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Jonathan Hall & Sonia Valdiviezo

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## The Social Worker as Language Worker in a Multilingual World: Educating for Language Competence

Jonathan Hall and Sonia Valdiviezo

### ABSTRACT

Social work is language work, and yet the profession has operated without a fully critical theory of language difference. Rather, a model of language as merely a neutral conduit of communication has prevailed, with the result that language issues have been addressed mostly as problems of translation. But a more rigorous approach to language as an active social practice points toward a reconceptualization of research, practice, and education. An autoethnography explores issues of language identity and power differentials implicit in the choice of language, showing that even bilingual social workers face dilemmas in how to approach client language issues. In social work education, language competence is not mere proficiency in speaking but rather, even for monolinguals, the ability to operate in a critical third place between one's own linguistic frame and that of a client. Learning objectives are proposed for social work education in language issues: address critical theories of language to help students move toward a resource model of language difference; help students envision how to apply these theories in practical situations; and help all students develop a conscious and critical awareness of their own language identity and how it may affect their education and their future practice.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Social workers are language workers. They operate in a community created by language and are immersed in language, which is their principal medium for doing their work. Sometimes they use language as a relatively straightforward means of communication, a specialized tool of professional discourse with colleagues, as a signal of cross-cultural understanding (or misunderstanding), and as a therapeutic tool in complex interactions with clients.

This article, which is a collaboration between a bilingual social worker and a scholar of multilingual writing across the curriculum, examines the relationship between social work and language from several angles with the aim of articulating what social workers need to know about language and, more specifically, about language difference in their academic training, field practice, and professional development. We advocate a standard of *language competence*, the ability to interact with clients of different linguistic backgrounds in a conscious and appropriate manner. This concept should not be confused with *language proficiency*, the ability to speak or write a language, as monolingual social workers can attain language competence, and multilingual social workers could fail to do so.

The first part of this article examines and critiques underlying conceptions of language and the resulting attitudes toward language difference as presented in the social work literature. The second part builds on an autoethnography of multilingual social work practice to illuminate some of the underlying concepts and tensions regarding the integration or nonintegration of language difference in the social work professional community. The conclusion draws on a workshop on language and social work for social work graduate students and offers some suggestions for incorporating a more sophisticated study of language issues in the curriculum of social work education programs. Our

overall goal is to explore how the social work community can most effectively respond to the challenges and the opportunities of language diversity in a world where multilinguality is the mainstream (Hall, 2014b).

## **Models of language and language difference in social work theory and practice**

As a profession, social work has until relatively recently operated without much explicit attention to language issues. More than 50 years ago, Timms (1968) complained that “it is surprising that social workers, who are largely dependent on language, should have given such little attention to words and what it means to speak a language” (p. 1). Gregory and Holloway (2005), building on Parton and O’Byrne (2000), argued that social workers must develop a more sophisticated understanding of language as far more than a transparent medium or a passive tool but rather multiple socially constructed practices that are tied to personal identity and unavoidably implicated in structures of power: “Language is used to establish membership of a group and conversely to restrict access to outsiders; to indicate allegiance to a cause; to establish, and sometimes coerce into, a position; to restrict communication and the type of communication; to influence the construction of a situation” (p. 38). Social workers do most of their work immersed in language, so a critical awareness of their own role in language as power must be integrated into their education and continuing practice.

### ***The communication model: Language difference as a barrier***

When language issues have been discussed in social work literature, language is often conceived as an unproblematic “conduit of communication” (Harrison 2006, p. 404). This model “imagines meanings to be pre-formed in sentences that are then transmitted from sender to receiver through processes of encoding and decoding” (Harrison 2006, p. 404). If the main action of language is the transmission of a meaning that already exists outside language, then languages are arbitrary codes we can use to send packets of text, telegraphlike, from speaker to receiver without changing or distorting the message. This model relies on translatability across languages, that there is an easily accessible common reality underlying all efforts at communication and that the choice of medium is just a matter of convenience.

Given these underlying assumptions about language in general, it is not surprising that when difficulties arose, language difference could be blamed as a barrier to effective social work. In a study of language issues in England and Norway, Kriz and Skivenes (2010) found that social workers reported that the use of interpreters resulted in information deficits, more curtailed relationship-building processes, feelings of mistrust, and practical obstacles for non-English-speaking clients who were trying to reach social workers (p. 1368). Building a therapeutic or working alliance with a client is a delicate process, and it can be further complicated by the involvement of a third party, the interpreter. Such involvement, although ideally invisible and transparent, rarely is, and even if the social worker and client share a language themselves, social workers must understand that language proficiency can only be part of the equation in cultural awareness and social diversity.

In this article we define language competence as a combination of cultural awareness and social diversity as they relate to working in a multilingual environment where language holds immense power. Regardless of the use of interpreters, a social worker’s ability to navigate and mediate language difference skillfully can make a significant difference in building an effective working alliance with a client of a different culture, background, and demographics. If the role of a social worker is to meet the client wherever the client happens to be at a given point, then language competence is a necessary tool in achieving not only the ethical standard of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) on cultural awareness and social diversity but also in applying the core competency of the Council on Social Work Education (2015) of engaging diversity and difference in practice, which calls for social workers to “recognize the

extent to which a culture's structures and values ... may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power" (p. 7).

Major social work journals have begun to address language issues more thoughtfully. For example, in an editorial in *Social Work*, Pomeroy and Nanaka (2013) described the relationship between social work and language work:

From the beginning of our social work education, we develop a repertoire of skills, including relationship building, active listening, keen observation, and psychosocial assessment as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity. By the time we complete our education, we perceive ourselves to be prepared to communicate effectively with clients from a wide variety of backgrounds. However, due to forces of worldwide globalization, international networking, and global transmigration, the odds that a social worker will have clients who are multinational, multilingual and multicultural are exponentially greater, testing our abilities to interact meaningfully with these clients. (p. 101)

Pomeroy and Nanaka helpfully acknowledge the centrality of language to the social worker professional experience, but we can note that the communication model of language is still central in the subtitle of their article "Are We Really Communicating Effectively?" Although that is an important question, it doesn't really get beneath the surface of the issues raised by language difference. Standards from the NASW (2015) include providing services in each client's preferred language (p. 45), yet in many practice situations, attention to language issues does not go beyond the use of telephone translation services or involving bilingual colleagues or staff as translators.

### **Re-thinking language**

In an effort to transcend the limitations of the communication and translation model of social work language, the work of Harrison (2006, 2007) has begun to force a reconsideration of the central role of language and language difference in social work theory, practice, and pedagogy. Harrison has addressed two related but distinct major areas of concern with relation to the uses of language in social work: first, the underlying conception of language itself, which implies a model of language difference, and second, the way those in the social work profession and individual social workers embedded in specific practice situations inevitably end up following, whether consciously or unconsciously, a language policy that governs how multiple languages and the speakers of those languages are treated in a given organizational domain.

Harrison (2006) argues that language is better conceived "as an active social practice" (p. 403). That is, rather than focusing on language as a direct act of communication between two individuals—encoded from my brain at one end of the conduit and decoded by your brain at the other end—this view of language takes a step back to show that language is a shared medium in which many people, institutions, and assumptions are operating in every act of language; that is, it is never just two people talking. Language must be viewed as an interactive phenomenon that "impacts *on* ... the social world and [is] also shaped *by* that same social world" (Harrison, 2006, p. 403).

### **Language policy and social work practice**

Officially social work is committed to a policy of always serving "in a language appropriate to the client" (NASW, 2015, p. 5). But in practice, this commitment focuses on a translation model. As long as appropriate interpreters are on staff or accessible by telephone to mediate conversations with clients, the standard has ostensibly been met.

Language policies may sometimes be explicit, for example, when a government declares an official language or bans the use of a minority language, as in the case of Welsh, discussed by Pugh (1994). To avoid becoming unwitting enforcers of unjust restrictions, social workers must be conscious of the role of language in personal identity and in culturally structuring their clients' experiences and the way they interpret and report them. Language policies need not be visible or blatant but rather may be implicit in a set of practices and unexamined assumptions that tacitly fill the gap of an

undeclared language policy or even contradict or subvert in practice an officially designated one. Harrison (2006) suggests that translation is far from a nonproblematic issue for social work, quoting Spivak's claim that "you cannot translate from a position of monolingualist superiority" (p. 412). That is, as long as we're waiting for the translation into the right language, we haven't really met clients in their appropriate place of expression.

Harrison (2007) further suggests that underlying any language policy is a tacit orientation toward language in general and language difference in particular and identifies three views as prevalent in social work discourse and practice. Social work is not immune from broader cultural tendencies, especially in the United States, to conceive language difference as a problem to be solved, a "barrier" to communication, or as a "personal deficit" model that assumes something is wrong with language difference or multilinguality (pp. 74–75). A second more promising orientation sees language, including the use of minority languages, as a basic human right, thus conferring on social work practitioners a social justice obligation to provide services in a language appropriate to the client (p. 79). Beyond accommodation, though, is a third language orientation for social work to aspire to, which is to regard each language that an individual (including a bilingual social worker) speaks as a resource to be developed (p. 83). Social work is a language-centered activity, but it has not been sufficiently or systematically conceptualized in terms of language difference. In contrast to most of the rest of the world, in English-speaking countries, an expectation of monolingualism as the normal state of affairs tends to obscure the complex translanguing network of meanings—often across languages and in between languages—that clients are bringing to their experience, especially as immigrants. Because social workers must not restrict their help to only those who speak English, developing a consciousness of multilingual experience, even in those social workers who themselves remain monolingual, must begin in the classroom and continue throughout their careers.

Although the United States has no national language established by law, a combination of accepted institutional practices (e.g., regarding bilingual education), unexamined political beliefs about immigrants (Garcia & Bass, 2007), and ideological assumptions that monolinguality is and should be the norm (Hall, 2014b) create a situation in which multilingual clients may feel intimidated or excluded unless social work practitioners consciously develop and implement linguistically inclusive attitudes and procedures.

### ***Language competence and the third place***

Language competence, which we describe here as a vital set of skills for social workers, is closely related to cultural competence but not identical to it. In advocating "linguistic competence" or "language access services" as crucial for social worker development, Le Sage (2006, p. 4) argues that social work has conceived of language only as a subset of culture and thus ends up neglecting language per se. Similarly, Bishop (2008) focuses on the failure of social work to recognize language identity as a social differentiator and proposes "culturally competent language tuition" (p. 918) for social work students. The goal is not necessarily for the social worker to acquire the skill to speak a second language adequately enough to use it in a practice situation but rather to gain an understanding of how language connects with identity and thus how individuals construct their experiences through a given language.

Language competence involves the social worker's ability to transcend word-for-word equivalence, to conceptualize an individual client's construction or perception of the problem. A social worker cannot fully comprehend the client's subjectively constructed experience "without exploring the culturally embedded meanings the issues have" (Lee, 1996, p. 191) for the client. One aspect of language competence requires fluidity not only in switching between languages (with or without the aid of an interpreter) but also in switching between listening from an etic and emic perspective. For example, if a non-English-speaking client describes a history of trauma in his or her native milieu using terms for a context the social worker has little experience in, the social worker is left with the option of either translating the information inaccurately or defining the client's experience from an ethnocentric

perspective. Working with non-English-speaking clients is not a simple matter of language fluency or multicultural awareness. It is a complex task requiring a social worker to suspend an ethnocentric point of view to simultaneously exercise an emic perspective while holding an etic perspective.

The target state of mind for language competence education has been described by Crozet, Liddicoat, and Bianco (1999), in a study of intercultural competence, as a *third place*:

An intercultural interaction is neither a question of maintaining one's own cultural frame nor of assimilating to one's interactant's cultural frame. It is rather a question of finding an intermediary place between these two positions, of adopting a third place... . The participant in the interaction is an experienter, not an observer, of difference... . It is not necessary to learn all of the languages of one's potential interactants. The important learning which comes through the experience of difference through language comes through the analysis of one's own culture and the ways in which language mediates this culture. (p. 5)

Thus when we advocate language competence education for social workers, we are not just talking about conjugating verbs or even about language proficiency. Rather, the process of learning a language is valuable because it enables learners to see their own cultural frame *as* a frame and their own language as less than an inevitable representation of reality. This third place mentality is neither easy to achieve nor to maintain, but this crucial aspect of language competence needs to be a goal of social work education that will be reinforced in practice.

### **Language and social work field practice**

At the level of social work theory, the field is beginning to undergo a gradual reconsideration of the central role of language. Harrison and others have begun to criticize the unspoken monolingualist assumptions underlying much of the discourse of social work and its often reductive theories of language, and we can look forward to additional scrutiny, self-examination, and change in the social work literature. But what about the application of these shifting theoretical models? How do these issues play out in the actual day-to-day experiences of social workers practicing at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels? In future research, situated rhetorical and linguistic analyses of particular social work language systems may yield detailed linguistic insights into particular assumptions and practices. But over the past several years, reports from social workers operating in multilingual and international settings have already provided a more robust context for considering how language issues affect the social work profession (e.g., Barlow, 2007; Dominelli, 2004; Engstrom, Min, & Gambie, 2009). Also, Murdach (2006), Witkin and Chambon (2007), and Oglensky (2008), among others, have pointed to the central role of language, including writing and rhetoric, as tools of the modern social work student.

In the context of this ongoing exploration of the central role of language in social work theory, practice, and pedagogy, we turn to autoethnography to point out what we take to be some critical issues for future investigation in relation to social work practice. Canagarajah (2005) defines an ethnographic approach as “a first-hand, naturalistic, well-contextualized, hypothesis-generating, emic orientation to language practices” (p. 155). Autoethnography takes this process one step further: “Blending researcher and subject roles, autoethnographers use analytical strategies to explore the social and cultural contexts of meaningful life experiences and their implications for the present” (Witkin, 2014, p. 2). Applied to language difference in social work practice, an autoethnographic approach is a reflexive attempt to capture moment-by-moment fluctuations of language as power in relation with the client.

### **Who decides what language is appropriate?**

As a social worker who works with non-English-speaking clients on a daily basis, Sonia Valdiviezo must determine whether she has the skill to interact with any particular client “in a language



appropriate to [that] client.” As she explains in her autoethnography, this determination is complicated by the ambiguity of who defines what a language is or what appropriate means:

Working with clients whose culture and dominant language differ from my own, but who share similar experiences afforded by similar socio-economic backgrounds, the most appropriate language to the client may be a form of “switching” between English and their language, while when working with clients who speak a language in which I am fluent and with whom I share a cultural background but not lived experiences, may require a quite different vernacular that is most appropriate to the client. In other words, the process of engaging a client “in a language appropriate to the client” requires that I recognize the particulars of not simply language and cultural difference, but remain aware that language and culture along with various other factors comingle in constructing identity out of lived experience.

Deciding which language is most appropriate to the client is a task that requires skill in assessment. Assessing which language is the most appropriate to the client requires language competence, that is, a set of skills founded on theory, practice, and pedagogy.

### ***Language and identity***

The idea of language competence carries implications for all social workers, not simply those who are multilingual but equally for those who are monolingual. Even if initial assessments and actual services are provided by a social worker fluent in the client’s language, the information must be entered into English-language forms and paperwork and may later be accessed by monolingual social workers. For the multilingual social worker, the dilemma is how to interpret and translate on the fly, with the added challenge of capturing the nuances of the context in which the client acquired her history. For the monolingual social worker reading the translated information on a client’s record, the challenge is to find ways of escaping an ethnocentric point of view to perceive the nuances of the client’s original context.

The act of translating a client’s subjective experiences (what a person feels, thinks, comprehends, etc) is a constant practice of social work in general. Language mediates the relationship between an individual and the social world; the client’s verbal constructions of experience are laden with nuance at every turn. Social workers and their clients are not just having a conversation. They are involved in a formal discourse situation, mediated by various institutional constraints, cultural biases, and the epistemological assumptions of social work as a professional community. The social worker, at every moment of practice, is part of the larger social work discourse community, and the task is to translate that technical discourse into words understandable to clients.

### ***Language and the construction of experience***

Language is not merely a communication issue. The language in which clients describe their situation shapes that situation. They are not merely reporting an already processed experience but are actively constructing that experience, in the moment of the interaction, through the process of articulating it to the social worker. In the following, Valdiviezo describes the ongoing negotiation with clients, not just which language to speak but how to capture the client’s construction of their experience:

In the actual practice of working with non-English speaking clients, I have encountered a much more complex “listening” and “talking” than that which I would do with monolingual English speaking clients. However, regardless of a client’s language, I first have to define the terms of our “talk” with the client. I have to define the terminology for framing and “talking” about their situation or problem and this requires keen attention to the client’s own terminology of emotions and her own framework for elaborating on her experience, all of which requires double the clock time when working with non-English speakers, primarily because I must first determine whether I can speak the “language most appropriate to the client.” Hence, in my role as social worker the monumental task becomes one of simultaneously relating to a client with emic empathy while adhering to an etic professionalism.

“Talking” and “listening” thus become customized to the client’s attributions of self and other. For example, with one particular client, I found myself hyper-aware that I kept switching between the formal you and the informal you within each session, particularly when the client herself wavered in the form that she addressed *me*. This switching worked its way into defining the level of formality between us, such that it played on my awareness of the power dynamic between us. In comparison, I observed that my work with English speaking clients was devoid of this negotiation.

If “culture is a learned, shared, and symbolically transmitted” (Lee, 1996, p. 190) experience, then social workers must understand the context in which clients developed their perspective or standpoint – and, crucially, how the clients then integrated that perspective and standpoint into the new context as framed by their native language rather than English. In other words, the varying degrees to which each client has become acculturated to the new environment, and the extent to which each has reframed his or her individual subjective experiences through the native language and not English, requires a social worker to possess a skill set that is beyond straightforward translation.

### **Language and power**

In any case, when a social worker is with a client, it is never just two people talking because their conversation takes place in a formal, institutionalized setting in which various discourses of power play a part. The situation mandates the social worker to speak for the institution, or to put it another way, the institution speaks through the social worker. The conversation that takes place is delimited and defined by the institutional setting and by the roles of social worker and client that are assumed by the parties involved. Valdiviezo’s autoethnography explores this relationship:

While the negotiation of power dynamics is present in my work with all clients, the negotiation of power dynamics in multilingual discourse is not binary, rather it lies on a continuum of ethnocentric degrees. On one end of the spectrum are those clients with whom I share both a language and a culture (including demographics, social class, education level, etc.), while at the other end are clients with whom I share neither. Albeit my work with non-English speakers requires a complete abeyance of ethnocentricity, I must also suspend my ethnocentric perspective with non-native English speakers, with whom I do not share a culture.

The linguistic structure of the social work situation is a complex one, with power differentials always inherent in the interaction. Knowing a language is more than constructing grammatically correct sentences; rather, as Bourdieu (1977) has insisted, “language capital” is “practical mastery of language and practical mastery of situations which enable one to produce adequate speech in a given situation” (p. 647). Even when client and social worker speak the same language, they are speaking from different subject positions and different levels of linguistic capital, and these differences are only emphasized when their languages differ in the more usual sense as well, and an interpreter must be employed. Any client, from whatever background and whatever language identity, always speaks the language of social work with an accent.

### **Languages of trauma**

The interaction between social worker and client takes place in what Pratt (1991) calls a *contact zone*, a place where the identities of the social worker come into contact, for good or ill, with those of the other, occupying a different institutional identity, which the client inhabits with varying degrees of comfort or discomfort. Even if both parties are ostensibly speaking the same language, they are engaged in reframing the client’s experience according to professional and institutional language mandates. When we add in the possibility of multiple languages and multiple cultural systems, the difficulties quickly increase exponentially, especially, as Valdiviezo notes, when the subject of discussion is not easy to talk about in any language:

In working with an Eastern European client who is fluent in English, but whose culture (and therefore language) did not include a construct of the type of trauma he had endured, I recognized that his native language and culture did not contain a lexicon or framework for this type of experience and therefore his



subjective experience did not readily translate into English. Together, we struggled to construct his traumatic experience in a language that was “appropriate to him.” Therefore, our multilingual multicultural discourse included continuous negotiation between us (and within me between the emic and etic perspectives).

What may appear to be a relatively straightforward and progressive standard of using “language appropriate to the client, which may include the use of interpreters” is a much more complex negotiation in practice. Even when clients speak English acquired as a second language, a competent social worker needs to employ a complex skill set to balance comprehending the words with honoring the clients’ linguistic identity while simultaneously interpreting implicit constructions of reality embedded in the language.

### Language and social work education: Curricular issues and a workshop model

Although it is imperative for these issues of language difference and language competence to be addressed comprehensively in social work education, Kornbeck (2001) found almost no published research about “teaching social workers languages” (p. 307). Pugh and Jones (1999) pointed out that although “the importance of factors such as age, class, gender, and ‘race’ has been extensively documented within social work literature” (pp. 529–530), there had not been a corresponding focus on issues of language difference. This lack of attention left practitioners in the field with considerable discretion in how to assess the meaning of language differences (e.g., a child who speaks a minority language) in a session but without significant background training in how to exercise that discretion. Without language competence, social workers risk basing decisions on ethnocentric assumptions about language and cognition or falsely assuming that all languages conceptualize psychological and cultural issues of identity in similar ways.

There are isolated cases of institutions experimenting with the notion of including a central role for language in social work education. Cox et al. (2006), for instance, report on an initiative that conceptualizes “teaching language skills as part of cross-cultural practice,” (p. 75) an approach that might be difficult to replicate because it requires a three-course sequence of Spanish language instruction and cultural immersion through a study abroad program.

The *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* issued by the Council on Social Work Education (2015) show that little has changed since the analyses by Kornbeck (2001) and Pugh and Jones (1999). For example, Competence 2 defines diversity “as the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status” (p. 7). Language difference is not mentioned as a dimension of diversity, and the phrase “including but not limited to” is not a big enough loophole. In fact, a search of the word reveals that *language* appears nowhere in the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*.

The NASW’s (2015) cultural competence Standard 9, which addresses language diversity, advocates “providing services in each client’s preferred language” (p. 45). But Valdiviezo, who attended one of the leading social work graduate programs in the United States, found a similar gap in her own education:

In my experience as a graduate social work student, I did not encounter any explicit and specific instruction on exactly what this means in a particular context. For instance, the first semester of a two-year program discussed issues of racism, classism, and privilege throughout several courses, but issues involving language were not included. Courses discussed the effect of several “-isms” as they impact groups of people categorized by age, gender, or ethnicity. The curriculum also aimed at giving students an understanding as to how environment directly and indirectly shapes human behaviors (individually and collectively) and vice versa, but language was not discussed, not even to mention the impact of illiteracy on the underprivileged persons with whom many social workers will engage and serve, let alone to address issues of multilingualism within the monolingual U.S.

It was in this context of a lack of discussion on language that the partnership that has resulted in this article first arose, and a workshop on social work and language difference was conceptualized. One student who participated in the workshop reported that it “covered a topic that was barely

mentioned in our coursework.” The question of the workshop’s structure and content arose from its status as a one-shot, 2-hour presentation to graduate students who were already interested in the subject as they had joined the multicultural and multilingual caucus at the university. In this limited space, we could not, of course, aim to fill the gaps in the curriculum that Valdiviezo describes here. But here we provide the structure and some of the materials from that workshop that could be used in a course, or in a series of modules in various courses, with the goal of exploring issues of language difference in social work.

We have already described language competence as the overall target of a language-conscious social work curriculum. More specifically, the objectives would necessarily include the following:

- (1) **Theories of language in social work:** Social work students must understand the ways conscious or unconscious assumptions about language and about language difference shape the field’s approach to multiple issues.
- (2) **Issues of language difference in social work practice:** Students must be prepared to negotiate real-world situations involving language difference.
- (3) **Student language identity:** All students must develop a conscious and critical understanding of their own language background and the ways it influences their approach to issues of language difference in theory and practice.

### ***Objective 1: Theories of language in social work***

These three objectives were addressed in an embryonic form in the workshop. The material for this objective would be an expanded version of what is presented in the first part of this article, that is, an investigation of the ways social work has traditionally conceived language (as a nonproblematic communication conduit or barrier), the ways this conception is enmeshed in an ideology of monolingualism, and the effects of explicit or implicit language policies on social work theory and practice.

At the beginning of the workshop, students were asked to make lists of social work activities that involve language and then a list of activities that don’t. (The latter list was very short or empty altogether.) What social workers do all day, of course, is listen and talk and write and read. The next step is to introduce the goal of language competence and the concept of the third place students can use to view their own cultural and linguistic framework and their clients’ framework without being limited to either while in the field.

### ***Objective 2: Teaching language competence in social work practice***

Language competence begins with understanding language difference and diversity; it involves a critical awareness one’s own position. *Competence* implies skills: developing and practicing techniques that enable active engagement out in the field. Multilingual students will need to think about situations in which they might be called on—sometimes appropriately, sometimes inappropriately, sometimes it’s difficult to say—to make use of their own linguistic resources. Monolingual students will need to gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues involved in translation and how they might handle such issues in field practice.

It is impossible, of course, for any social worker to be proficient in all the languages that prospective clients may bring to the table, and so the use of qualified interpreters is often necessary. Social workers are called on to be cultural mediators, charged with making sure that services such as interpretation or translation are used correctly and in a culturally appropriate manner. The participation of an interpreter means that the session cannot be exactly the same as with an English-speaking client, and the social worker is the only one in a position to make sure that language difference does not translate to an experience of marginalization or disenfranchisement. The social

worker can only accomplish that if he or she has had previous language competence training, which may draw from a growing body of research that delves into the complexities of the proper use of interpreters in contexts ranging from child protection (Chand, 2005; Lucas, 2015; Sawrikar, 2015) to public health (Kale & Syed, 2010) to medical services (Jacobs, Diamond, & Stevak, 2010; Ngo-Metzger et al., 2007). Issues that have been identified range from the inappropriate practice of using children as makeshift interpreters, not setting boundaries for interpreters who may tend to take too active a role (e.g., asking clarifying questions on their own rather than reporting what was said to the social worker), and partial or summary interpretation (a client makes a lengthy statement, but the interpreter transmits only a few words).

The point is that even a seemingly straightforward aspect of language competence, such as working with interpreters, requires a social worker to have the skill to assess whether the exchange of information is truly serving the client. In the workshop we began with an open discussion of the text of NASW (2015) cultural competence Standard 9, which is the official guiding principle for U.S. social workers in terms of language issues. We approached it, however, not in a manner where the standard is taken for granted but in a consciously critical approach in which its interpretation is not always straightforward and where the possibility exists that the standard itself may be implicated in unexamined assumptions about language and translation.

But understanding the virtues and limitations of Standard 9 (NASW, 2015) would not remedy a social worker's need to apply the principles out in the field. Therefore we devised seven hypothetical scenarios (Appendix A) that multilingual or, crucially, partially multilingual or mostly monolingual social workers might be involved in as a means of raising practical concerns and an understanding of the underlying principles. They are intended as cautionary tales in the management of language difference. The scenarios warn social workers (a) not to be satisfied with unqualified interpreters, such as children, especially in situations where sensitive information may be disclosed or where precise articulation of alternatives (e.g., legal) is necessary and (b) not to rely entirely on their own ability to speak a client's language in those sensitive or complex situations but rather to insist on finding ways to actually serve "in a language appropriate to the client" (NASW, 2015, p. 5).

This approach challenges students to apply the principles of Standard 9 (NASW, 2015) thoughtfully, and in some cases, to go beyond them. Sometimes their responsibility may include challenging their own supervisors or agency norms if implicit and inadequate language policies fail to meet the responsibilities of serving clients in an appropriate language.

### ***Objective 3: Language identity and social work education***

The value of including language difference as a topic in social work education is to prepare social workers with the skills that can help them meet the client where the client is by bringing to the fore the issue of privilege and power dynamics. All students need to acquire a conscious and critical understanding of their own language identity. For multilingual students, this might take the form of articulating their relation to their language and culture of origin. Monolingual social workers will need to examine their place in a culture that uncritically assumes monolinguality as a norm when globally multilinguality is the mainstream.

At the end of the workshop, students were invited to complete an education and language background survey (Hall, 2014a), which asked questions about their own language use and where and when they learned their other languages. The purpose was to offer students an opportunity to reflect on their own language identities.

### **Conclusion**

This article examines several aspects of the central role of language and language difference for the contemporary social work community in today's multilingual world: the integration of

language difference in social work theory, interactive case studies illuminating multilingual social work practice, and suggestions for curricular changes targeting language issues in social work education.

When we say that a social worker is a language worker, we don't mean it in the trivial sense that any profession involves talking. Rather, language is the principal medium of social workers' work. A social worker is a language worker in the same way that a fish is a water worker. Sometimes we could say that the fish uses the water for its own purposes, for instance, as a means of transportation or of communication with others of its species or warnings of danger from predators. Still, we would be greatly remiss if we were to say that water serves the fish simply as a tool used for their own purposes. Obviously the relation between fish and water is much deeper and more pervasive than that, not only because the fish is literally immersed in water and physically dependent on it. Even beyond that, water defines a fish's life and reality, everything it is.

Language is where social work takes place; it is the principal means of building an effective working alliance with a client. Language is the means by which a social worker builds an effective working alliance with a client. It not only conveys critical information, but also plays an essential role in guiding and empowering clients toward effective change. If language is social action, it is crucial for social workers to understand how social work functions in a world defined and supported by language. Language competence is a crucial aspect of a social workers' development at every stage of their education.

## Notes on contributors

*Jonathan Hall* is professor of English at York College, City University of New York, and *Sonia Valdiviezo* is a 2015 graduate of the Columbia University School of Social Work currently practicing as a clinical social worker at the Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center.

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## Appendix A

### Language Issues in Social Work Practice: Some Hypothetical Case Studies

1. Your client Isabel, who has been in the United States for 2 years after emigrating from Venezuela, is in an emergency situation when her case comes to you. Her house burned down the night before, her husband was killed, and her son is in the hospital in critical condition. She was at work at the time, so she's in no physical danger, but she has no place to live and no other close relatives in the United States. Although her work requires her to deal with the public, mostly in English, Isabel seems to be having trouble understanding you as you explain her emergency housing options. You took a couple of years of Spanish as an undergraduate, intermediate proficiency. What do you do?
2. You used to speak French with your grandmother, who died 10 years ago. Your client Marie, who is about the age your grandmother was when she died, has come to you for grief counseling after the death of her husband while

they were visiting their son in New York. She speaks a little English but is much more comfortable in French. You haven't spoken French in 10 years, but she reminds you of your grandmother. What do you do?

3. Han, an immigrant from China, has lived in New York City for 5 years. He seems to understand English, but he speaks in a very heavy accent that you are having trouble understanding. After you have asked him to repeat the information you are asking for several times, he becomes angry and demands to see a Mandarin-speaking social worker. You tell him that there is no one like that available at your agency; you could arrange for an interpreter, but he'd have to come back at another time. He offers to have his 7-year-old daughter, who is out in the waiting room, interpret for him. What do you do?
4. Zhang proudly tells you that he has not spoken a word in anything except English since arriving from China 2 months ago; "I want speak be real American good, ok?" he tells you, and for him this means English only. But you have to discuss some rather complex and technical matters with him and you're not sure that he fully understands what you're saying. When you suggest bringing in an interpreter, he becomes offended and seems on the verge of walking out. What do you do?
5. A neighbor has reported to Child Protective Services that Ivan, a Russian immigrant, has been beating his 8-year-old son; she was able to hear the boy's screams. When you arrive to investigate, you take a statement from the neighbor, who is bilingual in Russian and English, and then knock on Ivan's door. You quickly discover that Ivan speaks no English, but his wife speaks some, and she assures you that what the neighbor heard was just corporal punishment, quite normal in their culture, and that their son is rather overly dramatic. What do you do?
6. You work for an agency that advises HIV-positive clients about how to negotiate medical options and other support services. Recently the agency has had a rapid influx of Haitian refugees, most of whom speak only Haitian Creole, which no one on your staff understands. The director has requested authorization to hire a social worker with the correct background, but even if that succeeds, it could take up to a year. You speak a little French, and some of the clients' words sound somewhat familiar to you, and the director, faced with a waiting room full of Haitian clients, decides to assign you, for the interim, to specialize in coordinating the Haitian clients' care: "I know it's a different language, but you're the closest we've got." What do you do?
7. You have been part of a team of psychiatrists and social workers who have developed an elaborate protocol for dealing with clients diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and who often attempt to play one member of the team against another or display erratic behavior and unstable emotions. The protocol involves precise verbal formulas members of the team are supposed to use to respond (in a consistent manner to avoid splitting) to these various behaviors. A new client has arrived who speaks only Spanish. You and one other member of the team speak fluent Spanish, but you've never worked with this protocol in Spanish. What do you do?