Allied Interpreters: Qualitative Interview Research Studying How Uncertified Interpreters Working With Migrant Agricultural Workers Perceive Their Role, Power Dynamics and Ethics

ARISTA MARTHYMAN (arista@uvic.ca) - DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY - UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA - MARCH 14, 2022

BACKGROUND

MIGRANT WORKERS IN CANADA:

- The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) brings migrant workers from poorer countries (e.g., Mexico) on temporary visas to work on Canadian farms (Polanco & Zell, 2017).
- SAWP workers in Canada do the dirtiest, physically taxing and least paid work (André, 1990).
- SAWP workers may be fearful of deportation by employers if reporting abuse or unsafe working conditions (Basok, 2010).
- Many SAWP workers have low education and English skills, so they often struggle advocating for their needs, making connections and navigating Canadian systems (Basok, 2010).

INTERPRETERS IN PREVIOUS RESEARCH:

- Some interpreters aim to be neutral conduits for information, while others work to empower others as advocates in their role (Hsieh, 2006).
- Bravo (2019) argues that neutral interpreters become automatically aligned with existing power hierarchies, while advocate interpreters can attempt to challenge them.
- The way interpreters see their role influences how they navigate power, make decisions in their role, and perceive ethics (Hsieh, 2006).
- Certified interpreters are theoretically available in medical and government settings, but many of these are not accessible to migrant workers (Colindres et al., 2021). In contrast, untrained, uncertified interpreters associated with non-profits are much more accessible to workers in many different contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do interpreters navigate power dynamics and manage ethical challenges when interpreting for migrant workers in Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program?
- How do personal life experiences and positionality inform how interpreters perceive their role?

KEY FINDINGS

1. Uncertified interpreters for migrant workers can be advocates and supporters of migrant workers.
2. The positionality and experiences of interpreters can help or hinder them in their role.
3. All participants say they use their own power to support and advocate for workers.
4. Accuracy, accessibility, clarity, confidentiality and transparency in interpretation were key ethical considerations for uncertified interpreters identified.
5. Participants help workers by explaining concepts and helping them express themselves, as opposed to providing support limited to literal word for word interpretation.
6. Participants state they navigate many power dynamics (e.g., employer-worker, service provider-worker & interpreter/self-worker) by listening to workers to identify and work around barriers like fear, unethical employers, power abuse, illness, and language barriers.
7. All participants considered spending quality time, establishing trust, and building relationships as important to their role.

REFERENCES


METHODS

Conducted 3 qualitative, semi-structured interviews (45-75 minutes) conducted over Zoom or telephone. The research sample included 3 uncertified interpreters who interpret between Spanish and English as uncertified interpreters for migrant agricultural workers in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. Research was conducted from the ontological perspective of critical realism, and data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

CONCLUSIONS

In British Columbia, uncertified volunteer interpreters play an important role in making many resources accessible to migrant farm workers. From my research, I found that these interpreters perceive their role as a mixture of interpretation, explanation, advocacy and social support. They value relationships and trust-building with workers, and often have aspects of their background that connect them with workers and give them knowledge of workers culture, migrant worker experiences, and the SAWP program. Because of these relationships and background, these interpreters reject neutral, word-for-word interpretation roles as ethical standards. For them, ethical interpretation must include accuracy, accessibility and transparency while helping migrant workers express themselves and working relationally with workers. These interpreters explain that their role is challenging as they must navigate power dynamics that disempower migrant workers. All participants state that they try to use their own personal privilege and power to empower workers especially in the face of systemic opposition and opposition from employers and other actors. They explain that their goal is to support migrant workers to the best of their abilities from the trust that workers place in them.

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