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SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE UTILIZATION OF  
SPANISH-SPEAKING INTERPRETERS IN CHILD  
WELFARE SERVICES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Veronica Huizar Beltran

June 2004

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by  
Veronica Huizar Beltran

June 2004

Approved by:

  
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5/25/04  
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## ABSTRACT

This study examined social work perceptions of the use of interpreters in child welfare services. Specifically, this study focused on monolingual (English) speaking social workers and their perceptions of the use of interpreters in child welfare services.

This study has found a need for the following; bilingual social workers, the implementation of Spanish-speaking social worker units and the utilization of well-trained interpreters that have an understanding about social work.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and thank the faculty of California State University at San Bernardino for their help and support in the completion of my study. I also wish to acknowledge Cathy Cimbalo, Director of the Department of Children's Services of San Bernardino County and my supervisor Sally Richter, L.C.S.W. for her understanding, support and help during this difficult process.

## DEDICATION

To my loving husband Javier for his encouragement and support during this journey, without your help it would have been much more difficult. To my parents Luis and Gloria and my sisters, Mary, Patricia and Sandra, thank you for not forgetting about your absentee little sister for the past two years.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

With a growing number of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States, the utilization of social services by Hispanic/Latino individuals has been estimated to continue growing. Hispanics/Latinos are becoming the largest minority group in the United States according to the United States Department of the Census (2001). In 2001, there were a reported 32.8 million Hispanics/Latinos in the United States (U.S. Census, 2001). Furthermore, it is projected that the Hispanic/Latino population will triple in the next 20 years and "by the year 2050, the Hispanic/Latino population shall be the largest minority ethnic group surpassing all other ethnic/minority groups in the United States" (U.S. Census, 2001). As a result of this continuous population growth, social workers have found themselves providing social services to non-English speaking individuals when they themselves do not speak the language.

#### Problem Statement

With a growing number of Hispanics/Latinos, an increasing number of social service practitioners', child welfare social workers' and members of other helping

profession have encountered the dilemma of providing social services to non-English speaking individuals through the use of an interpreter.

Utilization of an interpreter helps facilitate communication between social service practitioners who are English speaking only when providing social services to Spanish speaking individuals. However, there have been occasions when interpretations resulted in erroneous information provided to the individual seeking social services as well as to the social service practitioner (Malgady & Zayas, 2001). In using an interpreter, there is always the possibility of misunderstandings and uncertainty due to cultural norms. In addition, there is also a lack of cultural awareness among social service practitioners due to the inability to speak Spanish as well as variations in the Spanish language.

Although the Spanish language sounds similar when spoken by individuals from different countries of origin, one word can have a different meaning depending on the individual's culture. The dialect within a single country can differ depending on the region or state in which that individual grew up. It can also be said, however that the Spanish language is not any different than the variations of English that are spoken in the United States. For

example, the English spoken in California differs from the English that is spoken in Georgia, Oklahoma or New York. The Spanish-language is not the predominant language in the United States and therefore many social service practitioners do not speak Spanish. Children born to immigrant parents living in the United States often times speak both languages, Spanish and English, and therefore will interpret for their parents.

Utilization of children and other family members as interpreters can result in misunderstandings. According to the Department of Justice (2001), Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act ensures that individuals of limited English proficiency (LEP) status are guaranteed language access and are protected from discrimination in federally funded services (p. 1). Often times, individuals seeking social services do not speak English, however, their child does and therefore the child is often utilized to interpret when social service practitioners do not have a professional interpreter available to assist. This can also occur when parents do not speak English and have their children interpret.

Suleiman (2003) discusses important aspects of communication in that

effective communication is the key to ensuring equal access to benefits and services for Limited English Proficiency children and families. The client should be able to (a) understand information about the services and process, (b) understand the resources and services available to address the particular situation and (c) communicate with the service provider. (p. 187)

This study identified social workers' perceptions of the utilization of interpreters in child welfare, and thereby offered a greater understanding of the challenges and processes social service practitioners endure.

Questions have been raised with regards to the significance of language while providing social services to Hispanic/Latino, non-English speaking individuals seeking social services. Such questions have prompted this study involving the perceptions of social workers. This study was designed to explore the beliefs, attitudes and norms of social service practitioners in the utilization of interpreters in child welfare. Furthermore, this study looked at possible solutions for social workers that do not speak Spanish as well as drawbacks to the possible solutions.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine social workers' perceptions of the utilization of

Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. Although there are extensive amounts of literature regarding the importance of cultural competency, (Malgady & Zayas, 2001; Castex, 1994; Santiago-Rivera, 1995; Antshel, 2002) the importance of studying the use of interpreters will add to understanding of the bilingual dialogue issue. Furthermore, culture is emphasized as an important variable in treating clients in a clinical setting (Antshel, 2002). Similarly, according to Castex (1994), cultural issues are key social characteristics that include language, race, national origin and self-ascription (p. 288). Expanding on the definitions of Latino culture, it is also said to include familismo, respeto, personalismo, espiritismo, simpatia, and fatalismo (Antshel, 2002).

Case management, mental health, community outreach and advocacy are crucial tasks for social workers that are not bilingual and equally important for Spanish-speaking social workers. Social workers must apply their skills culturally and linguistically when working with Spanish-speaking clients. These responsibilities are essential for social service practitioners and according to Suleiman (2003), "limited Spanish-language services

have a tremendous effect on the success of family reunification efforts" (p. 189).

Social service practitioners as well as other individuals in the helping profession, for example, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and doctors have experienced the need for bilingual social service providers. As a result of the lack of Spanish speaking social workers, individuals that have the ability to interpret such as clerical staff, are utilized as interpreters as well.

Qualitative data for this study were obtained from interviews. This study was intended to identify social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. This study is important to social work because it identifies line-level perceptions of social workers in the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

The study examined social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. It is necessary to identify these perceptions because it will help the social work

professionals improve social service to Hispanic/Latino individuals in our community.

This study was also significant to social work because it offered an inside look at the attitudes, norms, and beliefs of social workers. Malgady and Zayas (1997) examines linguistic factors in relation to clinical diagnosing. Although this study is not about clinical diagnosing, his findings are applicable to this study. Malgady and Zayas (1997) suggests that "Hispanic/Latino clients may be more self-revealing in a Spanish interview administered by a Hispanic/Latino social worker and that such interviews will reveal more pathology" (p. 8). This study further explored the perceptions of social workers with regard to the degree of openness and willingness of the client when working with non-Spanish speaking social workers. The generalist model of social work further describes the steps social workers take when providing social services to all their clients and for the purposes of this study, when working with non-English speaking clients.

CHAPTER TWO  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The utilization of bilingual staff as interpreters has become an essential component for social service practitioners as well as other professionals in child welfare services. There are services that social service practitioners actively provide to individuals in our communities that are delivered in both monolingual (Spanish) and bilingual (Spanish and English) communication. This chapter discusses related literature on the utilization of interpreters in social services.

Hispanics/Latinos: The Growing Minority

The Hispanic/Latino population is the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Malgady & Zayas, 2001; Bureau of the U. S. Census, 2004). There has been an increase in the Hispanic/Latino population since 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). It is estimated that by the year 2050, the Hispanic/Latino population will be the largest minority group in the United States from 35 million to 102 million (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). The United States Bureau of the Census in 1990 accounted for a 12% increase since 1980



according to their 2004 U.S. interim projections. The 2000 census data found the Hispanics/Latino population has increased by 37% in California alone. The United States Census Bureau (2004) defines Hispanic/Latino origin as "Hispanic: a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (p. 3).

In addition to U.S. Census data, Therrien & Ramirez, (2000) further contributed to the 1999-2001 projections of the Hispanic/Latino population growth indicating the increase throughout the United States particularly in the southwestern states, California, Arizona and New Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

According to Malgady and Zayas, (2001),

it is estimated that in the next century nearly half of the clientele seeking mental health services will be members of ethnic minority groups. Hispanics are the most rapidly growing population in the United States... (p. 39)

Although Malgady and Zayas (2001) focus their work on mental health treatment and the diagnosing of Hispanic/Latino individuals, it is also believed that there will also be an increase of Hispanic/Latino individuals in the child welfare system (Suleiman, 2003).

Suleiman (2003) offers statistical data on the Hispanic/Latino population regarding education and

children in foster care (p. 186). There are estimates presented by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) of the number of children in foster care system between 568,000 in 1999 of which 15% were Hispanic/Latino (Sulieman, 2003). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System indicated that the number of children in foster care nearly doubled from 8% in 1990 to 15% in 1999 (Suleiman & Gonzalez, 2002).

The 2000 U.S. Census indicates that the number of Hispanic/Latino children dropping out of high school is also increasing (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). The 2000 Census also specifies "57% of Hispanics age 25 and older had at least a high school education, compared with 88.4% of non-Latino whites" (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). Gutierrez, Yeakley, and Ortega (2000) present statistical data collected from the 1997 Bureau of the U.S. Census stating that in addition to low levels of education, there is "a high rate of unemployment, and overrepresentation in agencies of social control such as the criminal justice system (p. 541).

#### Spanish-speaking Needs/Issues and the Significance of Language

Language plays an important and significant role in social work (Gonzales & Castillo-Canez, 1997; Gonzalez &

Castillo-Canes, 1997; Malgady & Zayas, 2001; & Suleiman, 2003). Through the use of Spanish language, social service practitioners that are bilingual have effectively contributed to the success of multitudes of Spanish-speaking Hispanic/Latino child welfare service recipients. The Spanish language has become the second most common language in the United States (Mezzich et al., 2000).

As essential as language is when rendering treatment and services, assessing the needs of clients' using interpreters is also necessary (Baker, 1981; Castex, 1994; Gutierrez, Yeakley, & Ortega, 2000; Marcos, 1976; Rollins, 2002). A critical component in the utilization of interpreters is their translation accuracy in rendering effective communication (Suleiman, 2003; Malgady, Roger, & Constantino, 1987).

There is an immense underutilization of social services due to language barriers across the Hispanic/Latino community (Suleiman, 2003; Malgady & Zayas, 2001). For example, individuals seeking social services often avoid treatment because of language barriers resulting in early termination or higher drop out rates, after initial contact with service providers (Rodriguez, 1989; Sue & Zane, 1987). Malgady and Zayas

(2001) discuss the importance of language during diagnosis of bilingual Hispanic/Latino clients and the possibilities of misdiagnosing due to the "language used to express distress during a psychiatric interview" (p. 42).

Malgady and Zayas (2001) also include in their study the mental health needs of the Hispanic/Latino client and the utilization of Spanish speaking translators (p. 42). With the utilization of Spanish translators, Malgady and Zayas (2001) emphasize the study of Marcos and his associates (1973) which found that "in actual clinical settings, almost any available Spanish-speaking person tends to be pressed into service as an interpreter; family members, friends, or hospital staff" (p. 43).

Another important issue is accuracy among interpreters. Without assessing the interpreters' capabilities linguistically in Spanish, or evaluating the mental health treatment capacity, erroneous interpretations were identified in Marcos' study (Malgady & Zayas, 2001). These included,

grossly inaccurate translations from English to Spanish, intrusions of the interpreter's feelings and interpretations of the client's Spanish language disclosure, and interference with the development of rapport between the client and the counselor. (p. 43)

It is crucial, though difficult, that individuals utilized as interpreters receive appropriate training in both Spanish and mental health concepts to ensure accurate translation for Spanish-speaking clients as well as clients receiving mental health services. Furthermore, Malgady and Zayas (2001) emphasize the likelihood of linguistics becoming evermore vital in the future due to the deficiency of bilingual social workers' and other professional staff in health care (p. 43). Marcos (1979) is in agreement with Malgady and Zayas (2001): "people who are not mental health professionals should not be pressed into service as translators" (p. 45). These individuals do not have the training that social workers and other individuals in the helping profession received. Social workers are highly trained individuals that are educated to work within the clinical field as well as in medical settings. Individuals that are not trained are unaware of key words, phrases and what social workers' look for in needs assessments.

Although Malgady and Zayas' (2001) study focuses on mental health service delivery, a similar study of social workers' and the child welfare system was conducted, evaluating service delivery and the need for bilingual social workers (Suleiman, 2003). Suleiman's, (2003) study

focuses on the social services and child welfare system and Latino families in need of bilingual services.

(p. 185). Santiago-Rivera (1995) found that in addition to focusing on social services, "well-trained" interpreters can help create a connection among the English-speaking therapist or counselor and the Spanish-speaking client.

Suleiman (2003) discusses the importance of appropriate service delivery beginning with effective communication (p. 185). Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits discrimination on the basis of national origin and affects individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) (Department of Justice, 2001). "Language for LEP individuals can be a barrier to access important benefits or services..." (p. 2). Title VI requires federally funded agencies to provide services by reducing language barriers to LEP individuals (2002). According to Suleiman (2003), "effective communication is the key to ensuring equal access to benefits and services for LEP children and families" (p. 187). As social workers provide services, it is ethically imperative that the individual receiving the service understands what is being said. Similarly, it is imperative when a counselor is assessing or providing other services to a client, that they are able to communicate with the client.

In child welfare, according to Suleiman (2003), "the investigation is a pivotal part of the process..." (p. 188). Social workers are in a position of assessing and making placement decisions which can be overwhelming to family members and children when what is being said is not understood. "In areas of substantial Latino populations, agencies should have enough bilingual investigators to conduct these initial assessments" (p. 188). It is also essential that social workers have the ability to consult with family members and extended family during assessment in order to have a better understanding of the clients needs. Reid (1984) examined social worker discretion when working with undocumented Spanish-speaking families. He describes the cultural differences among investigative social workers and undocumented families "it is most difficult for social workers and clients to communicate when there are language barriers" (p. 110).

Suleiman (2003) points out that it is disturbing when children are utilized as interpreters for their parents during sessions. Children do not have the skills or capacity to translate. They lack the child welfare knowledge and training and therefore can translate erroneously. These children are put in positions that can

further cause distress. They become the parents "little helper" interpreting for their parents during child welfare investigations as well as medical appointments.

A recently introduced bill, Assembly Bill 292 (AB292) by Assemblyman Leland Yee prohibits children under the age of 15 from being utilized as interpreters in social service and medical settings. Rollins (2003) discusses the situation that children are placed in when they are utilized as interpreters. According to Romney (2003), "children serve as doctors' little helpers. They even facilitate police investigations and help social workers determine whether dad hit mom and why" (p. B1).

Social workers that have limited Spanish skills should not have high Spanish speaking client caseloads (Castex, 1994). When a social worker has language limitations, the client loses out on important information which can cause termination of parental rights (Suleimen, 2003).

#### Spanish-speaking Counselors Needs/Issues and the Significance of Interpreters

Counselors have encountered a much greater need for adequate interpreters in treatment in recent years. Baker (1981) elaborates further on the distinction among "interpreters" and "translators" (p. 392). He identifies



interpretation as working with two or more people translating back and forth, applying interpersonal skills in an effective manner. He also recognizes the significance of relationships among social workers and interpreters. Translators on the other hand, must have exceptional written skills in both languages for accurate translation (Baker, 1981; DOJ, 2001).

Social workers need excellent interpreters that speak Spanish and are culturally competent. During the interpretation process, it is crucial that social workers and interpreters work collectively to ensure proper translation. According to Baker (1981), it is vital that the interpreter not take on the role of the social worker. Rather they should work together as if they were one to guarantee that appropriate rapport is built with the client.

Research has indicated that Hispanics/Latinos underutilize social services (Gutierrez, Yeakley, & Ortega, 2000). Nonetheless, research also indicates that when social services, mental health services and health care, are delivered to Hispanic/Latino individuals in their dominant language, Spanish, there is an increase in service utilization (Gonzalez & Castillo-Canes, 1997).

Hispanic/Latinos are faced with barriers that also contribute to the lack of service utilization. Hispanic/Latino parents are unable to communicate and have a clear understanding of what is being said in conjunction with a lack of understanding of the legal system in the United States. There is a need for bilingual staff, the necessity of bilingual services and appropriate use of trained interpreters. Furthermore Gonzalez and Castillo-Canes (1997) elaborates that by "matching" Spanish-speaking Hispanic/Latino clients to therapists of similar ethnicity and language, then Hispanic/Latino clients would have an improved therapeutic outcome.

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Conceptualized around a multicultural knowledge base and theory, the use of the Spanish language in treatment ensures appropriate social service delivery. The basis for this study was to emphasize the significance of language in social services. Bilingual social workers are needed to strengthen the accuracy of service delivery to Spanish-speaking individuals. In addition to providing appropriate and accurate language translations, the interpreter must possess knowledge of cultural competency and norms. Baker's (1981) research presents occasions when

social workers have offended or insulted the client due to cultural incompetence. As a result of the lack of thoroughness of the interpreter's translation, the social worker many times is unaware that the client has been offended (Baker, 1981).

Gonzalez and Castillo-Canes (1997) communicates the need for multicultural competence among mental health counselors. Multicultural competence is also important to the delivery of services from child welfare social workers. Social service practitioners must also seek training on cultural issues to ensure appropriate service delivery. Although the use of Spanish language and interpreter utilization is crucial for social services, it is imperative that social workers and interpreters also demonstrate cultural competency skills towards child welfare service recipients.

#### Summary

Literature important to this project was presented in this chapter. Hispanic/Latino individuals seeking social services in a language that is understood is essential for the delivery of child welfare services. Social workers providing services to individuals that do not speak the same language the social worker speaks should have access

to adequate and reliable use of a well trained interpreter, not a family member or clerical staff that has not received appropriate training. The Hispanic/Latino population will continue to grow and the need for well-trained interpreters is vital in a community of helping professionals.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This research project was a qualitative study of social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. This study focused on child welfare service delivery to Spanish-speaking individuals in San Bernardino County. The study was carried out using face-to-face interviews with child welfare social workers'.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to assess social workers' need for well-trained interpreters and the need for bilingual social workers' in child welfare. A requirement of this study was that all social service practitioners who participate in this study be employed in San Bernardino County. The interpreter's effectiveness was assessed using social workers' self-report of their perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. This research project was designed to explore social workers' perceptions regarding effective service delivery when social workers utilize Spanish-speaking interpreters.

Through an exploratory and qualitative process, this research offers an in-depth look at social workers' perceptions.

A limitation of this qualitative study is that it is based on social workers' self-report. Social workers may feel that there are risks to disclosing the strengths and challenges of utilizing interpreters. Social workers' may experience uncertainty as to the accuracy of service and treatment delivery to non-English speaking clients when utilizing an interpreter.

#### Sampling

The participants in this study were social workers employed in San Bernardino county. Potential social work participants were obtained on a voluntary basis through the Department of Child Welfare Services. Requirements for participation in this study were that participants be child welfare department employees and carry a caseload with Spanish-speaking clients.

For the purposes of this study, individual clients seen by social workers must be non-English speaking and be of limited English proficiency as LEP is outlined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VI. This client limitation

allows for the utilization of interpreters by social workers when providing social services.

The sample for this study consisted of fifteen social service practitioners from the Department of Children's Services from San Bernardino County. There were no limitations regarding age or length of employment with San Bernardino County. There was however, a requirement that all participating social workers either carry cases, work in adoptions or work as intake social workers. Participants were required to be employed with the Department of Children's Services as social workers that carry cases that are family reunification cases, volunteer maintenance cases and permanency planning cases as well as adoptions social workers and immediate response social workers.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection included the gathering of data through the administration of an interview. The information gathered was limited to questions regarding social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. The questions presented to social workers were questions concerning their perceptions regarding the strengths as

well as the utilization of interpreters during the delivery of case management services and treatment. The challenges social workers encounter when interpreters are utilized were also be explored. The questions presented to social workers were concerning issues that have risen regarding the effectiveness of treatment, the accuracy of interpretations to and from the client through the use of an interpreter and the effectiveness of the utilization of family members as well as interpreters for interpretation by social workers. Social workers were asked their opinion about treatment and the use of interpreters, what they find are the strengths in utilizing an interpreter and last what they find challenging when utilizing an interpreter. Participants were asked "what are your perceptions or opinions about case management and treatment through the use of an interpreter," "what strengths do you find in utilizing an interpreter when delivering case management services" and lastly, "what do you find challenging when utilizing an interpreter" (see Appendix A).

#### Procedures

The interview was administered at the participating social workers place of employment. Permission was



obtained through administration/agency approval.

Appointments were made with the individual social workers, provided their schedules allow it.

Social workers were solicited through the distribution of fliers. A total 125 fliers were placed in social workers mail boxes informing them of the study. The flier contained information regarding what the study was about, how long the interview would take, how to contact the researcher, via e-mail or telephone call, and as gratitude they would be receiving a gift certificate to a coffee house. On responding to the flyer, the researcher screened possible participants, and determined the social worker qualifications for participation. Social workers were asked if they were line-working social workers, if they carry a caseload or have contact with clients regularly and if they are in a supervisor position. These questions determined if the social worker could participate in this study.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

In an effort to maintain the participants' confidentiality, names and any identifying information was not collected. Once all participants completed both the

interview and the data collection processes, random numbers were assigned.

Participants were provided with a consent form and a confidentiality statement prior to the commencement of the interview. Participants were also provided with an additional consent to audiotape to ensure the accuracy of responses during transcription. Once agreed on, the letter X was marked on the signature line, the interview began immediately after. On completion of the interview process, all participants were provided with a debriefing statement informing them of the study in which they have participated. Participants in addition were provided with a Starbucks Gift Certificate as appreciation for their time and participation in this study (see Appendix B).

This project was approved for the protection of human subjects by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino (see Appendix C). Approval was also obtained from the Department of Public Social Services, San Bernardino (see Appendix C).

#### Data Analysis

This study was qualitative in design involving face-to-face interviews. Qualitative analysis involved

transcription of the researcher's notes and tape recordings. Analysis was performed using a coding of the narrative data onto index cards and evaluating responses for similarity.

#### Summary

This study explored social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. Through interviews, this study furthers our understanding of the importance of bilingual communication.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This study interviewed of 15 social workers working with non-English speaking clients. They were all social workers employed by the Department of Children's Services, San Bernardino County. All participating individuals were persons that carried a caseload consisting of either family reunification, permanency planning, family maintenance, immediate response or adoption cases. Participants provided social services to non-English speaking clients.

#### Presentation of the Findings

Responses to were either audio taped or hand-written at the time of the interview. The responses to the questions asked during the interview were then categorized by themes relevant to service delivery to non-English speaking clients. A total of three questions were asked which included the delivery of services or treatment through the use of an interpreter, the effectiveness and the accuracy of the interpretation as perceived by the social worker and a concern by social workers regarding the needs of the client and if they were being met. The

themes that developed included strengths, challenges, and social worker perceptions about case management and treatment through the use of an interpreter. The following is a list of the questions and some sample responses, which were used to either establish main themes or assist in the recognition of important factors.

The first question was "what strengths do you find in utilizing an interpreter?" Of the 15 social workers interviewed, eleven agreed that utilization of an interpreter is a strength when delivering social services, while four of the eleven believed that interpreters were an imperfect solution, stating "it [having an interpreter] was better than not speaking to anyone because of a language barrier" and "definitely there are strengths, making sure there is no confusion and making sure they [the client] understands what we want." The remaining four social workers did not feel that utilizing an interpreter was a strength. Eight social workers responded by focusing on the need for a bilingual unit. For example, "it is better to have a Spanish-speaking social worker and a unit that does that because she will know what we do, she or he will really be able to ask questions that we need."

The second question asked was "what are your perceptions about case management and treatment through

the use of an interpreter?" Twelve social workers believed that providing case management services to non-English speaking clients was difficult when they themselves did not speak the language. In addition, some of the social workers communicated that they had utilized a child at one point or another during a client contact. For example, "there are times that I go out on an investigation and if only a child speaks English then I have the child tell the parent I will be back with someone that speaks Spanish, but if an interpreter is with me, then I do not waste my time and I can communicate with the parent. I usually end up having to go back with someone another day."

The final question asked was "what do you find challenging when utilizing an interpreter?" Of the fifteen social workers interviewed, one social worker did not perceive the utilization of interpreters challenging. The remaining fourteen social workers did comment regarding the challenges. Seven social workers discussed the process of having an interpreter assist them with communication. For example, "sometimes I use other Spanish-speaking social workers but it's not fair for them. They have their own caseload and they all take time, sometimes half their day. They [bilingual social worker's] don't have time to do their job and mine." Social workers also responded

stating "It would be a lot easier if there were more bilingual social workers, not just Spanish but Vietnamese and others." Availability of a bilingual unit would benefit the Department of Children's Services and reduce family utilization as interpreters. Overall, all participants agreed that the utilization of interpreters although challenging, allowed for them to communicate with clients, making their job somewhat easier.

The interviews allowed social workers to present their views, skills and ability to work with the client through the generalist model. Social workers discussed the importance of building rapport with the client through engaging the client, however because an interpreter is utilized, the building of rapport occurs more often with the interpreter. The difficulty in engaging a client and having the ability to build rapport becomes a challenge and overall affects the social services that are offered to the client. One social worker stated during an interview, "I feel uncomfortable because I didn't understand, it feels like I have blinders on having to rely on someone else, interpreter, social service aid or who ever can do it."

The difficulties non-English speaking social workers face leads to the difficultness of accurately assessing

the situation. Once again, as stated during the interview, social workers must trust what is being interpreted, "I have to trust what is being said and I don't always know what they said."

#### Summary

Chapter Four reviewed the responses provided by social workers working in San Bernardino County. It provided some insight into social worker's perceptions about utilizing interpreters. Chapter Five provides insight into the meanings and interpretations of the results.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Included in Chapter Five is a presentation of the conclusion of the project. Further, the recommendations extracted from the project are presented as well as the limitations. Last, the chapter concludes with a summary.

#### Discussion

Throughout the interviews, the following themes emerged, 1) social service delivery through treatment or case management and the use of an interpreter, 2) how effective service delivery through an interpreter really is and 3) how accurate the interpreter is during a client meeting and whether the clients needs are being met.

The findings show that there is a need for well-trained interpreters. Social service delivery through an interpreter benefits the client and children's services so long as the interpreters utilized have understand the importance of rapport building and communication skills.

Furthermore, well-trained interpreters ensure accurate and effective service delivery. The utilization of well-trained interpreters reduces the amounts of interruptions bilingual social workers receive as well as

the number of favors done resulting in minimal time constraints with the handling of their own caseloads as presented during an interview.

In addition, this study found that social workers prefer having well trained interpreters who are knowledgeable in social work which allows for accurate interpretations, assessments and social workers feel they are meeting the client's needs. It has been found that social workers report the difficulty they face in providing services, engaging clients and understanding well enough to provide services to non-English speaking clients. There are challenges social workers face when utilizing interpreters. Social workers are challenged with not understanding what has been said, if service delivery has been beneficial to the client in meeting their needs and most importantly, if what was being interpreted was understood. These challenges are crucial for social service delivery by non-Spanish speaking social workers.

Having discussed the difficulty of engaging the client as well as administering an accurate assessment, following are the limitations of this study.

## Limitations

This study was limited by several factors. One was a lack of interested and willingness to participate in this study. Social workers were non-responsive to the flyers distributed in their mailboxes. Some more experienced social workers were approached and asked to participate; however they refused stating they were too busy, becoming avoidant. Second, the research relied heavily on social worker self report. This can be misleading and social workers' own agendas can surface. Third, not all social workers had the same experiences. Some social workers had been in social work for over fifteen years while others had just less than two years of experience. Last, the literature regarding interpreter utilization and social service delivery to non-English speaking clients was very limited.

## Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

In an effort to improve social work practice, it is recommended that a bilingual unit be established as mentioned by current child welfare employees. A Spanish-speaking unit would allow for Spanish-speaking only clients needs to be met through accurate communication. This would allow for social workers to

accurately know that the client's needs are being met.

Some of the respondents noted that a designated unit would alleviate the additional challenges faced when providing case management services to Spanish-speaking only clients.

It is also recommended that if and when interpreters are utilized, the interpreter have social work skills. The most accurate way to accomplish this recommendation is to employ or contract with individuals that are bilingual and understand the terms as well as have knowledge of the child welfare system. It is difficult on families when a social worker is unable to do his or her job accurately and efficiently due to a lack of communication and accessibility.

Currently, policy allows for Spanish-speaking social workers to receive monetary compensation for their skill in speaking another language. Although some social workers do not feel the amount of bilingual-pay received is justifiable for the necessary time and efforts required by a non-English speaking client, there are still more social workers that do pride themselves in the ability to apply their language skills. In order to encourage social workers to apply their skills more, adequate compensation should be considered.

As for research, it is evident that more empirical research is needed. The Hispanic/Latino population will continue to grow over the next 45 years (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000) and as a result, children's services must prepare accordingly. Currently, there is a band-aid over social service delivery to families receiving child welfare services that do not speak English. Documents are provided to clients in English and, when available, in their native language. However, when documents are not available, the client receives the information in English. The ability to provide services either directly or through an interpreter is a current problem in social services and this problem will continue to grow unless addressed. This research provided an inside look at how social services are offered to individuals of limited English proficiency.

### Conclusions

In summary, this study found that, although the utilization of an interpreter can be challenging, social workers feel their client's needs are met in whichever manner is available. Respondents made it very clear that they have difficulty assessing and working with clients that do not speak English because of the problem of working with an interpreter and the lack of bilingual

social workers. It is important for children's services to understand and work proactively to solve the language barrier issues. The most important conclusion was that although social workers are having difficulty communicating with their bilingual clients and utilize interpreters either from inside or outside of the department, social workers perceive their service delivery is appropriate and adequate.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

## QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What are your perceptions about case management and treatment through the use of interpreters?
2. What strengths do you find in utilizing an interpreter when delivering case management services to clients?
3. What do you find challenging when utilizing an interpreter?



APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

This study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to look at social workers' perceptions of the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters in child welfare services. This study is being conducted by Veronica Huizar Beltran under the supervision of Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Professor in the Department of Social Work at California State University San Bernardino. The Social Work sub-committee Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino, has approved this study.

Participants will be asked to answer questions during an interview. The interview should take approximately 45 to 55 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be recorded with your responses. All data will be reported in-group form only. You may receive the group results upon completion of this study in June 2004 at the California State University San Bernardino Pfau Library, located at 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free not to answer any question and withdraw at any time. When you have completed the interview, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. You will also receive a \$5.00 gift certificate for your participation. In order to ensure the validity of the study we ask that you do not discuss this study with other participants.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to call Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at 909-880-5507.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and the purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a mark here

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## CONSENT TO AUDIOTAPE

By placing a check in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of the interview being audio taped. To ensure accuracy of transcription of the questionnaire and interview, I consent to participate.

Place a mark here

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

The study in which you have just participated was designed to identify social workers' perceptions regarding strengths and challenges in the utilization of Spanish-speaking interpreters. Social workers' are working more and more with non-English speaking clients and therefore social workers' perceptions have become particularly interested in this issue.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the question and interview with other participants. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at 909-880-5507. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please contact the Pfau Library or the Department of Public Social Services in June 2004.

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