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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Using Interpreters: Can Black Feminist Thought and Anti-Oppressive Principles Be used to Improve Information Gathering and Social Service Efficacy in Populations That Are Culturally Diverse?

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Abstract

Globalization and other homogenizing developments, such as the free movement of citizens within the European Union, have brought people together from all corners of the earth, thereby increasing the need for skilled and culturally aware interpreters. In this paper, the authors reflect on their own experiences working with interpreters—both in research and in connection with the delivery of social services to marginalised women. When dealing with women of colour, the authors found, it is important to take into account principles defined by Black feminist writers and Anti-Oppressive Principles (AOP) designed to alleviate unequal, unfair, and otherwise oppressive conditions. Where women of colour are concerned, the authors further advocate using women from their cultures rather than men or women from outside their culture to interpret subjects' experiences. Using women interpreters from the same culture, the authors find, may increase the accuracy of research data and its interpretation and minimizes power inequalities associated with differences in gender, culture, and class. (160 words).

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Introduction

In international development as well as in the provision of social services, practitioners today are generally aware that steps must be taken to diminish female oppression, equalize opportunity, and otherwise promote gender equity (Equality Act/UK, 2010; Kanbur, 2002; UNDP, 2003b). The recent influx of refugees and asylum-seekers has meant that European nations now have an urgent need to improve the way they glean information and provide services to immigrant populations. Where developed countries host large numbers of refugees, where ethnic and economic tensions have led to large numbers of internally displaced people in developing countries, where war causes people to flee their homes—both incomers and locals will have to learn how to adapt to differences of language, religion, and culture. Global statistics show, moreover, that war and poverty disproportionately affect women and children, and that the feminization of poverty, especially for women of colour, is on the rise (International Labour Organisation 2011; Horn, 2010).

As societies become ever more heterogeneous, both culturally and linguistically, the need for interpreters also increases. Newcomers need to know the rules and to recognize their new countries' established institutions, and to understand what social and economic resources are open to them. Most of all, both hosts and newcomers need to understand how best to accommodate and adapt to each other's cultural norms.

Studies show that even in places where the law and policy supports the right to language, more often than not, speakers of non-official language are still disadvantaged, both financially and socially. Their lives, moreover, are marred by a great variety of misunderstandings and complexities, which proper interpretation could go far to alleviate (Norma and Garcia-Caro, 2016; Bhopal, 2010; Farooq and Fear 2003; Westmeyer, 1990). In addition, interpreters not only help with language barriers but also help bridge other kinds of differences to achieve common goals. Interpreters link service users with service providers and researchers with their informants. Without this vital link to bring about understanding, neither successful service provision nor research is possible.

The Australian study by Norma and Garcia-Caro (2016) highlights the importance of training interpreters dealing with certain types of situations in words and ideas specific to relevant fields. This study found, for instance, that community interpreters assisting migrant women experiencing high rates of domestic violence were not familiar with social science ideas about how best to deal with gender-related issues. The authors therefore recommend tailoring the education of interpreters in a research study of abused women to include information about these issues, so as to make them less obtrusive and more effective in gathering information from informants. When Australian migrant women had to relate experiences of violence through male interpreters, for example, they frequently found them insensitive. They also sensed that these interpreters were distorting their words, and became extremely distressed (Amnesty International Australia, 2008; Hunter, 2006).

Several authors have demonstrated that gender differences between subjects and interpreters can skew results and diminish the quality of information gathered. These studies showed clear benefits, when collecting research data about women, or using women to interview and interpret for women (Oakely, 1981; Harding, 1991; Finch, 1984; Cook and Fonow, 1990). Other studies raise questions about the advisability of using men from the same culture as interpreters for women reporting on gender-sensitive issues (Bhopal, 2010). Male interpreters with cultural taboos related to sex, for instance, are likely to shy away from sex-related topics and may even fail to translate sex-related incidents their subjects report (Hale, 2007; Pardy, 1995).

Psychiatrists have also noted the importance of research interpreters being familiar with the area of study, sensitive cultural issues, and words used in relevant fields (Farooq and Fear, 2003). Westmeyer (1990) reports a situation where an interpreter discouraged patients from divulging information seen as derogatory to their culture. Farooq and Fear (2003) found that interpreters unfamiliar with psychiatric-related words frequently introduced errors into the data gathered (see also Farooq et al. 1987).

Bhopal (2010), conducted research on how marginalised groups invariably deals with issues related to gender, identity, and personal experience. When properly handled, she observes, these three variables can create a “shared empathy and a shared understanding between the respondent and the researcher in which trust and rapport” encourage conversation. In her own research, Bhopal (2010) observed that her shared culture, experiences, and gender were instrumental in gaining access to Asian women and getting them to speak with her. She also discussed key issues for researchers and social service providers working with Gypsy communities, such as the separate spaces, both private and public, male and female Gypsies occupy. In this culture, women are prohibited from being in the company of men, including male interpreters, they are not related to (Bhopal, 2010). Bhopal’s research experience sheds light on the importance of gender as a key factor when recruiting interpreters and communicating with women from marginalised and non-indigenous cultures.

Black Feminist Thought and the “Anti-Oppressive” Principles

Feminist theory overall is founded on the premise that women, although making valuable contributions to society globally, have been and still are culturally, economically, and educationally oppressed. This oppression has made it impossible for most women to achieve their full potential. Feminists therefore concentrate on ways to empower women, and to foster conditions likely to equalize access to education, power, and economic opportunity (Ropers-Huilman, 2002).

Emerging in the 1990’s and Informed by post-colonialist and post-modernist writings, Black Feminist Theory (BFT) is part of the third wave of the feminist movement as a whole. It goes beyond gender issues cited by earlier feminist writers and includes variables that specifically escalate female oppression (Hill 1991, Narayan 2004, Phoenix 2001). Black Feminist Theory contends, for instance, that the Black female experience goes beyond gender issues and must also include issues related to culture, class, and race. Hill (1991) and Phoenix (2001) contend that

the primary responsibility for defining a reality lies with the people who live it. Drawing on her own experience as a Black woman, Hill further confirms the Black feminist contention that race and class are essentials in the Black female life experience. Narayan (2004) additionally contends that lived experience confers a special expertise (an “epistemic advantage”) that allows a person to contextualize words and events with the understanding of a participant.

To understand the oppression of marginalised populations, Crenshaw (2007) emphasizes the importance of intersections where spheres of power overlap, and to compare them to marginalized peoples’ lived experiences. Social service professionals and academics may therefore find it useful, when working with marginalized women, to adopt the Black feminist practice of analysing human interactions and relationships in terms of race, culture, and class as well as gender equality (Burke and Harrison, 2002).

Understanding the Unknown Other:-

Development specialists and researchers working in unfamiliar contexts obviously depend on interpreters to bridge the gap. They also draw on many different social work, sociological and anthropological theories about how best to analyse and understand information gleaned from other cultures—including Cultural Relativism (CR), Anti-Oppressive Principles (AOP), and Person-Centred Approaches (PCA).

Cultural Relativism denotes a person’s beliefs and activities must be understood in the context of that person’s own culture (Herskovits 1973, Lazer 1994). Anti-Oppressive Principles is the way we evaluate conditions and ways subjects’ powers (with regard to social status, race, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, and age) can be used to shift power away from oppressive persons, organisations, structures, and communities. Clifton (1995) observes that our experiences, histories, geographical location, and place in society affect the way we understand and respond to the complex issues that lead to oppression. Helping to increase marginalised people (especially women)’s awareness of anti-oppressive principles helps them deal with issues arising from powerlessness. In Black Feminist Thought, black women are the best interpreters of the marginalised black woman’s experience. In Person-Centred Approach, Dominelli (2008) stresses the importance of using a Person-Centred Approach to reduce structural inequalities, because it helps to empower users and lessen the deleterious impact of social and economic inequality.

Interpreters: Reflections Working in Cross-Cultural Communities – Adelaide Lusambili

In this section, I reflect on my own experience using male interpreters to speak with marginalized, non-English speaking women in both developed and developing countries. I then present my argument as to why I think black marginalised women’s accounts cannot be properly interpreted by men. It is my contention that, when recruiting interpreters, we need to apply Anti-Oppressive Principles and principles espoused in Black Feminist Thought and to minimise the damage done by chronic conditions of oppression and inequality in these women’s lives

The provision of services in the UK to minority ethnic groups from within the EU and from Commonwealth countries, many of whom come as refugees and asylum seekers and have limited proficiency in the English language, require help in interpreting their stories/views to professionals (Tipton, 2016). Scant research exists on the crucial role of interpreters in gathering information needed to provide culturally appropriate services. In the UK, trained and untrained interpreters work alongside each other. According to a National Health Service England (NHS) policy statement, patients should receive primary care services in a timely manner and should not be prevented from doing so because they do not speak English. and This means that the law requires they be provided with services designed to meet their language and communication needs.

Tipton’s (2016) research revealed some of the issues experienced by health professionals, interpreters, and service users. For example, her study revealed that interpreters are usually hired in a hurry and most of them have limited background in the subject matter. Despite this, interpreters are frequently called upon to provide opinions and give their views on material issues. Other issues raised were service users’ mistrust of interpreters and sometimes also of service providers, who are generally in a hurry to move on to the next appointment. Findings that there is a general feeling of mistrust and that frequent misunderstandings arise from poor quality interpretation, raise concerns about the quality of interpretation and also raise ethical concerns about the quality of treatment provided.

In 2016, I had the opportunity of working with marginalised non-English speaking women who needed interpreters to relay their messages to professionals so that they could be sign-posted to available community services where

they could obtain help. In one instance, a Gypsy male interpreter was called to interpret for a family whose child had undergone physical and sexual abuse. When the interview began, the female respondent whose child had undergone abuse began to explain what had happened in her language. The male interpreter looked on, and when his turn came to relay the message, all he said was, "She says people don't like her on this street...I think that is why her child was assaulted" and then kept quiet. The interpreter then went on to talk with her in their native language. The female interviewee then became emotional, went quiet and began to weep. We decided to cancel the session as we thought she was upset talking about her daughter's abuse. We decided that we would return another day. When we did so, we held the meeting in a community building, with a different male interpreter. This time, we completed the session; however, the male interpreter made it clear to us that he had not translated some words that may relate to sexual acts as the culture does not allow him to do that. He also intervened in the woman's account and told professionals that he knew the family the woman had mentioned that perpetrated the abuse and he did not think that they were capable of committing this act. He went further and spoke to the woman in their native language, which professionals learned later that she had put pressure on this woman not to implicate the family in this case.

This experience was not only with one family in this community but with many of the families with whom we worked. However, when Gypsy women were provided with interpreters from their culture who were women, conversations were detailed and professionals at the session were able to see and interpret the respondents' facial expressions for themselves. Women reported that they preferred their fellow women as interpreters and that male interpreters from the same community could not adequately report or talk about issues of physical or sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated by fellow men.

The experience of women feeling uncomfortable relaying their experiences of abuse in the presence of male interpreters and the issue of male interpreters not wanting to relay messages that they felt could stigmatise the women and their families were also experienced while working with some Black Africans and Asian women in the UK. For instance, while working with a Black African woman, she came to me after a male interpreter had left and revealed that, even though she had said she received welfare benefits, she did not personally receive and control the money, her husband did. She explained that she was afraid to share this information during the interpretation because the male interpreter, who hailed from the same community, might find a way of relaying the information to her husband. A similar instance was experienced when volunteering for an Asian Women organization in North of England who were working with ethnic minority families in fuel poverty. While interviewing an older lady, whose house was cold, the (male) community interpreter, who was familiar with the family, had deliberately omitted information that the bills had not been paid due to the son's financial abuse of his mother. The son had not paid the bills for many months, and the home was cold. When a female interpreter accompanied me, we learned that the son controlled the finances and was abusing the lady financially; however, the male interpreter had failed to tell us this information as he was familiar with the family, and it may be that he wanted to protect the son.

The experiences with interpreters working with black women living in developing countries are no different. Between 2005 -2008 and in 2009 and in the summer of 2016, I conducted research in the slums of Nairobi on differential impacts of environmental sanitation. One of the main findings of this study was women's physical and sexual abuse while accessing sanitation facilities in the night. Because women in these slums did not speak my native language, I employed a male research assistant to translate their stories from their native language into English. Women were uncomfortable sharing their experience of abuse with a male interviewer, while the male interviewer did not seem comfortable delving deeper into the topic.

Issues concerning physical and sexual abuse are very delicate. My experience demonstrates the role of gender identity in research. Research has shown that gender identity can create empathy between interpreters and service users. As such, trust and rapport can provide a conducive environment in which interpreters can open up and discuss their personal experiences (Bhopal, 2010). These experiences have also shown that tensions associated as a result of power relationships can impact the quality of information given by marginalised women. These experiences also highlight the need for professionals to be alert and able to use anti-oppressive principles to prevent ways in which poor interpretation could be detrimental to provision of services to marginalised groups. Adequate provision of services cannot be delivered if in the first instance the available information is not credible.

Interpreters, Gender, and Ethnic Conflict Research – Fr Kizito Muchanga

In the following section, I reflect on my doctoral research conducted with women who had experienced rape and loss of property during the Post-Ethnic Violence (PEV) in Kenya. The purpose of this reflection is to share some

experiences from fieldwork and demonstrate how issues of power, gender and culture caused me to think that black women's – and in particular marginalised women's – stories of their experience of sexual abuse can be better researched or presented by other women. Secondly, based on my reflection, I want to add to the existing knowledge by arguing that women's stories must be understood holistically by locating them within social, cultural and political structures that are geographically and historically specific. Lastly, black feminist thought and anti-oppressive principles are crucial in understanding vulnerable people's experiences of abuse.

My study took place between 2012 and 2015 in Western Kenya. Before commencing this study, I was familiar with most of the women who had suffered physical and sexual abuse during Post-Ethnic Violence. This was through my work as a Catholic Priest in the area, who had provided shelter to these women during the violence. The objective of my study was to examine the effectiveness of the Catholic strategies in dealing with conflicts. As a clergyman and a researcher, I was also keen to understand the experience of these women and the ways in which the church could assist from a psycho-social point of view.

Many of the victims of Post-Election Violence came from a different ethnic group to mine, and spoke a language unfamiliar to me. As such, I had two interpreters helping with the research and alternating depending on their schedules. Because issues of physical and sexual abuse are sensitive culturally and can lead to long-time stigmatisation for individuals and their families in this culture, I decided to use a seminary nun and another clergyman familiar with their language to interpret these women's experiences. The interview process was slow, as potential interviewees who had been identified through the development project affiliated to the church either cancelled their interviews or recanted their testimonies of being raped. For a few of the interviews that we conducted, information received was scant and participants did not want to engage with me, the researcher, or the nun. One nun who worked with the majority of the women in the local health centre had noted that the women should be interviewed during their health sessions and that community health workers or nuns who spoke their language were better placed to interview them. This method was successful as women shared their experience comfortably with the nuns or community health workers. Even when it came to counselling, women preferred to talk to the nuns and they preferred to be counselled by the nuns.

My experience made me to reflect on ways in which development specialists working in Post-Conflict Violence can approach issues of physical and sexual abuse when working with women who have experienced male dominance. While women were willing to share other experiences with me, such as destruction of property they incurred during the violence, they were not comfortable divulging information on sexual abuse. Anti-Oppressive Approaches show how social differences and power can disempower some groups while empowering others. While I am not sure to what extent being male, a clergyman and from a different ethnic group may have caused the women to refrain from sharing their views, it was clear that they felt at ease with other women from their culture. This experience raises issues from Black Feminist Thought, in particular how to represent the subjects lived experience from an insider point of view while paying attention to the intersection between gender, class and culture.

Conclusions:-

In this paper, the authors draw from Black Feminist Thought and Anti-Oppressive Principles' to reflect on the interpreters' role when working with marginalised women, especially women of colour, who are not native English speakers. The authors draw on their personal experience working with women from diverse cultures.

As developed countries are increasingly called upon to provide social services to people from many different cultures, the use of interpreters has also increased. Interpreters, in fact, provide the vital service of making service-users' accounts intelligible. These accounts ultimately guide which services are delivered, and how well interventions meet service users' needs. In questioning the efficacy of using male interpreters to communicate with marginalized female service users, this paper highlights a problem in social and medical service provision that is too often ignored.

Further research needs to examine ways in which social cultural and gender variables must be factored in the recruitment of interpreters. The reflections have also raised issues on the efficacy of male community interpreters in interpreting issues of sexual or physical abuse that are likely to be committed by men from the same culture. Even within countries that have internally displaced people, these reflections provide a platform upon which further research can be conducted that can inform how ethnicity and women speakers of local languages can be used to glean data from victims of sexual abuse in their own cultures.

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