference between a practitioner-client dynamic with and without an interpreter respectively. They observed nineteen children from Child Protection

Case Conferences with the help of researchers who were fluent in the families' first language. The results show possible discriminatory and dysfunctional practices that were not present when the interpreter was absent (Westlake & Jones, 2018). This research signals the need for more efficient and effective interpreter and translator training.

One of the issues in the practitioner-client-interpreter dynamic is the narrative in which the interpreter's skills are seen as paramount. It can overshadow the importance of the social worker's role in the process and thereby create a distorted narrative of the process. This can mean that it oversees the fact that the social worker takes the necessary steps for improvement in the whole process with the client. The interpreter's role is to create a more accurate setting. In addition to the difficulties that arise when an interpreter is present, clients may also be hesitant to trust the process and the social worker, often appearing more reserved or withdrawn. Moreover, the stated predicaments, as previously recognized, can lead to inadequate assessments and service provision. The conclusion of the researchers was that the performance of the social worker was more strenuous as it objectively makes the process more time-consuming (Westlake & Jones, 2018).

The questions that arose by virtue of the research conducted by Westlake and Jones (2018) touch on the topics of whether service users feel they have the opportunity to clarify their situation to the interpreter and to the social worker. This problem emerges when an interpreter is employed via a third agency so that clients can perceive the whole situation as contradictory, meaning that while the interpreter is there for both the social worker and the client equally, the service user may feel unwanted in the process. It has often been proven through objective observation that the social worker communicates with the service user exclusively through communication with the interpreter, while the client is referred to in the third person.

Service users can also feel as if the interpreter does not represent their needs but the agency's. Thus, even though the main intention is to use the interpreter proactively, it appears counterproductive. The inevitable presence of an interpreter has taken a substantial toll when it

comes to building trust and communication between the social worker and the client. While social workers have reported greater difficulty in expressing empathy and establishing a positive relationship with clients, research shows that the development of rapport is further hindered by the presence of an interpreter, as both parties are less likely to engage in small talk or interact in a more casual manner. These types of occurrences can put a strain on the social worker-client rapport and fall into the background (Westlake & Jones, 2018).

The results of the studies point out distinctive techniques not only relevant to situations when an interpreter is present, but also for social work in general. One of these techniques is reflecting, a key method in social work practice. Reflection involves repeating and/or paraphrasing what the client expresses through the use of active listening, as part of building trust in the process. Reported research has shown that this can lead to confusion if an interpreter is involved, and there is a chance they will not interpret reflections since they believe that the social worker may be repeating themselves (Westlake & Jones, 2018). Furthermore, the importance of self-reflection is pointed out in the *National Association of Social Workers'* (NASW*) Code of Ethics* (2002). It states that by using self-reflection to understand their own bias and engage in self-correction, social workers should demonstrate awareness and cultural humility by recognizing that the client is the expert of their culture (ibid.).

It has also been proven that assertive attitude of the client can prompt the interpreter to clarify simple and empathetic statements such as: "That makes sense. I understand". Using an interpreter or approaching an existing language barrier leads to closed questions in the conversation. This is restrictive in that it does not provide the social worker with the necessary information to comprehend the client's situation, nor does it allow the client the space and freedom to respond to questions without feeling pressured. Additionally, closed questions create the space for narrow and suggestive questions, which, in most situations, should not be the case in a social worker-client conversation as they unintentionally or subconsciously persuade the client to confirm

the worker's question. These types of questions can vary from "Is your relationship with your husband good?" to "Would you say your mother is a bad parent?"

Another difficulty when using an interpreter is the loss of context as a result of linguistic-cultural differences. This can lead to confusion in the conversation, and vital information remains unnoticed. If an interpreter is present, it additionally limits the time that the client and the worker have to gather the vital information and improve the client's situation. Based on the conducted research, out of nineteen observed cases, there was only one situation that has proven the interpreter reliable. In that case, the worker and client can rely on the interpreter to reduce the confusion in the process, take time to clarify whatever the client may be disclosing. In other words, the interpreter is proactive in the entire process instead of being a passive third party. Exclusion of the people who are non-native speakers of the official language is not rare. In the course of the research, the recordings of the interpreter-mediated sessions were gathered in England. They show specific situations in which family members who do not speak English are side-lined and disregarded while the worker and the interpreter communicate with the English-speaking family member. The results of the conducted research show that using an interpreter can have disadvantages when it comes to expediency, gathering information and being empathetic. Social workers' reluctance to probe for crucial information disrupts the rapport between the worker and the client, yet it depends on their assertiveness and perception of their role and the role of the interpreter.

Westlake and Jones (2018) propose four principal recommendations for enhancing professional interactions with non-native speakers. First, practitioners should actively seek to clarify potential misunderstandings or misconceptions during communication. Second, incorporating informal conversation can support rapport-building between the client and the worker. Third, the use of closed or narrowly framed questions, as well as reflective interpretation, should be avoided to reduce ambiguity. Lastly, in cases where clients demonstrate fluctuating levels of

language proficiency, it is advised that communication be conducted entirely in their native language.

Cumulating the stated ideas could be vital to the development of the worker-client relationship (Westlake & Jones, 2018). It is paramount that social workers have knowledge in foreign language content, whichever ones are most prevalent in their country of work, to thoroughly understand the interpreter and the client. This would reduce the possible misunderstandings during the process, as well as give the social worker a more accurate perspective on the client's situation, which would further lead to more precise assessments.

Recent global movements and vast migrations across Europe call for linguistic diversity. Monolingualism does not seem to be a feasible option for social work. The global dominance of the English language as *lingua franca* must be recognized as an aspect that affects the lives of people who speak English as a second language. Since the profession of social work strives for social inclusion, it is paramount that social workers are aware of this fact when working with their ethnic minority clients. Studies have shown the benefits of bilingualism through enhancements such as creativity, cognitive flexibility and language awareness (Harrison, 2006). The need for interpreters in social work in working with non-native speakers can be identified in recorded cases. Harrison (2006, p. 405) points out a notorious case in social work i.e. the case of Victoria Climbié with a tragic ending in situations where a child and worker relied on the caregiver for interpretation.[1] From the sociolinguistic aspect, people use language strategically to shape their identity in conversation. It is therefore crucial to recognize the importance of language identity, the proper engagement of interpreters, and the role of bilingualism in social work.

[1] Victoria Climbié was an eight-year-old girl from the Ivory Coast, who was given by her parents to the care of her grandaunt in London. The girl was proficient in her local language and French but spoke poor English and had to rely on her caregiver to translate. Her grandaunt's boyfriend was abusing her, which remained unrecognized, because in contact with health and social services her abuser, who was translating used the language skills selectively. She died in 2000 in hospital in London from hypothermia and malnutrition, after suffering months of abuse and neglect.

2.2. Sign Language and Deaf Communities

In the past, deaf children were treated as individuals with special needs, but in the last few decades they are increasingly considered a language and cultural minority, which has led to the development of a bilingual approach to education that includes sign language and the written/spoken language of the majority community that uses American Sign Language (ASL) as its full language and shares a common cultural identity. Higgins and Liebermann (2016, p. 9) analyze the historical development of this change, as well as the influences that linguistic and cultural perspectives have on language development in deaf children, teacher education and educational policy. From this perspective, a distinction must be made between the term "deaf," which denotes the medical condition of hearing loss, and "Deaf," which refers to a cultural identity within the sign language community.

Bai and Bruno (2020, p. 38) point out that people who are deaf or identify as hard-of-hearing inevitably face obstacles in everyday life within the community, ranging from health care and cultural events to mental health services and education. Consequently, the Deaf community is at a disadvantage in terms of easy access to these services. Social work is not an exception seeing as the use of sign language in their work with a client who has hearing loss is predominantly not the case. This leads to language deprivation, especially if there is no enhancement in the communication and professional services access for the Deaf community directly and promptly. Since communication between a social worker and client is essential to building rapport, it is imperative that a client with hearing loss and their assigned worker have high-quality communication with the assistance of a professional sign language interpreter.

People with hearing loss have limited access to social services. Hearing social workers often lack sufficient understanding of the challenges faced by the Deaf community and do not possess adequate knowledge of sign language for effective communication. Furthermore, there is the question of service quality and proper accommodations when using the accessible services. To avert cases of unattainable services and to ensure

that proper adjustments have been made, it is paramount for social workers to have adequate knowledge of the struggles a disabled person has to tackle with. Moreover, if a social worker is working with a person who has hearing loss and there is an interpreter present, the worker follows the client's non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures, body language), and maintains eye contact. It would be optimal if social workers comprehended essential sign language phrases and words as well as be able to sign common terms in their field of work to build a trusting relationship with the client (Bai & Bruno, 2020).

In order to improve social work with deaf people, the literature highlights a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring equal access and culturally sensitive practice. First, the importance of hiring social workers who have knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL) and an understanding of deaf culture is emphasized, since such professionals can provide better and more inclusive service to deaf clients. Furthermore, they should play an active role in educating hearing social workers, especially regarding the effective use of interpreters and other communication adaptations. Bai and Bruno (2020, p. 45) provide "critical recommendations to enhance access for deaf clients using American Sign Language (ASL) to more comprehensive social work services". In the case of communication barriers that the Deaf community is compelled to confront daily, the field of social work has to improve certain deficiencies as well. Thus, Bai and Bruno (ibid.) recommend that social workers who do not have previous experience working with the Deaf community are strongly encouraged to participate in professional development and lifelong learning programs to develop cultural competence. In addition, cooperation with organizations and institutions that bring together deaf people and ASL interpreters is recommended for the purpose of designing and implementing education, training, and workshops. The leadership role of those professionals who are already well-versed in the practice of working in the Deaf community is particularly important. Their contributions can be crucial in raising awareness of the legislative framework (e.g., NASW), and in strengthening understanding of the social and cultural aspects of deafness.

Finally, to ensure the long-term sustainability of a professional workforce trained to work with deaf people, it is recommended that content related to deaf culture and disability policies be integrated into educational curricula and accreditation standards in schools of social work and related professions.

Current estimates indicate that there are approximately one million sign language users in the European Union (however, it is unclear whether this figure includes hearing individuals). The blatant lack of literature on sign language as a minority language, as well as dependable data on the actual number of people with hearing loss who are sign language users does not allow for further improvement in terms of language policies and reliable statistics. New sign language users appear to be of assistance to the visibility of not only American Sign Language but also the importance of being familiar with sign language in general (De Meulder et al., 2019)

2.3. Discrimination in Social Work Related to Language Minorities

One of the purposes of language policy and planning in a society, according to Fishman (1965), is to address the questions of who plans what, for whom, and how in language, which is both a political and social issue. Lena Dominelli calls for linguistically inclusive social work, and Gustafsson et al. (2023, p. 507) propose that social workers should become "agents of integration", developing their own linguistic and empathetic competences.

Since discrimination may appear in all aspects of life in a society, social welfare is no exception. It is paramount that social workers are aware of the presence of prejudice and stereotypes targeted at minorities and therefore minimize its existence in social work and communities in general. The social work as a profession aims at combating discrimination. However, the occurrence of unwanted practices, e.g. in working with minority groups, has been recorded. In this context, Brkić, Barišić and Šmuc (2024) point out the need for developing communication and intercultural skills in social workers, specifically those

involved in working with unaccompanied children. They also emphasize the importance of providing interpreters competent to effectively cooperate and support unaccompanied children. According to Hermos and Barišić (2024), transnational social work foregrounds anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, pointing out that trauma-competency, as well as understanding of the cultural contexts are crucial in working with minorities. Undoubtedly, one of the main objectives of social work is promoting humanism, social justice and the dignity of all persons. Therefore, it is no surprise that, according to the *Ethical Code of Social Workers* (2014) in Croatia, every activity of social workers should be marked by the promotion of the values of human beings regardless of their different characteristics and life circumstances (HUSR, 2014). Additionally, pursuant to Article 29 of *The Social Welfare Act* (2011), any form of direct or indirect discrimination of social welfare beneficiaries by social workers or service providers is forbidden (NN 57/2011).

One of the essential aspects in working with language minorities is their opportunity to adequately voice their needs and be understood. This assertion is the epitome of anti-discriminatory practice along with anti-racist practice, not only in social work, but social services in general. Thompson (2012) describes a case from Wales involving an eight-year-old girl who refused to speak about her sexual abuse to her English-speaking foster parents. She disclosed the details only after a Welsh-speaking social worker was assigned to her case. Discriminatory practice can be seen in the mere ethnocentrism that occurs when social workers and service providers do not consider the client's perspective, but merely establish the perspective by means of their own culture as the norm. This relates to cultural hegemony, the imposition of socially acceptable behaviors and ways of life by dominant groups, which social work should resist, given that one of its core principles is the opposition to the oppression of language and other minorities. Studies have shown that when working with non-native speakers, social workers may not provide service users with adequate assessments. Workers may also feel frustrated and helpless if the interpreter is not knowledgeable about

specific fields (e.g., child abuse) relevant to social work in the service user's native language (Chand, 2005).

2.4. The Capacity for Improving Social Work with Language Minorities

Green (1999) suggests several proposals to improve the comprehension of communication in workplaces where multiple languages are spoken. He points out the practicality of using cover terms, essentially terms and phrases that are of significance to the client and are commonly used by them. An example of a cover term would be the use of the term "green card" by labor immigrants as well as law enforcement officials who have the jurisdiction to deport them. Cover terms can be viewed as basic ethnographic materials that shape a substantial part of the interview. For further clarification, the social worker should ask the client to translate the noted terms along with explaining the context in which the terms are used. The list should be forwarded to colleagues in the intent to expanding it, which would result in creating a dictionary with key phrases suitable for both the practice and the worker's own awareness (Green, 1999).

Thompson (2016) points out the necessity of ensuring adequate and proper assessments are done when working with ethnic minority clients. The first step that should be taken in achieving this is making sure that the process is not mediated by negative stereotypes or prejudice. Furthermore, social workers must work on developing a positive perspective of ethnic minority clients, as well as be aware of the disservice they have had to endure because of cultural differences. Anti-discriminatory practice must be the goal when discussing improvement in the social welfare system.

Bussey et al. (2021) list several suggestions for overcoming the bias present in social work. These suggestions include some of the training practices that should be implemented in the social welfare system. They highlight the importance of the practitioner's reflexive skills, in addition to self-awareness regarding one's accord towards the systems

of oppression and self-identity. Moreover, the practices involve not using oppressive or derogatory language, education about current systems of oppression and their effects on minorities. The model of improvement also threatens the reduction of human experiences, meaning it interferes with the biased description of certain groups. Additionally, it promotes one of the fundamentals of social work practice, the practice centered on the person, in which the client is an equal in the process and is involved in the decision-making process.

3. The Role of the Social Worker regarding Language Minorities

Hermos and Barišić (2024) state that the migrant crisis as a permanent issue in Europe requires social workers to be more engaged and aware of national minorities. This is the reason for the urgency of keeping up to date with migrant movements within European borders. Undeniably, when working with language minorities, social workers should foremost make sure that the client feels comfortable and that they understand the whole procedure. On the other hand, social workers should determine, in agreement with the client, whether an interpreter or translator is required during the interview. The aspect of confidentiality should be clarified forthwith. Moreover, additional emphasis should be placed on confidentiality when a translator or interpreter is present. During such processes, the service user's dignity and self-esteem must be protected, and they must not feel discriminated against by social service providers.

Gustafsson et al. (2023, pp. 501-507) state that social work is not only a helping profession, but also language work, in which communication (verbal, non-verbal, written, sign and digital) plays a key role. They emphasize that linguistic diversity and the migration context must not be neglected in the professional education and practice of social workers, as well as in the legislation and institutional organization of social services. As far as social work (language work) is concerned, Gustafsson et al., drawing on Hall and Valdiviezo (2020), emphasize that language, speaking, writing, and listening skills are fundamental tools in everyday

social work practice, especially when working with vulnerable groups. Due to globalization, the multilingual context of social work has become increasingly challenging. It is common for social workers and clients to speak different languages, which creates communication barriers and necessitates the use of interpreters who, although important, cannot replace the language and cultural competence of social workers (Gustafsson, 2023). Linguistic diversity in social work is often overlooked or treated as invisible, as the literature primarily highlights cultural competence while frequently neglecting language awareness. There is also a risk of ethnocentrism and of stereotyping clients through cultural labels (Gustafsson, 2023, p. 502).

Conclusion

The results of this research, based on the analysis of contemporaneous sources addressing language minorities in social work, highlight the importance and benefits of minority language skills. They also emphasize the need for more adequate training of translators and interpreters in social work when working with language minorities. The present cultural differences and language barriers undoubtedly affect the rapport between the social worker and the service user; therefore, the entire social welfare system is under the obligation to advocate for change in the system. The interpreters must be better trained and aware of possible difficulties in communication regarding a certain language minority, just as social workers must be cognizant of potential disadvantages a language minority may have to deal with, according to the cultural differences in a certain country. With regard to the research conducted for this paper, the main issue is clearly the lack of literature addressing language issues in the field of social work. In spite of the fact that there is a significant amount of information about national minorities, their livelihoods and use of social services, there is a scarcity of research that analyzes how language barriers affect their access to social services. Furthermore, research examining how national minorities build rapport with social workers and social service providers often does not take

language into account in these interactions. Nevertheless, the existing literature, such as Green's *Culture Awareness,* and Joseph Lo Bianco's work, provides insight into specific guidelines for a more effective way of working with a language minority client. The results are therefore indicative of further research into language awareness and minority languages in the field of social work.

This text strongly argues that linguistic diversity is not a technical challenge, but a fundamental issue of equity, access and power in social work. Social workers must be educated to work in multilingual contexts, and institutions must review their monolingual practices and legal framework. The use of language should be understood as a key means of understanding and inclusion, not just as a pragmatic tool.

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