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Research article

Language competence in forensic interviews for suspected child sexual abuse[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Forensic interviews with children for suspected child sexual abuse require meeting children “where they are” in terms of their developmental level, readiness to disclose, culture, and language. The field lacks research indicating how to accommodate children’s diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This article focuses on language competence, defined here as the ability of an organization and its personnel (in this case, Child Advocacy Centers and forensic interviewers) to communicate effectively with clients regardless of their preferred language(s). In this qualitative study, 39 U.S. child forensic interviewers and child advocacy center directors discussed their experiences, practices, and opinions regarding interviews with children and families who are not native speakers of English. Topics include the importance of interviewing children in their preferred language, problems in interpreted interviews, bilingual interviews, and current and recommended procedures. Recommendations for practice and further research are included.

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a significant and common problem in the United States and throughout the world (e.g., [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009](#)), with the potential to harm a child’s development, functioning, and welfare (e.g., [Tishelman, Haney, Greenwald O’Brien, & Blaustein, 2010](#)). CSA also has lifelong implications for victims’ health and well-being (e.g. [Felitti et al., 1998](#); [Putnam, 2003](#)).

Children of all genders, cultures, and socio-economic strata experience CSA (see [Olafson, 2011](#) for a recent review of pertinent demographic factors). Despite the prevalence and tremendous costs associated with CSA, identifying victims is challenging because CSA rarely leaves traces in the forms of medical confirmatory evidence. Instead, identification of CSA typically relies upon children’s report or “disclosure” of their victimization; sometimes this disclosure points to confirmatory forensic evidence. Research reveals that most children delay disclosing CSA experiences for significant time periods or fail to ever disclose during childhood (e.g., [Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003](#); [Paine & Hansen, 2002](#); [Smith et al., 2000](#); [Tishelman, Meyer, Haney, & McLeod, 2010](#)). It is imperative, therefore, that when a child does disclose CSA or is interviewed in an effort to obtain information regarding CSA allegations, these interviews be conducted carefully, utilizing forensically and clinically informed approaches. Although a vast and growing literature investigates and

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proposes evidence-based methodologies for such interviews, many issues related to best practices have yet to be adequately researched.

In an outline of high priority areas for CSA research, [Tishelman and Geffner \(2010\)](#) specified cultural factors as needing further exploration. [Fontes and Plummer \(2010\)](#) note that although “culture stands prominently as a factor in *all* cases in which children are considering disclosing or being asked to disclose” (p. 513), research on cultural influences is scarce. The field still lacks a sophisticated understanding of how culture impacts experiences of abuse, professional responses to CSA, and the complex interactions of children and families with the medical, mental health, social work, and legal professionals involved in CSA cases. This research addresses an important area with implications for criminal prosecution as well as the psychosocial adjustment of child victims and families: cultural issues in forensic interviewing for suspicions of child sexual abuse.

[Fontes and Plummer \(2010\)](#) suggest that cultural factors may be relevant to child forensic interviewing in a variety of ways including: language usage and fluency, nonverbal communication, the experience and communication of stress, the prominent concerns of children and family members, as well as numerous other issues, some of which may not have yet been identified. We must understand these variables in order to develop optimal clinical and interviewing practices for children and families during these difficult conversations ([Fontes, 2008](#)).

Throughout the United States and around the world, interviews conducted in Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are considered the state-of-the-art way to investigate and respond to children when there is a suspicion of CSA victimization (e.g., [Cross, Jones, Walsh, Simone, & Kolko, 2007](#); [Cross et al., 2008](#)). CACs employ a multidisciplinary model to bring together professionals from legal, mental health, social work, and medical arenas to work with children and families in a supportive environment following allegations of CSA. This coordinated response is meant to enhance the care of alleged victims, reduce stress, and help achieve justice by facilitating optimal forensic responses in a child and family centered environment. Typically, highly trained forensic interviewers work within CACs to conduct forensic interviews using research-informed, child-centered and non-suggestive semi-structured interviews with alleged child victims (e.g., [National Child Advocacy Center, 2015](#)). In more than 700 fully accredited CACs throughout the U.S. and in an increasing number of CACs throughout the world, forensic interviewers regularly interview children alleged to have been sexually abused, while members of a multidisciplinary team observe behind a one-way mirror or with a video connection. (Some CACs also interview child victims of severe physical abuse and neglect, as well as child witnesses of violent crimes.) Frequently these interviews are videotaped, documenting both the child’s statement and the interview process. [Cross et al. \(2007\)](#) found that communities with CACs had greater law enforcement involvement in CSA investigations, and higher levels of coordinated care, victim medical exams, caregiver satisfaction, and mental health referrals compared to communities without CACs. However, one limitation of their research evaluating the CAC response to alleged CSA is the lack of data on cultural issues, and specifically foreign language-related challenges ([Cross et al., 2007](#)).

CACs are meant to be accessible to all potential child and adolescent victims and their families. Consistent with this mission, CACs should be equally comfortable for all victims and non-perpetrating guardians, regardless of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, language, cultural norms, national origin, immigration status, or other demographic variables. It is important to examine potential obstacles to this fundamental commitment to accessibility, so these barriers can be addressed and ameliorated.

This article focuses on findings related to language competence, which formed part of a larger study on cultural competence. Here, we define language competence as the ability of an organization and its personnel (in this case, the Child Advocacy Center and forensic interviewers) to communicate effectively with clients regardless of their preferred language(s). This study explores the most frequent, important, and challenging issues related to language competence as perceived by forensic interviewers and CAC directors in varying geographic, socio-economic and racially/ethnically diverse communities in the U.S. We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study prior to initiating participant recruitment.

1. Method

We conducted semi-structured qualitative individual interviews with professional child forensic interviewers and directors working within CACs across the United States. Qualitative methods allow patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to emerge from the data and therefore are well-suited for studying complex social phenomenon in context. Although qualitative methods lack the statistical precision of quantitative studies, they are especially well-suited to investigating topics about which little is known ([Patton, 2014](#)). Exploratory qualitative studies generate hypotheses and suggest themes that can later be confirmed, disconfirmed, or elaborated through subsequent qualitative or quantitative research ([Rossman & Wilson, 1985](#)). Conducting semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to gather data on specific questions, while also allowing participants to speak about themes that were not included in the original interview guide ([Esterberg, 2001](#)).

1.1. Participants

Thirty-nine CAC forensic interviewers and CAC directors who work within CACs across the United States participated. Thirty-seven were female and two were male. Our sample included participants from the four CAC regions in the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) with participants currently working in twenty-two states. All participation was completely voluntary and no compensation was provided. To assure anonymity, neither state directors nor CAC directors

were informed of forensic interviewer participation. Ethnically, 72% ($N=28$) identified as White/Caucasian or European-American, while the remaining 28% ($N=11$) identified as Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, or Multiracial. (Some multiracial participants mentioned Native American ancestry and affiliations.) Most participants had some experience conducting interviews through a foreign language interpreter—ranging from “occasionally” to “all the time.” Some of the multilingual participants conduct bilingual interviews and/or have interpreted forensic interviews. This multiplicity of positions enhanced participants’ ability to comment on various facets of language competence in child forensic interviewing.

1.2. Procedures

Participants were recruited via an email on a list-serve for forensic interviewers, which included contact information for the researchers. Potential participants contacted the researchers through email, indicating their interest in learning more about and possibly participating in the study. The researchers responded to inquiries with basic information about the study and to set up an initial telephone call, when appropriate. During the interview call, the researcher obtained verbal consent using a standard consent form approved by the IRB, and conducted an audio-recorded semi-structured interview. Following the interviews, all audio-recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription agency.

The researchers posed open-ended questions geared toward addressing the most salient cultural issues encountered and how they were managed and resolved. In addition, the interviewers asked about resources, professional training pertaining to culture, and demographic information relevant to years of forensic interviewer experience, as well as the participants’ own cultural background and how they thought this might affect their interviewing. The researchers sought to understand the themes generated by the participants, and probed some responses with clarifying questions. The researchers frequently asked the participants for specific examples to illustrate their assertions.

1.3. Data analysis

The two researchers initially reviewed the transcripts for broad thematic categories. All of the interviews were then collapsed into one file and general search terms were created that pertain to each category. For this article, we searched for dozens of terms related to foreign languages and interpreters such as “interpret,” “translation/translate,” “language,” “meaning,” “Spanish,” “speak,” “confusion,” and “words.” After relevant passages were identified through these searches, they were extracted from the interviews to create an overall file of related content, which the researchers then analyzed and classified by theme. After drafting the article, the researchers read through the transcripts one more time to incorporate any relevant data that had been missed. This article concerns only those themes related to language competence in interviews; articles will follow focused on other themes.

For the final preparation of this manuscript, fillers such as “um,” and “you know” were deleted. Some longer statements were shortened for concision with the missing words or sentences indicated with ellipses.

2. Findings

The data analysis described above led to the identification of themes related to foreign languages and interpreting in child forensic interviews for suspected child sexual abuse. The themes are enumerated below, along with selected relevant participant statements. Usually statements by two or more participants supported each theme. We include more than one statement related to a single theme only where they provide additional elaboration on the theme.

2.1. Languages encountered in forensic interviews

The participants spontaneously described encountering numerous languages in their forensic interviewing work. This list included, in alphabetical order and with the participants’ own descriptors: Arabic, “Asian languages,” Burmese, Cantonese, Chinese, “a central African language,” “a Congolese language,” French, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, “Latino,” Mandarin, Marshallese (an unnamed dialect from the Marshall islands), Mayan, “Micronesian languages,” Pennsylvania Dutch, Pidgin English (Hawaii), Polish, “Polynesian languages,” Portuguese, Quechua, Russian, Samoan, Somali, Spanish, “Sudanese languages,” Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

The participants also mentioned children using specific words from languages of the indigenous peoples of the U.S. including Ojibwa and Yupik, as well as specific English vernacular related to sub-subcultures in the United States, such as African American Vernacular English (“Black English”), “country” words, and “street” words. Participants additionally mentioned that interviewees sometimes used slang words that were more common among young people, and which required clarification. Several participants raised issues concerning American Sign Language interpreting. Although these additional issues of language competence merit discussion, they are beyond the scope of this article.

2.2. Interviewing children in their primary language

Many participants emphasized the importance of interviewing children and adolescents in their primary language. They noted that even youth who are fluent in English may be more comfortable speaking their first language when discussing sensitive and potentially traumatic issues related to CSA:

I think a child needs to communicate in the language where the child feels the most comfortable. . . There's nothing like the genuine words out of a child's mouth.

Once they get to the traumatic part or the part that's hard to say, they want to revert to their native language.

You have a lot of kids who speak Spanish in the home, and they come to school and they speak Spanish and English and so when it comes to an interview, I need to find out what that child feels most comfortable speaking. . . because they're going to resort back to what they feel most comfortable in. . . especially when you start going into a traumatic experience.

Participants also described the frequent need for an interpreter or bilingual staff member to speak to members of a child's family.

If I have a mom who maybe speaks some English, but because this is such a serious matter and so important, she wants an interpreter. I have to respect that, and I have to provide her with the best way for her to be able to communicate with me.

Participants described occasions when a child or family's lack of English language skills was mistakenly perceived as a lack of cooperation by others who did not understand the importance of language competence. One participant described such an incident with a Spanish-speaking family:

Law enforcement and prosecution were saying that this family was being completely non-cooperative and child protection was saying, "No, they aren't. They're very cooperative but they're not understanding what you're saying to them even if they're nodding their heads and saying, 'yes.'" The outcome of that conversation was that the child protective worker. . . served as the interpreter and then the case moved along beautifully. . . The lead detectives on the cases were not Spanish-speaking and they were dealing with a Spanish-speaking family, but the family seemed to speak English. . . That was another one of those ones where there were some real assumptions made.

2.3. Code switching

Participants described interviews conducted primarily in English in which children occasionally wanted to use a word from their other language:

When I'm interviewing Latino kids, even if their articulated first language, the one that they want to be interviewed in is English, sometimes I notice that there will be like a beat, and then the kids will say, "Well do you know what blah-blah-blah is?" . . . and it's something that doesn't necessarily have a good translation. . . They'll give me a Spanish word, maybe "comadre" or something, where they're wondering if I understand something in their experience which just doesn't translate.

One participant commented that some bilingual children are "between both languages." Even when questions are asked in English, children may switch into their preferred language, sometimes without awareness.

Sometimes you get kids who come in here, and they kind of mix Spanish and English together. . . They feel comfortable in English, so we don't use an interpreter, but they use certain words and mix Spanish and English together and so that can kind of be confusing.

The participants described bilingual children growing frustrated, quiet or angry while trying to think of "the right word" in English.

Kids who are bilingual, sometimes they'll say, "I don't know the English word for that," and I'll say, "That's okay. You can use any word in here, and I can take a break in a little bit and find out what you're talking about and see if I can find the English word." Because a lot of times for Spanish-speaking cases or bilingual children, if we don't have a Spanish-speaking interviewer available, still the team member and investigators, or at least someone behind the glass will be able to translate that. And a lot of times, kids will be able to figure it out later. Sometimes it just doesn't come right to their minds.

Interviewers reported a variety of strategies for handling occasional words in a language other than English.

When I didn't understand something when kids would say it, I would just say, "Well, tell me about that," and then get them to kind of talk about the context of it so that I would understand what was happening. Sometimes I would take a break and go into the other room and ask the team, "Do you know what they're talking about?" or I would sometimes ask the advocate to ask the parent. . . I try not to talk to the parents very often, but sometimes I would go out and say, "This is what they're saying. Can you tell me a little bit about that?" so I would get an understanding of it.

2.4. Accuracy and completeness

Participants asserted that accuracy may be impeded and information lost when conducting an interview only in English with multilingual children. Immigrant children learn English in a variety of contexts and have uneven vocabularies (Altarriba & Morier, 2004). Even some children who seem quite fluent in English may have particular gaps in their English language vocabulary.

One participant described getting called back after an interview by a girl who said she had more to disclose but didn't know how. The interviewer asked the girl if it would be a good idea to call in someone who speaks Spanish to help with the second interview:

And she said, "Yes, because I don't have a word for what you asked me. When you asked me where he was standing and I shrugged my shoulders. . . I didn't have a word for where he was standing." And do you know what the word was? "Hallway." . . .She could tell me she was sitting on the couch, and she could tell me that he had on a towel, but she didn't have a word for "hallway". . . Didn't have the language.

Participants reported that children may have trouble conveying specific content in English because a different language was used during their victimization.

Another reason to interview that child in Spanish is because the offender was generally speaking Spanish. We had one case where the offender would text her but in Spanish. . . .He was doing a ton of grooming and so you wanted to capture that in Spanish or what he would say to her during the assaults, that kind of thing.

Participants described bilingual children's occasional difficulty conveying information about specific body parts, sexual acts, and disciplinary practices, in English:

The language barrier. Lots of different words for body parts, lots of different words for disciplining. . .

Sometimes with Latinos we'll have children that do speak English, but I always make sure that the interpreters that we have here are on hand because the thing that I've run into is that they'd say, "This child speaks English just fine." Well, yeah they probably do speak English in saying "Hi, my name is María and I go to XXXX High School," but when she needs to tell me that he put his penis in her vagina, she may not have heard words like that in any other language but her own. . . .Most of the adults in her world are Spanish-speaking.

Participants reported that when children are interviewed in their non-preferred language their statements often lack specificity. One participant reported interviewing a "very smart" four year-old whose mother assured the CAC staff that he did speak English, and the child spoke in English fine until he was asked about the abuse:

He started speaking in Spanish, and we started realizing we had that barrier, and he was trying to give information. . . . In English he was able to give a very broad explanation of what happened, however, we knew that there was more details. . . .We figured out that the child needed a translator, so when we left the interview room and we came back out and talked to the mom, the mom told us, "Oh yeah, he did give me that outcry in Spanish," which would have been very good to know earlier. And so we let that family leave, and we contacted a translator and had them come back, and we did a second interview with that child with our translator so that that kid could communicate better about what happened.

Participants reported that children who have limited English proficiency sometimes use formulaic phrasing when speaking English, leading their speech to sound rehearsed or unnatural:

Children who speak another language first might use learned phrases in speaking English, like 'now he does this. . .'

2.5. Procedures for interviewing children who are English language learners

Participants described a wide range of procedures for addressing the needs of children and their families who are not fluent in English. Some CACs employ bilingual interviewers capable of conducting interviews routinely in their additional languages, either as members of their staff or on an as-needed basis. Some of these interviewers are fully trained whereas others have related jobs (e.g. with police or child protective services) and are asked to conduct interviews without adequate specialized preparation. At least one CAC has a rule against conducting interviews entirely in a language other than English and requires even bilingual interviewers to use an interpreter. Some CACs rely on a small group of interpreters who have become comfortable in the forensic interview setting whereas others rely on telephone interpretation or whichever interpreter an agency happens to send over. Some still rely on "ad hoc" or informal interpreters—that is, members of the community (such as Spanish teachers, bilingual university students, or bilingual professionals from other fields) to interpret child forensic interviews.

2.5.1. Deciding whether an interpreter is needed. Participants report difficulties deciding when an interpreter or bilingual interviewer should be called in to work with a specific bilingual child. The following comment was typical: "Kids say they speak English but then you get into the room and it seems chopped up."

Some centers have clear procedures for determining whether a child needs to be interviewed in a language other than English, whereas others do not.

When the child arrives, there is what we call a “pre-interviewing round table.” And during that time we learn about whether the child speaks primarily English or Spanish and then make decisions about who will do the interview based on a number of factors, one of which is English and culture. . . .Typically the police or CPS will say, “Oh, the children speak English fine. It’s the parents who speak primarily Spanish.” So initially we used to listen to that, and what we found is that, during the course of the interview, when it came to discussing the more sensitive topics, the children didn’t have the language and that they would revert to Spanish, which put us in a very difficult position, because now what do we do? So now, when we know that a family is Spanish-speaking and the child can speak English but they also speak Spanish, we will try to make sure that the person who is doing the interview speaks both languages. It has been majorly more successful that way because then a child can go back and forth in whichever language they’re the most comfortable.

I really try to push for giving them the [language] choice. When we get the referrals, I usually am the one to set up the appointments and I am always asking the case workers and the police officers, “Please check with the family which language the child would prefer.” And they tend to assume a little bit more, “Oh, if they are in high school, you know, their English is fine.”

Several participants described conflict in their multidisciplinary teams regarding the need to interview a child in that child’s preferred language, other than English.

The police feel like if they could communicate with that child, then that interview can be in English. And we always really say, just because they can doesn’t mean that that is the language that is most comfortable for them.

Other interviewers described “feeling panic” when they discovered that the child who was going to be interviewed did not speak English, and either rescheduling the interview for another day, trying to “get by” with an interview conducted in English, or scrambling to meet the language competency needs at the last minute.

We recently had a family come in who is Micronesian and it was DHS and law enforcement on the team. They did not mention that before the interview, and when I went to greet the family and bring the child back to the interview room, right before I did that, the DHS worker said, “Oh by the way, I don’t know if one of the children speaks English.”

2.6. Finding the right interpreter

Participants described delays in finding an interpreter—or a properly trained interpreter—as slowing down the investigation process. They described postponing interviews until the right interpreter was located and made available. If the child’s language or dialect was uncommon in their area or even difficult to find through telephone interpreting, these waits could delay a case a week or more. They also described occasions where a multidisciplinary team assembled for an interview that had to be postponed at the last minute when it was discovered that an interpreter was needed. Participants reported that some cases were dropped when it proved too difficult to find an interpreter. Depending on their location, participants described the expensive practice of flying in interpreters from other cities for languages including Russian, a Marshallese dialect, and Somali.

Participants described awkward situations when the interpreter and family were acquainted, from the same clan, or from the same small community in their country of origin or in the United States. They reported that particularly in small, tight-knit refugee and immigrant communities, it can be difficult to find an interpreter who doesn’t have a prior connection with the child’s family. An interpreter who is known to a family might pose confidentiality risks.

A lot of interpreters that are used come from their own community. And so we brought in a family who, um, it was sexual abuse going on with the father to the daughter and come to find out the interpreter knew that family, has interpreted for them several times, is friends with the family, comes over for dinner and all of that kind of stuff. . . .That child was then terrified and the interpreter let us know that and that he knew them. . . .and we had to assess and figure out whether we needed to find someone different and reschedule this interview because he knew that if he got back there, the child was going to clam up because this is a friend of the family who is interpreting and about to know everything that’s happening. And so we ended up having to find a different interpreter for that interview.

We did have a young woman who came in who was Muslim and had been alleged to have been sexually assaulted. She was brought in by her brother. . . .We had an interpreter because she did not speak English and it turned out that she knew the interpreter, so she became very upset. . . .In this case, there definitely was a cultural concern about someone within the community knowing that this young woman had been assaulted. And so we did get another interpreter.

Participants described difficulty finding interpreters who could speak their clients’ exact dialects who were not known to those clients.

We wanted to bring in an interpreter but we couldn’t identify one that wasn’t connected to this family. So we were struggling with the interpreters online, through a telephone system, and this family was from a small, remote part of the country and

so a translator just wasn't connecting. . .it wasn't a clear translation. . . It was just a long, frustrating battle, and I think we ended up bringing in another family member who had stronger English skills and was helping us understand what was really happening.

2.7. "A world of problems:" difficulties in the interpreted interview

Although participants agreed on the need to engage an interpreter (or bilingual interviewer) when the child was not fully comfortable in English, they acknowledged that interviews conducted through interpreters were often difficult and far from ideal. Those who had used foreign language interpreters frequently described large and small dissatisfactions with their interpreting experiences. This kind of comment was common:

I hate it. I absolutely hate it. I just think you just run into a world of problems. There are just so few people who are trained for interpreting forensic interviews in any language. . .It just ruins the flow of the interview. You can't ask the follow up question as quickly as you might want to. . . I'm really not a fan. I have not seen it work terribly well.

2.7.1. *Slowed interviews.* Participants described interpreted interviews as taking longer, which can frustrate the interviewer, the team and the child. The slow pace of the interpreted interview strains children's attention and patience.

With any type of interpreter, it is a struggle. It just is, because it's a long process.

The interviews take twice as long because you have lots of pauses for the translator, and there's always that broken up communication any time you speak through a translator, and so it's kind of a frustrating thing.

You go in there and you just hope for the best, and they're definitely different and definitely take longer, and. . .you hope that the child doesn't get too frustrated in the process because they normally do.

Participants suggested that the slow pace of the interviews is particularly problematic with young children, who have a reduced ability to tolerate a long interview in the best of circumstances.

The younger [child] you get is the hardest, and the reason for that is because you already have such a small window of time in order to get that disclosure. So with an interpreter you need to be able to go quicker but you can't and so you are losing a lot of time just because of the translating process. And children lose attention so quick that when I have to ask it and then the interpreter has to ask it, and then the child answers and the interpreter has to answer it in English, we lose that child within those broken spaces. . .And so the younger they are, the more difficult for sure.

While acknowledging that interpretation slows down an interview, not all participants defined this as a problem:

[Interviewing through an interpreter] is different, it's a little bit more challenging. . .They're a little bit longer. But, I mean, I don't mind but it does take a little longer.

2.7.2. *Forensic integrity.* Participants expressed concern that interpreters were giving information to a child or family that was beyond what the interviewer had stated—and might be incorrect or inappropriate or in some way damage the integrity and forensic value of the interview.

This interpreter was having conversations outside of what we would consider appropriate. . . with the family, as far as maybe giving information that we would not want the family to have regarding the interview and regarding the investigation.

Additionally, the precise way questions are asked in interviews must be replicated when these questions are interpreted. Participants expressed concern that interpreters sometimes might interpret questions too "loosely," therein damaging the interview.

Within the interview, we just weren't sure that the questions the interpreter was asking were non-leading and non-suggestive.

[Some of the interpreters] kind of put their own spin on it to get it out and that we find can be a big problem. A couple of our Spanish interpreters have done that and we have lots of problems with them trying to ask questions in their own way.

Some participants reported that because of possible interpreting problems, they might be careful in how much credence they give to answers to single interpreted questions.

When you're interviewing, obviously, the nuances of how you ask the questions can be really important, and so the team is always a little cautious of answers [in interpreted interviews], and especially if the child's answer seems a little weird, kind of out of context.

2.7.3. *Side conversations.* Participants conveyed their impression that sometimes interpreters were engaging in "side conversations" with children and families and failing to interpret these.

It's really, really hard for the interpreter just to interpret and not to interject even when it's not just about something that doesn't translate well. They get into their own mini-conversation, and it's different and it makes a different dynamic interview.

You can always tell when they're having more conversation than you just had. So if I ask a question and then the interpreter asks a question and the child answers the question in Spanish and then the interpreter asks something else to the child, I know that she did something wrong because. . . she's saying more, and the child said something, and she didn't interpret it for me. So, she'll kind of have a string of conversation with the child in Spanish without interpreting it to me.

The times where I feel like it hasn't gone well is where there's conversation between the interpreter and my child, or even between the interpreter and a parent, if we're talking to the parent. I kind of expect to ask a question, and they ask a question, and then the child gives an answer, and they provide an answer, but there have been times where the child or the parent has answered, and then the interpreter has talked to the child some more, and then there is some more answer and then they talk to me.

2.7.4. *Distracting and awkward.* Participants described the presence of an interpreter in the room as being “distracting” at times for both the interviewer and the child, and as interfering with the normal flow of conversation. They described that the team members and the children just felt “awkward” or “uncomfortable” having to communicate through a third person.

[Working through an interpreter] causes some breakage in that interview and I think you lose some of those details. You lose some of those key things that you want to get. . . even though the translator we get for our Hispanic population is amazing. She's absolutely wonderful, but you can get some who are not so good. They need to keep the inflections that we have in our voices. They need to ask the questions exactly how we ask them, but there's still that broken thing where the child is hearing it from me, then they have to hear it from the interpreter, and then the child has to answer to the interpreter and then the interpreter answers in English.

A lot of the conflict can stem from actually having that extra person in the room.

Other participants suggested that if they felt comfortable with the interpreter, it was easier for the child to feel comfortable as well.

2.7.5. *Lost in translation.* Participants expressed their concern that interpreters were not always interpreting correctly or exactly, and that this might affect a legal case. They said they could sometimes tell that the interpretation was not verbatim or complete, even if they could not understand the target language. A center director reported:

They need to be interpreting verbatim what the interviewer says and what the child says. And based on some of the responses of the children and the way the interpreter interprets back to them. . . the interviewers get the sense that they are not interpreting exactly as they should.

I don't know if it's being asked exactly like I'm asking it or is there no way to ask it exactly like I'm asking it? So there's always that uneasiness that I'm not really sure. . . and the same with the response back. . . Is it getting communicated to me exactly as the child meant it to be or is there something lost in the translation?

When you have an interpreter and you have a different language, it's kind of hard to know exactly how things are being translated or if they're being conveyed in the way that you're meaning for them to be conveyed.

I understand enough Spanish that I could tell she was not interpreting exactly. The kid was going between English and Spanish and I just wanted her to interpret everything, even if it seemed like the child understood, but I wasn't able to really get that across to her. She was not interpreting everything and I would have to look at her and be like, “Do that one! Do that sentence!” It was really awkward

I speak a little Spanish and I can tell the question I'm asking is not the question that's being interpreted

I interviewed a child who spoke Polish and we used an interpreter inside the forensic interview pod with me. So there were two of us sitting in the room with the child. [The interpreter] was a police officer who was not in uniform. . . But I wasn't getting the sense that he was saying exactly what I was saying. . . even though I said to him, “No matter what, say exactly what I'm saying, and then tell me exactly what they say back. Please don't paraphrase or change anything.” . . I think he paraphrased the entire thing.

The participants reported handling situations of inadequate interpreting by reminding the interpreter that their statements needed to be interpreted verbatim, by reporting perceived problems to the interpreter's agency, and by declining to work with certain interpreters. The participants also expressed their frustration because it was difficult for them to tell whether an interpretation was exact if they had no knowledge of the target language.

2.7.6. *Emotional content of interviews is lost or changed.* Participants described how interviewers may miss some of the emotional content if they are not speaking with children in their preferred language.

Be watchful of your thinking that when they show no expressions on their faces – that they don't care, or it's not so bad what happened to them. Like I said, it could be a language barrier that's holding them back from showing an expression.

There's so much that you can tell by the words that a child says and the emotion that they use with them, and you don't have that. . . Even with Latino children it's lost a lot of times. I don't hear the quiver in the voice as much with the word, maybe, because I don't understand the word.

2.7.7. *Reluctance to interpret sexual matters.* Participants reported that some interpreters recoiled when the interviews required using sexual words—precisely the focus of these forensic interviews.

When we used the Japanese [interpreter], that was a big disaster because the interpreter was so uncomfortable with using the words that needed to be used that it was a real problem. . . body parts words, sexual words.

Another participant described a social worker who spoke a central African language but refused to interpret sexual abuse interviews because he believed the sensitivity of these conversations made it too difficult to work subsequently in the community in other kinds of situations.

2.7.8. *Interpreter professionalism and boundaries.* Participants described some interpreters as lacking professional habits and boundaries. They also described their continual frustration with interpreters who did not understand the requirements of forensic interviews. One participant described an interpreter displaying affection toward a child in a way that might be seen as inappropriate.

[The interpreter] was used to giving pet names, and it was a little girl, and she was three years old, and she kept saying "M'ija" [an affectionate term in Spanish for girl, meaning, "my daughter"] and the interviewer wasn't aware she was saying that. Different interviewers who had been watching had realized she was saying that. . . The next time she came back, we had to reiterate with her, "You can't use pet names. I know you want to, we want to sometimes, but we can't. We have to just say what she said and say what the interviewer said."

Another participant described an interpreter whose cell phone rang during the course of a child forensic interview. "He wanted to take the call and we had to say, 'You can't do that.'"

2.7.9. *Interpreter emotions.* Interviewing for suspected child abuse can be emotionally upsetting. While members of the multidisciplinary team know what to expect and have been trained to handle the feelings that may emerge, participants described foreign language interpreters as openly expressing surprise, shock, disbelief, anger, or sadness during the course of interviews. Sometimes interpreters were so overcome by feelings that they felt unable to continue their work.

We had to have a Tagalog interpreter, and the detective. . . got a court-certified interpreter that he paid for, and the interpreter did a great job with the language. . . but the thing that happened in this particular one which really got me thinking was the abuse was so bad, the interpreter broke down and sobbed and we had to stop the interview. She had to excuse herself from the room. The person we were interviewing had. . . a very flat affect about what had happened, but the interpreter just completely broke down.

2.8. Telephone interpreting

Some jurisdictions forbid the use of telephone interpreters for forensic interviews, whereas others rely on them frequently. Some CACs use telephone interpreters to "fill in" either during emergencies or to help with languages for which it is especially hard to find an interpreter in their geographic area. Participants described problems inherent in interviews interpreted through a telephone.

It's hard to match dialects; it's hard to create a sense of comfort when we have this other third party on the line that is trying to translate all of this communication. It's hard to build that connection with the family. . . It makes it harder for us, so I know it has to make it ten times more uncomfortable for the family.

We actually ended up having to use a language line which is so not ideal. And the child spoke English, mom did not. And it was really hard because with the language line, obviously, we do not know what is being said, and if it's being translated properly or interpreted properly, and it was just a really challenging day. . . because we didn't know, there was just sort of this fear: "Is mom getting all the information?" And we're telling her, "This person, whoever, is interpreting for us right now, you know, they're a paid professional through DCSF and the interpreting line." . . . And mom was really struggling and it was just really, just not an ideal situation at all.

Participants described children as appearing "pretty confused" with telephone interpreting.

Participants also described the benefits of access to telephone interpreting, despite its drawbacks:

We had an emergency case that came. . . My bilingual person was not available and the father was very, very upset and distraught. So I decided to use the language line which I don't often use because I usually try to have a person with me, but it was clear that without having the bilingual conversation, we were never going to be able to help him feel better. . . It

worked out fine. I found it awkward because you're saying something to the telephone and then the telephone is helping him understand, and he's speaking back, so it's cumbersome but I think it made a difference in the outcome. . . . He was really upset and I don't think he could have been helped to understand with my very limited Spanish.

2.9. Gender of interpreter

Some participants asserted that different issues emerged, on occasion, depending on the gender of the interpreter and the child. They described instances across a variety of language and cultures in which male and female children were less comfortable with a male interpreter, or in which the male interpreter himself was too embarrassed or distressed to complete the interview. (Participants reported no situations in they believe a male interpreter would have been preferable.)

We had a translator that we struggled with. . . we were doing Burmese, and we were talking to him, and he was a male interpreter and our victim was a female and it was sexual abuse. . . . He felt extremely uncomfortable in the room. I could tell he felt uncomfortable. He was making the child feel uncomfortable, and so what we found out later is. . . . He felt like it was hindering the child from saying something, because in their culture, they would never speak about sexual things in front of a man.

One participant reported a situation in which a concern about a male interpreter hindering a girl's ability to disclose was unwarranted:

I was at first concerned because it was a male interpreter, but the young woman was fine, and her brother was fine with us using a male interpreter. I thought that might be an issue because of, you know, in the Muslim culture, often keeping the sexes separate.

2.10. Interpreter strengths and preparation

Participants discussed the importance of preparing interpreters for the particular ways questions are asked in child forensic interviews. Many interpreters are unaccustomed to the forensic requirement that interpretation be precise and questions non-leading. Participants also found it important to let interpreters know about some of the possible content of the interviews, so they would not be openly shocked to hear about violent or sexual incidents involving children.

You have to make sure to train your interpreters before they ever set foot in that room, or else you're kind of setting your interview up to fail. . . . If we've never see them before. . . . we ask them to come in early and we kind of do a training with them.

In describing the positive experiences they have had with interpreters, participants revealed the qualities they think are important in interpreters and in the interpreting process. These included “a really good understanding of the process of an interview,” understanding and respecting the need to “not overtalk the interviewer, and translating specifically what we ask, and translating very directly what the child says in response.” Another participant mentioned the “need to keep the inflections that we have in our voices. They need to ask the questions exactly how we ask them.”

They need to only say what I say. And so the translator who is so amazing, if the child says something that she knows that that is not what I meant, and that's not the answer I was looking for, she still gives me the answer the child said and that's it. She waits for me to ask another question to clarify the information that I'm looking for.

Most participants reported that ideally, the CACs would have multilingual forensic interviewers on staff, backed up by forensically trained interpreters for languages they encounter less frequently. However, they reported that resources were inadequate to make this possible. Consequently, they sometimes “made do” by conducting interviews in English only, with undertrained bilingual interviewers, or with ad hoc interpreters. Many participants described bilingual interviews conducted by a bilingual interviewer as preferable to interpreted interviews.

3. Discussion and conclusion

This study highlights the language issues forensic interviewers and the multilingual families they assist confront in their work together. Participants stressed the importance of language access and the difficulty finding forensically trained interpreters. Often CACs did not have a standard or entirely satisfactory means of resolving these issues, especially given the multiple languages they encounter, some of which are rare in their location or specific to a small population. The complications of finding competent interpreters gain particular salience when both the families needing interpretation and the interpreters live in small ethnic communities where they are apt to know each other. Although participants generally described interpreted interviews as time-consuming and difficult, they also expressed gratitude that the interpreters were available to make interviews possible in children's preferred language. Participants varied in their comfort in using both in-person and telephone interpreter services. Notably, only a small number of CACs employed bilingual forensic interviewers—and usually these were in urban areas and the bilingual interviewers were Spanish-speaking. Several participants asserted their preference for bilingual interviewers over conducting interviews through interpreters.

Importantly, we observed the sensitive way in which many of the forensic interviewers thought about language issues; we are impressed by their commitment, knowledge, and determination to provide the best possible environment for interviewing alleged child and adolescent sexual abuse victims. We are moved by the intelligence and flexibility that forensic interviewers use to approach linguistic challenges. Issues relevant to language competence resonated with most of the participants, many of whom conveyed respect and compassion as they described in detail the challenges they face with language minority interviewees and their families.

This research indicates a lack of consistency of resources and language-relevant practices across child advocacy centers. A language minority child might have widely divergent experiences depending on the CAC and/or the language(s) spoken by the particular child and his or her family. For instance, a Spanish speaking child might encounter a variety of responses, including a requirement to speak in English during the interview, a bilingual interviewer, an in-person interpreter who could be forensically-trained or not, or a telephone interpreter who is unlikely to be familiar with the child forensic interviewing context. While some CACs have well-established processes for accessing foreign language interpreters, others appeared to lack these and scramble at the last minute to meet the language needs of children and families. Forensic interviewers described cases which were dropped due to lack of available interpreting services. Participants emphasized the many difficulties they have encountered with both in-person and telephonic interpreting, and highlighted the need for forensically trained interpreters who understand the interviewing process. This can, admittedly, be challenging, given the range of languages spoken by alleged victims and their families, and the relative dearth of resources in rural areas or where people who speak certain languages are less commonly encountered. Inadequate funding for interpreting was repeatedly mentioned as a challenge.

Forensic interviewers reported encountering numerous languages (and cultures) during the course of their work. While some participants described careful attention to language issues at their CAC, others described a disturbing lack of attention to the same. Some participants lamented the lack of resources on language competence in child forensic interviews, seemingly unaware of the resources that do exist (e.g. Balogh & Salaets, 2015; Fontes, 2008, 2009).

Table 1

Summary of findings and recommendations regarding language competence in child forensic interviews for suspected sexual abuse.

Findings (reports or observations by participants)	Recommendation
When interviewed in English only, many Limited English Proficiency (LEP) children & family members cannot provide complete & accurate information, impeding investigations & prosecutions.	Interview children in their preferred language.
Multilingual children incorporate more than one language within a single interview.	Interview with a bilingual interviewer or interpreter.
CACs follow widely divergent practices regarding language use with bilingual and LEP children and families.	Develop best practice guidelines for bilingual interviews. Develop national guidelines for assuring CAC language competence.
Important information is missed & interviews are delayed due to CAC difficulty determining when an interpreter is needed.	Develop a decision tree for determining when an interpreter is needed.
Interpreted interviews are slower.	Allot additional time for interpreted interviews, including breaks so children can rest. To maximize their ability to provide full accounts of their experiences, LEP children may need more than one interview session.
CACs sometimes use ad hoc interpreters & professional interpreters who are not forensically trained.	Develop national guidelines for finding interpreters for common & less common languages. Train all interpreters used by CACs in the specifics of child forensic interviews, including forensic requirements & the possibility of violent & sexual content.
CACs face problems from professional & ad hoc interpreters who are known to the child or family.	Disallow the use of untrained ad-hoc interpreters & develop guidelines for handling interpreters who have a relationship with the child and/or family.
Interpreted interviews evidence problems including inaccuracy, side conversations, discomfort, missing information, misinformation, & distortions of emotional content.	Train all foreign language interpreters used by CACs. Such training can be accomplished in-person, online, or through a video review. Train forensic interviewers in best practices for working with interpreters, to improve their own comfort & competence in this aspect of their work.
Some interpreters are reluctant to discuss sexual matters, lack professionalism, & show overly strong emotional responses.	Foreign language interpreters need to be supervised & screened for their performance in child forensic interviews.
Telephone interpreting often fails in child forensic interviews.	Develop guidelines for using telephone interpreters including screening for language abilities & appropriateness, and/or restrict or reject their use in child forensic interviews in all but emergency situations.
Male interpreters may have more difficulty with the material or may inhibit certain children.	Further research is needed into gender issues in forensic interviews & how to prepare interpreters of all genders for these conversations. When the interpreter's gender (or other personal characteristic) appears to be inhibiting a child's ability to speak, CACs should offer the option of another interpreter.
Some foreign language interpretation is highly effective in child forensic interviews.	Those interpreters who work well in the forensic interviewing context should be invited to provide regular interpreting services. Research is needed to document effective foreign language interpreting in CACs.

3.1. Recommendations

In response to this research, we strongly recommend the development of CAC guidelines on language competence, including best practices with regard to working with children and their families who speak a language other than English. Please see Table 1 for a summary of major themes emerging from this research along with recommendations.

Conversations with participants suggest that bilingual children should always have the option to express themselves in multiple languages during forensic interviews, and that trained bilingual/bicultural forensic interviewers are usually preferable to interpreters, albeit not always practical. Research findings also indicate that recruiting and training forensic interviewers with diverse language skills matched to their communities should be a high priority. Guidelines should also discuss options for preparing interpreted interviews for court, including an English language voice-over, subtitles, a summary in English, an English-language transcription, simultaneous interpretation in court, and others. Finally, guidelines can specify best practices regarding the selection, training, and supervision of interpreters. (A training video for foreign language interpreters of child forensic interviews is available for streaming free of cost through the training portal of the [Midwest Regional Child Advocacy Center](#)).

Further research is needed related to language competence in CSA forensic interviews. For instance, researchers should systematically and more broadly examine the ways in which language issues affect alleged victims and their families, including the progress (or lack of progress) of cases through the criminal justice system, access to mental health, medical, and victim advocacy services, and related communications. In addition, research is needed on how interpreted CSA interviews may differ from other CSA interviews—from the perspectives of youth, families, interpreters, and legal professionals involved with cases. Language competence in investigative interviews for child sexual abuse has potentially significant implications for youth and family recovery and access to justice.

3.1.1. Limitations. The participants in this study were all volunteers who expressed an eagerness to discuss cultural issues in their work by actively responding to a researcher-initiated query. The participating forensic interviewers and CAC directors do not represent a randomly recruited subject sample, and therefore may not present the views and experiences of all forensic interviewers and CAC directors. Additionally, the ways that forensic interviewers remember and recount their experiences are filtered through several lenses including those of their training, expectations, and memory. Their statements represent their own perceptions and interpretations, which could differ from those of others who may have been present including the child interviewees, interpreters, family members, and colleagues from their multidisciplinary teams.

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