

Bilingual Court Professionals' Perceptions of Their Language Skills: Asset or Liability?

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Abstract: *Bilingual professionals are considered an asset in the workplace. However, bilingual professionals at times perceive their language skills as a liability. This paper examined bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills and the factors that influence their views. Focus groups were used to capture the perspectives of 15 bilingual professionals who speak English and Spanish and work in a court system in the eastern region of the United States. Findings reveal challenges rooted in discrimination that convert bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills from an asset to a liability. Participants highlight unfair practices affecting Limited English Proficiency (LEP) clients. These practices force bilingual professionals to become protectors and gatekeepers to prevent adverse outcomes and provide access to services in the court and across social service systems. Ultimately, bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills depended on how others used their language skills in the workplace. To support bilingual professionals and provide quality services to LEP clients, social work administrators must evaluate structural supports and provide training specific to the cultural aspect of language for all employees.*

Keywords: *Bilingual professionals, court system, language, and discrimination*

Literature Review

Bilingual professionals enhance services delivered in organizations, increase the number of individuals seeking assistance, and impact access to services. In general, bilingual skills are advantageous for both the workers and their employers (Fry & Lowell, 2013). Courts, in particular, often depend on bilingual professionals to use their language skills to serve Limited English Proficiency (LEP) individuals (Dutton et al., 2013; Logan, 2018; National Center for State Courts [NCSC], 2013). Most employers specifically recruit bilingual professionals to help organizations meet the needs of LEP populations, making it relatively easy for bilingual professionals to find employment (Engstrom et al., 2009; Fry & Lowell, 2013).

Engstrom et al. (2009) refer to bilingual social workers as “Critical Service Providers” (p. 168) who help organizations meet LEP clients’ cultural and language needs. They educate clients on laws and services, and contribute to colleagues’ and supervisors’ cultural and linguistic competency development, resulting in more efficient services (Bergman et al., 2008; Logan, 2018). Hall and Valdeviezo (2020) assert social workers must have language competence to understand how language ties to power and personal identity impacting client-worker relationships. They point out that one does not need to be proficient in a language to have language competency and that someone can have language

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proficiency and not have language competency. Language competency is the combination of “cultural awareness” and “social diversity” that allows for skillful engagement and interaction with clients who speak a different language (Hall & Valdeviezo, 2020, p. 18). Scholars have reported that bilingual professionals have positive experiences because of their language skills (Bergman et al., 2008; Engstrom et al., 2009). In past studies, bilingual professionals reported feeling pride and strong connections with their LEP clients (Logan, 2018; Shu-Wen, 2013; Verdinelli & Biever, 2009). Generally, the link generated by their acculturation, language identities, and sharing of everyday experiences enhances the client-worker relationship (Ando, 2017).

Bilingual practitioners can understand and effectively work with LEP individuals (Bergman et al., 2008; Engstrom & Min, 2004; Shu-Wen, 2013; Verdinelli & Biever, 2009). Bilingual professionals provide LEP clients with an outlet to express themselves in their native language. They also elicit emotional experiences unique to LEP and bilingual clients (Oliva, 2017). Both LEP and bilingual clients are more comfortable expressing themselves with professionals who communicate in their same language; thus, they are more inclined to seek services when agencies have bilingual providers (Zambrana, 1996). Nathanson et al. (2016) reported that health care agencies without bilingual professionals or translation services cannot meet the demands of the rising LEP population and often deny services to LEP clients.

Despite the unique and powerful contributions bilingual professionals make in their field, they are often not valued to the same extent as they are recruited. They face myriad challenges, such as differential treatment, assumptions, and unrealistic expectations (Logan, 2018). Disparities in assignments, workload, compensation, and professional development negatively impact bilingual professionals’ work. These conditions also affect workers’ satisfaction and their physical and mental health (Arias & Friberg, 2017; Engstrom et al., 2009; Logan, 2018; Núñez et al., 2021). Bilingual professionals’ work is often interrupted by language interpretation requests. At times they sacrifice their work responsibilities, identities, and comfort to assist monolingual co-workers and prevent them from feeling suspicious, threatened, distrustful, or excluded by bilingual professionals (Bergman et al., 2008; Engstrom et al., 2009). Bilingual professionals not only use their language skills to help monolingual co-workers and clients but do more work than their monolingual counterparts and yet continue to be viewed as outsiders (Bergman et al., 2008; Logan, 2018).

Being a bilingual professional comes with unique pressures and challenges. Cultural bonds linked to language add to this internal pressure. Some may experience feelings of guilt and responsibility to give back to the community, either through clients or co-workers (Logan, 2018; Nielsen et al., 2019). The internal pressures felt by these professionals have led to physical concerns such as sleeplessness, body aches and tiredness, and psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, forgetfulness, poor motivation, and low self-esteem (Alleyne, 2005; Bergman et al., 2008; Engstrom et al., 2009; Sue, 2010). Furthermore, the pressures on bilingual professionals can result in dissatisfaction with work, mood change, absenteeism, lowered work performance, and a denial of language skills (Logan, 2018). The extra work performed may also decrease their self-worth and abilities (Bergman et al., 2008; Logan, 2018).

Additionally, bilingual professionals are burdened with unrealistic expectations connected to their knowledge of professional terminology in languages other than English. Often bilingual professionals are expected to know all terminology in several languages, sometimes even languages they do not speak. The expectation of being knowledgeable in several languages is a concern for many bilingual professionals who worry about issues of credibility, ethics, and miscommunication with clients (Logan, 2018). In fact, social work ethical guidelines require that all clients receive culturally and linguistically competent services. Yet, social work educators struggle with diversifying curriculum despite recognizing its importance (Hebenstreit, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). However, bilingual professionals are often expected to serve as interpreters regardless of language competency or training. In a quantitative study examining self-efficacy related to Spanish language skills, Arriaza (2015) found that out of 319 participants, 46.1% perceived their Spanish language skills as inadequate when providing social work services. Only 37.3% of participants perceived their Spanish language skills as adequate when delivering social work services.

There is limited literature about how bilingual professionals whose job description is not that of interpreting experience their language skills in the workplace. Thus, this study examined whether bilingual professionals who work in the court system or with court-involved clients perceive their language skills as an asset or a liability and the factors that influence those perceptions.

Purpose of Study

In this study, the authors examined one aspect of a larger study that explored the quality of services provided to LEP people within the judicial system. The bilingual professionals' responses, specific to their ability to provide services in two languages, were the focus of this analysis. Two research questions guided this study:

- 1) To what extent do bilingual professionals perceive their bilingual skills as an asset or a liability?
- 2) What factors influence bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills?

Methods

This qualitative study focused on bilingual professionals with clients involved in the criminal and juvenile justice system in the Eastern United States and the perspective of monolingual coworkers and supervisors. The original study used five focus groups (2 groups of bilingual professionals, 1 group of supervisors, 1 group of monolingual professionals, and 1 group of LEP clients) to explore the challenges faced by bilingual professionals in the judicial system. For this paper, the responses from the two bilingual professionals focus groups about the use of their language skills in serving the LEP population within the court system were analyzed.

Participants' Recruitment and Selection

The researcher, also the main author, used a snowball approach and purposefully selected the participants from her judicial colleagues and community agencies' network. Participants were selected based on their intersecting identities of being bilingual and employed by the court system or an agency that services court-involved clients. Participants were recruited from different judicial locations within a 40-mile radius of where the focus groups were held. The focus groups were held in the private conference room of a courthouse within the heart of a city. The researcher emailed an invitation letter to prospective participants. Those interested responded to the researcher by phone or email.

Participants in this study had court-involved LEP clients who spoke Spanish. None of the participants had interpreting as a job requirement. The 15 participants included 12 native Spanish speakers and 3 non-native Spanish speakers. In this study, native Spanish speakers within the context of bilingual professionals, refers to individuals who learned to speak Spanish before speaking English. Non-native Spanish speakers refers to individuals who learned to speak English before learning to speak Spanish. Participants were composed of five males and ten females. Three of the participants were not Latino, and twelve were Latino. It is noteworthy to point out that this study is not about Latinos serving LEP populations but about bilingual professionals despite most participants being of Latino descent. Participants were also diverse across professional fields, consisting of three social workers, one attorney, six probation officers (one probation officer has a MSW), two investigators, two clerical workers, and one care coordinator.

Data Collection

Following Krueger's (2000) approach in developing focus group questions, the researcher developed the semi-structured interview questions based on her experience working in the judicial system for over 15 years. Two social work research consultants assisted with the data collection. One of the consultants helped the researcher craft the interview questions. The other consultant, a bilingual interviewer unaffiliated with the court and the co-author, facilitated the focus group interviews. The interview questions concentrated on the provision and effectiveness of services provided to LEP clients. All participants were asked the same interview questions that explored the positive and negative aspects of their role in assisting LEP clients, the quality of services received by the LEP clients, and how agencies and organizations can better serve LEP clients. The focus group interview lasted 60 minutes in length and was audio-recorded. Additionally, the principal researcher took notes at each focus group to capture non-verbal communication.

Analysis

The co-authors analyzed the data by organizing, preparing, reading, coding, and categorizing the narrative data into themes. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and reviewed the audio recordings twice. Open coding generated main categories and themes from the transcriptions, and a web-based qualitative software program assisted

with the organization of the data (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009). The variations in themes and commonality between groups were compared and analyzed using Dedoose qualitative software. The researcher used peer-inter-rater reliability to reduce researcher bias, review the codes and themes, and find connections.

Findings

Six main themes emerged as factors influencing bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills. Three themes were categorized as assets: (1) strong connections, (2) satisfaction and appreciation, and (3) cultural bond, and three were categorized as liabilities: (4) terminology and miscommunication, (5) limited bilingual services, and (6) pressure and dissatisfaction. The theme of limited bilingual services included three subthemes: protectors, gatekeepers, and above and beyond.

Bilingualism as an Asset

All participants in this study perceived their bilingual skills as an asset when working in their professional roles and assisting their LEP clients. The term "asset" in this study is defined based on participants' viewpoints as a personal and professional value, benefit, or advantage in the workplace. Participants thought that their language skills enhanced their work performance, resulted in favorable dispositions and outcomes of cases, and led them to feel satisfied both professionally and personally. For example, a probation officer stated,

I think the best thing our agency did for this specific region where our office is, is give me the opportunity to work there. I think the Hispanic population was almost unrepresented in part because there was never bilingual staff who worked in that area. By me being there now, I feel that they can connect and speak the language. They feel a little more comfortable.

Similarly, a clerical worker stated,

I feel fortunate that I am in this position where people come to court for you. They know you by name. I feel fortunate that I am able to help people exercise their rights and stop this system where you are taken advantage of because they didn't know [referring to LEP clients].

The data reveals three factors that influenced participants' perceptions of their language skills as an asset: (1) strong connections, (2) satisfaction and appreciation, and (3) a cultural identity bond.

Factor #1: Strong Connections

Participants perceived their language skills as an asset because their skills allowed them to develop connections with LEP clients. Strong connections in this study refer to a professional link or attachment between individuals that revolve around trust and vulnerability. Strong connections led to developing a professional relationship and helping

clients to access services. Strong connections allowed the client to express themselves freely, as stated by an investigator,

I would say in my role what I enjoy the most is the fact that families feel so comfortable. They finally have someone they can relate to that knows their language and that they can feel free to express themselves the way they want to express themselves.

A probation officer added, *"I think you get to connect with the clients, and you form a trust level that helps you just be more successful when working with the families."*

Participants associated developing strong connections with positive outcomes. They credited strong relationships with LEP clients to conducting more thorough assessments and serving more effectively as mediators and advocates between the clients, lawyers, and other service providers. As another probation officer shared, *"All of my Hispanic clients and I have a really good connection, and the attorneys get a lot of information too."* Similarly, an investigator reported that, unlike their monolingual counterparts, he has *"... seen a tremendous value when you are able to connect with a client because of the language barrier is the amount of information you can get from them."* Participants raved about how their strong connections contributed to the success of their work with LEP clients.

Strong connections helped reduce LEP clients' anxiety and made them feel more comfortable in the legal environment. As one probation officer stated, *"I think you make the families and clients less anxious than they already are because they have a connection with us because we speak the same language."* Participants saw their connections with their LEP clients as necessary to meet the needs of LEP clients. One social worker stated,

I think you can help them find the right level of care too, then the necessary service because you speak the language and you're able to figure out what their needs are too, to make their situation better, and help link the mental health or behavior health services for them.

In addition to a strong connection, bilingual professionals experienced a sense of satisfaction due to their language skills.

Factor #2: Satisfaction and Appreciation

Participants reported feeling a sense of satisfaction and appreciation when they assisted LEP clients. They noticed the positive outcomes and LEP clients' comfort level when assisted in their dominant language. In this study, a sense of satisfaction refers to positive feelings of contentment and fulfillment. Appreciation represents gratitude, being valued and not taken for granted. Satisfaction and appreciation transcended participants' professional identities and impacted their experiences personally despite doing more work. A probation officer reported,

There is a satisfaction in helping people and being able to be supportive and trying to make someone feel relaxed and try to give them more information. You do it, but that doesn't take away from the fact that you are given more work because of the fact that you can do that.

An investigator stated, *“For them [referring to LEP clients] to feel comfortable, I enjoy that.”* They felt more motivated to serve, increasing their productivity. Another Probation Officer said,

For me working with Spanish-speaking clients is one of my pride and joy, and I get lots of pleasure. When people don't understand the system, I take the opportunity to educate them and just the whole appreciation. Many times, we do this [referring to helping co-workers communicate], and we don't get all that appreciation. But when you get, “oh wow, thank you very much, muchisimas gracias [referring to helping a client]”. You get that warmth; it encourages you to do more for that client because you connect.

Participants' satisfaction also developed because using their language skills felt rewarding to them. As a social worker shared: *“You get to make a difference in somebody's life, that somebody else would not have made.”* One investigator expressed himself by saying, *“Wow, it's the reaction you get, and that is very rewarding. It makes you feel good.”* A final factor, the cultural identity bond, influenced participants' view of their language skills as an asset.

Factor #3: Cultural Identity Bond

The data reveals that for both native and non-native Spanish speakers, the ability to serve LEP clients' in their dominant language contributed to developing a cultural identity bond that the authors consider can enhance or strengthen the helping relationship. In this study, “cultural identity bond” refers to the emotional attachments created by the sense of belonging to a community or group that shares a common language. In addition to sharing a common language, they also shared one or more of the following intersecting identities: cultural and ethnic background, social practices, traditions, beliefs, religion, history, trade, and knowledge and skills passed through generations. For example, a probation officer said, *“They feel supported, they know that you are just like them, they feel that support and connection right away, in my agency compared to just English-speaking clients.”* The cultural identity bond between the participants and LEP clients was a main factor responsible for strong connections and satisfaction. Participants credited the cultural identity bond for feelings of emotional attachment and responsibility towards LEP clients. A social worker explained, *“I think the cultural piece is important. You just find they connect with you. The reaction that I would describe is like giving candy to a kid.”* Another probation officer said, *“It's great [referring to culture] because I feel like I'm helping my community.”*

All participants agreed that *“It's the look of relief that you see in other's face when they realize that you're going to help them, and you can”* speak Spanish. Participants recognized language as a critical component of the cultural identity bond that develops between them and LEP clients. It is essential to understand language as a key component of the cultural identity bond. In its absence, the connections needed for positive client outcomes may not develop.

There was also the perception and assumption that a bilingual provider from the same culture facilitates an identification process that makes the LEP client feel better understood and supported. A probation officer stated,

I think the cultural connection is great...and I see in the client a positive attitude...wanting to change, wanting to successfully complete probation. I see that they can identify with me easily. There is something about the culture piece..if you can understand me as a Latino. You definitely see success in these clients, and it is satisfying to see them leave your offices, successfully completing probation...and a few years later they thank you so much; I appreciate it. That's very satisfying; I think that is the best thing.

The cultural identity bond between participants and their LEP clients had a powerful emotional hold on the bilingual professionals. Participants would go above and beyond their role because of their appreciation of the impact of language and cultural values on people, despite participants' diverse racial backgrounds. For example, the importance of loyalty to and support of family, and the sharing and passing of knowledge and skills between generations were mentioned by participants. A native Spanish-speaking clerical worker explained,

I was raised here, but my mom does not speak English. So, when someone comes to the window and speaks to me in English, and I know that they are having a hard time... I'm not going to be like, oh well, let me have this person have a hard time and keep speaking English. No, I come up with Spanish, and then at the end, they are like, oh thank you, and that makes me feel good because I see my mother there or my aunt, so I treat them like I would like my mom to be treated or someone else in my family.

Similarly, a non-native Spanish-speaking social worker, aware of sociocultural factors, expressed taking on the supporting role of family when working with some LEP clients who do not have family in the United States. She said, “*Our client's family lives in Honduras. We are the only ones that call them. No one else knows or cares about what is going on with them.*” All participants reported that having a cultural identity bond through language made them feel good and motivated to do more when assisting LEP clients.

However, depending on the number of intersecting identities, participants had difficulty deciphering which of their identities had a stronger hold and whether their cultural identity bond was due to their shared language or other cultural identities. For example, a native Spanish-speaking participant of Latino descent claimed that because of the cultural value of “*respeto*” (respect), she felt more responsible for helping LEP clients by using her language skills. There was a perception that for LEP clients to be assisted by those who had the language skills was a way to show them “*respeto.*” Participants felt it was their cultural duty to honor this cultural expectation. “*Respeto*” was instrumental in the development of a cultural identity bond. A social worker said:

It's a sign of disrespect. If you have the skill set, I feel like I am more responsible for the things that may not be listed [referring to in the job description]. If you

have the skill, then you should; coming from a person of that descent, they are going to think that is disrespectful.

Non-native Spanish-speaking participants also felt a strong cultural identity bond to language that would not let them walk away. The attorney stated, *“how can we say, no, though. I can’t, it’s amazing to me that you would sit there and watch somebody who can’t communicate, who wishes they could, you know you can, and just walk away.”*

Ultimately, participants perceived their language skills as assets due to strong connections, satisfaction and appreciation, and cultural identity bond. These factors motivated them to do more and made them feel fulfilled professionally and personally. However, participants did not always view their language skills as an asset.

Bilingualism as a Liability

Participants’ perceptions of their language skills seemed to change seamlessly from an asset to a liability if they did not set boundaries. One social worker stated,

...there are other people [referring to co-workers] that don’t have it [referring to language skills] that ask you to make this phone call, can you go with me on this home visit, can you write this letter for me real quick? We really have to set boundaries.

In this study, the term “liability” refers to a personal disadvantage or risk in the workplace due to language skills. Participants’ perceptions of their language skills as a liability emerged when others made assumptions or had unrealistic expectations of their language skills. As a result, they felt their language skills hindered their work performance and led to dissatisfaction both professionally and personally. Furthermore, they felt pressured and dissatisfied both professionally and personally because they knew if they did not use their language skills, it could result in unfavorable dispositions and/or outcomes of cases. The study found three factors that influenced participants’ perceptions of their language skills as a liability: (1) terminology and miscommunication, (2) limited bilingual services, and (3) pressure and dissatisfaction.

Factor #1: Terminology and Miscommunication

In this study, participants discussed concerns that employers and colleagues assumed they could interpret for any LEP individual seeking services at the organization. This assumption is problematic because appropriate interpretations entail knowledge of the professional concepts and terms used in the judicial system. Interpreting is a professional job that requires special training. A probation officer asserted, *“We weren’t trained to be a legal interpreter.”* Participants wanted to help but were worried about their preparedness, in the absence of proper training, to interpret or translate professionally and the problems that can arise from Spanish dialect differences. An investigator shared a childhood story about miscommunication that plays a role in his comfort when interpreting others. He recounted,

There are certain words in Puerto Rico and how I was brought up; I never heard a cuss word in my life because my father was a minister. There are certain words that when I started learning Spanish, I learned from Venezuela. I think I'm the best thing since sliced bread. I come home, and I tell my dad some of the new Spanish words I learned. He almost smacked me silly, 'How dare you cuss and swear?' I said I'm not swearing. I even took out my books, dictionaries; look, that's what it says there. I'm trying to impress him because my father, whoever heard my father speak, is very eloquent in the way he speaks Spanish. It's the Puerto-Rican stuff. Then I had to learn; there are certain words and phrases and even slang. It's to the point that we are proficient enough to know, but we are not official interpreters. In the end, it can come back to bite you because the attorney either gives it to you or the client can give it to you.

The different Spanish dialects and lack of formal education in professional terminology led participants to question if their language skills were assets or liabilities. They felt concerned about the possibility of miscommunicating information in a high-stakes environment. Errors in terminology or miscommunication, especially in an adversarial system, could affect clients' legal dispositions, be a conflict of interest, or put their jobs at risk. A probation officer reported,

I don't think they (referring to monolingual individuals) realize how important it is to have someone who can interpret correctly...Sometimes it's a conflict of interest, so we cannot... and that's a big problem because there is no true communication or a true understanding of the importance of having someone who is truly bilingual.

Another probation officer stated, "...we are efficient. We can have a conversation in Spanish, but we weren't trained with the lingo, and sometimes that's a liability. They can come back and fire you because we translated something wrong." The Care Coordinator reported monolingual colleagues also seek her language skills for languages she does not speak. She said, "They [referring to monolingual colleagues] hear somebody with a different accent or language, and they think it's Spanish, so they call me, I go there, and they [referring to LEP clients] are talking to me in Polish or Italian." Participants asserted their monolingual counterparts lacked language competence and did not see potential conflicts of interest and implications that result from repurposing bilingual professionals to serve as interpreters or translators. Participants also identified an additional factor that compounded this problem, limited bilingual services.

Factor #2: Limited Bilingual Services

In this study, limited bilingual services refer to agencies/organizations across systems that offer little to no services in languages other than English, restricting access to LEP populations. Limited bilingual services include but are not limited to bilingual forms, literature, bilingual providers, and bilingual specialized services. According to participants, limited bilingual services led to disparities and adverse outcomes, restricted access across service systems for LEP clients, and caused LEP cases to linger in the court system. As such, participants were forced use their language skills outside of their role to become

protectors and gatekeepers and go above and beyond to ensure LEP clients had an equal and fair due process.

Protectors. All participants understood the dangers of limited bilingual services for LEP clients. Their awareness of the disparities and adverse outcomes due to limited bilingual services in the court system led them to become protectors of LEP clients. In their role as protectors, they were able to counteract adverse outcomes and disparities experienced by LEP clients. A social worker said the lack of bilingual services was,

...a very serious limitation because some of our clients are juveniles who have very serious needs, and when you refer them to a program where you know there isn't a Spanish-speaking provider, they are not getting the services they need. But yet we are expecting them to improve and get to where they need to get; it's not really fair.

Participants reported that, at times, LEP clients were treated differently due to limited bilingual services. Therefore, if they did not intervene, the probability of a negative outcome was high. A probation officer shared a story of how she used her language skills to help a client whose family came from the Dominican Republic. The client, a juvenile, was accused of stealing the bike gifted to him by his father. She said,

It was just discrimination after discrimination with this kid. He [the father] had all the paperwork, the kid wasn't even there [corner store], but he went to get a soda. When he got the soda, the cop arrested him on the scene. He [the cop] did not catch him driving the thing, but he got arrested and was sent here [juvenile court]. He [the father] had his own business, so he had to pay for his own attorney. So, he [the father] said, I'll be my own attorney. So, I had to educate him and intervene and got everything dropped. He was intelligent enough in Spanish but couldn't navigate the system.

In their role as protectors, not only did participants use their language skills to help monolingual co-workers with LEP cases, but they protected clients from discrimination. In doing so, they could prevent LEP cases from being overlooked or lingering in the system. They reported that if they did not use their language skills outside of their role, the work would not get done, and the client suffered the consequences. A probation officer stated,

In the long run, it won't benefit the client either if you don't do it [use language skills outside of their role]. You keep waiting, right here [referring to the court system]; everything is time. You have someone's freedom in jeopardy. Then, it's this person [referring to LEP clients] who is going to sit in detention; they are going to sit in jail because this did not get done, and I'm responsible for him getting out.

Like other study participants, one investigator reported that he has often thought to himself, "Wow, this is beyond my capability or beyond my job descriptions. But if you don't do it [use language skills outside of role], certain things are not going to get done." Participants expressed the importance of using their language skills, not just in the court system but across systems, to help LEP clients access services and prevent adverse outcomes.

Gatekeepers. Participants in this study were compelled to perform as gatekeepers of services. In the context of limited bilingual services, gatekeepers refer to participants using their language skills to facilitate access to services across systems due to limited bilingual services. The study found that if participants did not use their language skills outside of the court system, LEP clients would not have their needs met, impacting their court cases. A probation officer explained,

I think a lot of our families that are only Spanish-speaking have a more difficult life; they have more struggles that directly impact our clients. Whether they will be successful or not, if a parent comes in who doesn't speak English and needs help with Section 8, a lot of times we do it. Even though it's beyond our scope of really what we have to do because we think ahead, okay, if this family loses their apartment, then there goes the stability it's going to affect my client, and the case may fall apart.

Another probation officer explained her gatekeeping role outside of the court system to help LEP clients in the school setting. She reported,

I think we have all been at school meetings, or PPT's [Planning and Placement Team Meeting] where then, again, there is a lack of interpreters... so whoever is at the table who can somewhat speak the language would be expected to translate for the parents or for the child and... so it becomes difficult in almost every area that we are involved in because there is limited human availability for people to assist.

The data showed that gatekeeping was a necessary role for participants in helping monolingual co-workers complete their jobs and ensure LEP clients had access to an equal and fair due process.

Above and Beyond. Participants found themselves going above and beyond to assist co-workers with their cases. In this study, going above and beyond refers to participants overextending their language skills to perform extra work due to limited bilingual services. All participants agreed the limited bilingual services burdened them with extra work that forced them to use their language skills outside of their role, unlike their monolingual counterparts. A probation officer stated, “*the biggest difference is that this [referring to his language skills] is our own responsibility, unlike others [referring to monolingual colleagues], their only responsibility is to provide services.*” Another probation officer asserted,

I think we also sometimes go above and beyond trying to help our non-Spanish-speaking co-workers and at times doing their [referring to their monolingual counterpart] jobs, whether it's interpreting for them in an office visit, interpreting their voice mail, or calling people on their behalf. I've actually taken cases that are not in my geographical area to cover because it's a Spanish-speaking family; not only are we going above and beyond in our caseload, but we are taking some of the caseloads of others as well.

Furthermore, participants reported going above and beyond hindered their ability to complete their work. As stated by a probation officer, “*It comes to a point where I have to*

keep up with my paperwork. I have to be twice as busy as my peers. You have to do your work, and you have to do somebody else's job." Limited bilingual services led participants to go above and beyond. They become gatekeepers and protectors for their LEP clients and their monolingual co-workers' LEP clients.

Factor #3: Pressure and Dissatisfaction

Co-workers often pressured participants to use their language skills; for many, it was assumed and expected. In this study, pressure is defined as being forced or assigned to use language skills outside one's job description without consent. For example, a social worker stated, *"I feel that when you have the skill, that very often you are forced to use that skill."* Similarly, a clerical worker said, *"I have this big thing on my shoulders, where I have to make the branch look good."* A probation officer stated,

I'm not an interpreter. I have a job, whether I am an administrator, a clerk, a social worker. I have a job. I have a caseload that is disheartening, and it varies within an agency. You are in a field capacity, I think sometimes, I am going to be very frank, I think in this position you feel that you're it, and you have the weight of the world on you because you have concern, passion, and you need to bring about changes because you think about that client all the time. People around you don't feel the same way about the client, and those kinds of issues.

Participants also reported experiencing attitudes from their monolingual professionals who expected and demanded that they use their language skills upon request to benefit others' work at their expense. These attitudes led participants to feel dissatisfied and unhappy. The attorney said, *"It's part of just an attitude, I think there is this awareness in the agency that you need to be doing this, and they feel it is something that they are looking for; it's amazing that our agency seems to think we don't have any problems with this."* A dissatisfied investigator stated,

I'm only one person. I can't help them all. I think that is the part that is not gratifying and is really disheartening because at times, you have to draw the line. Because I can't be all things to all clients. I think too it's the attitude, it's negative. The attitude that people in the office, co-workers and colleagues take. You're there as an interpreter, no I'm not.

Participants reported perceiving their language skills as a liability when they observed and experienced those attitudes. They were not comfortable when superiors and co-workers expected or relied on them to attend to LEP clients who were not in their caseloads. One probation officer reported dissatisfaction due to *"...being relied upon too much by your non-Spanish speaking co-workers. Kind of taken advantage of at times."* As a result, participants encountered excessive workload conditions, which made them feel overextended. They considered that their language skills were the reason they were overextended, preventing them from completing their work. Another probation officer asserted,

We as professionals provide a service, and I think as professionals, the tendency is that for our co-workers and colleagues and agencies that we work for, we overextend ourselves. We are not there to do everyone's job. It is great that we are

there to serve the client and help them. But you have your own job to do. You are pulled in a thousand different directions because you feel you need to help that client, but it cripples you; you become a jack of all trades and a master of none!

Participants described another conflict resulting from monolingual co-workers' unrealistic expectations. They explained a struggle between their desire to help LEP clients and their discomfort and disagreement with those unrealistic expectations. This struggle made them feel dissatisfied and uncertain about how beneficial it was to have bilingual language skills. An investigator said, *"As a professional, for me, it is disheartening because you feel like you want to help them all, but it is impossible."* A probation officer saw his language skills as *"kind of a curse."* When bilingual professionals were repurposed as interpreters, they perceived their language skills as a liability, as stated by another probation officer, *"...you're asked, once again as a liability, to take two hours and do a home visit because my co-worker does not speak Spanish."*

Ultimately, this study found that participants' perceptions of their bilingual skills highly depended on how others used their language skills in the workplace. Bilingual professionals encounter challenges rooted in discrimination disguised as assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and differential treatment that convert their language skills from assets to a liability. When bilingual professionals fully controlled their language skills, they viewed their language skills as an asset. However, when bilingual professionals were exploited and repurposed as interpreters, in essence, taken advantage of for having that extra qualification, they viewed their language skills as a liability. Furthermore, the extra help they provided their co-workers further took them away from their cases and prevented them from doing their work, leading participants to see their language skills as a liability.

Limitations

This study adds to the literature and the work of prominent scholars such as Engstrom and Min (2004), who assert more research needs to occur in this area to better understand the challenges faced by bilingual professionals. There are a couple of limitations. First, all but two of the participants worked in the judicial system. Furthermore, the participants in this study spoke English and Spanish. Therefore, one must be cautious not to make generalizations regarding bilingual professionals across work settings or languages. Additionally, collecting data via focus groups presents limitations in that participants' answers may be influenced by other participants or may have been hindered their sharing of information due to their comfort level with others in the focus group (Bryman, 2012). Lastly, the researcher is a Latina bilingual professional with 20 years of experience as a social worker in the judicial system. The researcher's position could have influenced participants' involvement and level of candidness.

Discussion

Bilingual professionals' perceptions of their language skills, as either an asset or a liability, depended on co-workers' attitudes and the expectations about their use of those skills. Participants acknowledged that being bilingual portrayed numerous benefits for the

LEP clients, their co-workers, and the agency. For the LEP clients, the benefits included access to services and positive case outcomes. Co-workers had the benefit of more effectively connecting with their LEP clients despite the language barrier, and the agency was able to provide needed services in the absence of proper language resources. For the bilingual professionals themselves, the benefit entailed a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

A profile among bilingual professionals emerged that merits further attention. The bilingual professionals carry out multiple duties where they not only communicate and serve LEP clients but engage in roles such as protector and gatekeeper. The similarities between participants and their LEP clients contributed to developing connections and trust that allowed for assessments to be completed as LEP clients feel more comfortable sharing information. Bilingual professionals not only facilitate assessments and service provisions but “more importantly,” advocate, mediate, and connect LEP clients with resources within and outside of the court system. Bilingual professionals’ ability to build strong connections was tied to the shared cultural identity with their LEP clients.

A significant finding is the notion of the “cultural identity bond” that develops between LEP clients and bilingual professionals. Naturally, individuals gravitate to those who are similar. Social identification with a particular group is a necessary cognitive function embedded in our emotions (Brown, 2000). This bond is a significant component in the development of a professional helping relationship. Additionally, a secondary gain or reward consisted of supporting and validating LEP’s and bilingual professionals’ cultural identities. This was meaningful to the participants and should be considered in professional development, client assessments, treatment, and the overall support provided to bilingual professionals.

Bilingual professionals experience personal and professional satisfaction when contributing their language skills to an LEP client’s well-being within their caseload. Through participant contributions, one could appreciate the presence of Latino cultural values of “personalismo” (personal relationships), “familismo” (family-oriented), and “respeto” (respect). These values played a significant role in participants’ decisions about how and when to use their bilingual skills and their perceptions of their language skills. The appreciation and satisfaction experienced by participants seemed to give them a sense of belonging that they did not find with monolingual employees and employers, who often imposed attitudes, assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and differential treatment.

Evidently, agencies serving LEP individuals and families need to build a workforce of bilingual professionals who can communicate in the dominant language and develop a cultural bond. This study suggested that the cultural identity bond between LEP clients and bilingual professionals is an essential contributor to a positive helping relationship. Such observation implies that having professionals who have a deep understanding and share similar cultural identities with their service recipients can benefit the helping process and should be promoted and provisioned by agencies and administrators.

There must be an awareness of the challenges bilingual professionals encounter in the workplace. Failing to recognize these challenges may have adverse outcomes for both bilingual professionals and LEP clients. In this study, participants reported feeling

pressured, dissatisfied, frustrated, and overextended in their work due to their co-worker's unrealistic expectations, assumptions, and dependence on them beyond the scope of their job descriptions. Logan (2018) asserts unrealistic expectations, assumptions, and differential treatment due to language skills are rooted in microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle forms of conscious and unconscious discrimination that communicate hostility and attitudes towards underrepresented groups, such as bilingual professionals (Sue, 2010).

Employees' perceptions, assumptions, and expectations of bilingual professionals must be addressed informally and formally within the agency setting. When others use their power to implicitly or explicitly control bilingual professionals' language use, there are consequences to the bilingual professionals that result in discrimination. A power and control "dance" between bilingual professionals and other workers, including superiors, is dangerous and will eventually affect working relationships and service quality. Essentially, participants' language skills become a weapon used against their will to benefit others' work. If bilingual professionals did not use their language skills, the LEP clients would not be treated fairly. Clients would be dismissed or ignored, and their needs may go unmet. In a way, the fair and just treatment of LEP clients is used to manipulate bilingual professionals to use their language skills. In this study, participants felt responsible for helping the LEP clients they identified with and cared about due to disparity in treatment. They felt obligated to go above and beyond to address LEP clients' needs.

With the pressure to use bilingual professionals as interpreters, there is potential to harm clients and service provisions if professionals have to perform without the appropriate training and knowledge of terms and concepts. Participants in this study did not feel comfortable and feared the consequences. Forcing bilingual professionals to be responsible for different terminology and possible miscommunications without organizational support was deemed inappropriate. Likewise, going above and beyond their regular duties to bridge language gaps across social services felt unfair. Ironically, in some instances, bilingual professionals could not complete their tasks without going above and beyond. For example, one participant needed to use her language skills to stabilize housing for her client to be released from detention.

The extra work performed by bilingual professionals is often not accounted for and led to disparities between their workload and that of their monolingual counterparts. In this study, bilingual professionals tried to balance their feelings, desire to help, obligations, and responsibilities. In participants' opinions, monolingual co-workers and supervisors failed to recognize the problems they encountered as bilingual professionals. Participants felt victim to attitudes, assumptions, expectations, and differential treatment because of their language skills. A participant alludes to organizational leaders being clueless or turning a blind eye to the challenges bilingual professionals face. The message embedded in participants' contributions highlight oppressive organizational structures and dynamics across systems that led bilingual professionals to perceive their language skills as a liability.

In essence, bilingual professionals become the scapegoat across systems that are not culturally aware and ignore or refuse to accept responsibility for delivering quality,

culturally and language-competent services to LEP populations. Participants reported being the sole person responsible for implementing bilingual services. Expecting bilingual professionals to be accountable for meeting the diverse needs of LEP populations without proper support is ineffective; diversity is everyone's responsibility, bilingual and monolingual professionals alike (Doering-White, 2020; Milem et al., 2005). Ignoring and passing the responsibility to bilingual professionals without adequate support to bridge the gap of services for LEP populations continues the cycle of disparities across social service systems. Glover and Richardson (1997) assert that equal access to justice in the court system, fairness, and protecting public trust and confidence is all about diversity.

Conclusion

Monolingual professionals exert bias, power, and control over the use of bilingual professionals' language skills, with no regard for their feelings or work responsibilities. Despite the value placed on having language skills by the judicial system and other organizations, bilingual professionals are often taken for granted. They experience and witness discrimination towards LEP clients from the point of arrest to the deposition of the court case. As a result, participants experienced both negative and positive feelings regarding their language skills depending on utilization and the changing contexts of day-to-day work.

Participants reported the lack of cultural and language competence is at the root of the misuse of bilingual professionals. The findings have numerous implications for organizational practice and future studies, especially in settings where disparities between demands to work with LEP clients and the availability of bilingual professionals are prevalent. For example, administrators need to understand and recognize the ways bilingual professionals are misused, and assess and address the cultural climate, barriers, and organizational structures that prevent access and fair practices for LEP clients and their providers. Mederos and Woldegiorgis (2003) assert that administrators must have a sustainable strategic plan and support all professionals serving LEP populations to impact employees' performance positively. Administrators can help employees by implementing and enforcing anti-racist policies that protect language skills, offering financial compensation for extra duties, and hiring more bilingual professionals and professional interpreters. Finally, to reduce discrimination for LEP clients and bilingual professionals across systems, social work administrators and educators must develop practices and train specifically about cultural awareness, diversity, and language competence.

Future studies should explore monolingual professionals' and supervisors' perceptions of bilingual professional language skills and the impact on the workload of bilingual professionals. Another area for further study is how LEP clients perceive and are impacted by services provided by bilingual professionals versus monolingual professionals (with or without interpreters). Additionally, identifying the types of microaggressions encountered by bilingual professionals is essential to bringing awareness to an often-overlooked issue. Examining how employers can support bilingual professionals and the role of education on bilingual professionals' experiences with microaggressions should also be considered.

Exploring ways to address the problem is critical to supporting bilingual professionals and providing quality services to LEP clients.

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