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# Language Barriers & Perceptions of Bias: Ethnic Differences in Immigrant Encounters with the Welfare System

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*This article demonstrates why research on immigrant language barriers should account for local variations in the way these barriers are experienced by different immigrant groups. It makes the argument that variations in language barriers experienced by immigrant groups are often reflective of differences in the local migration histories and socio-economic status of these groups. These themes are illustrated by discussing the findings of a comparative survey of welfare service barriers experienced by Haitian and Hispanic welfare clients in Miami-Dade county. Secondary data on South Florida migration patterns is also used to explain disparities in the bilingual fluency of welfare caseworkers, which had a significant impact on the service barriers experienced by both groups.*

*Keywords: language barriers, immigrant, socio-economic status, welfare service, Hispanic, Haitian, English fluency*

Prior research has shown that language barriers pose a formidable obstacle for immigrant welfare clients. Immigrants with poor English-language proficiency are more likely to go without health and childcare services (Kirkman-Liff and Mondragon 1991; Ku and Matani 2001; Schur and Albers 1996; Solis, Marks, Garcia, Shelton 1990; Suarez 1994) and are more likely to experience employment barriers which contribute to persistent recidivism (Aparicio 2004; Caceri and Quiroz 2004; Ng 2001). Tumlin and Zimmerman (2003) note, for example, that language barriers are one of the primary obstacles facing immigrant welfare leavers today and, as a result, are partly responsible for the fact that

immigrants have been leaving the welfare rolls at a slower rate than native-born welfare clients.

These studies have played an invaluable role in placing the issue of immigrant language barriers at the center of research and policy debates on welfare-to-work issues. They have been especially effective in demonstrating that language barriers are among the most prominent barriers to self-sufficiency for the national welfare caseload. Despite these achievements, this research has tended to treat language barriers as an obstacle that is experienced the same way by most immigrant groups. It is also significant that, with few exceptions, the empirical research on this subject has focused on the experiences of Spanish-speaking welfare clients engaging welfare service centers that are managed and staffed by white, English-speaking government workers.

In this article, I point out that research on immigrant language barriers should begin to account for local variations in the way that language barriers are experienced by different immigrant groups. I also note that it is important to consider how language barriers can effect interactions between immigrant welfare clients and caseworkers who may also be racial or ethno-linguistic minorities. These issues are of special significance for urban centers that contain large, linguistically diverse immigrant populations.

### Researching Language Barriers in Miami-Dade County

The observations offered here are drawn from a series of research studies that were conducted as part of a multi-state comparison of racial-ethnic disparities in welfare reform outcomes, conducted under the aegis of the Scholar-Practitioner Program of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. I was the research director for several studies that focused on welfare reform outcomes for Haitian migrants in Miami-Dade. I coordinated these studies with the supervision of the lead researchers of the Florida Scholar-Practitioner team, who were stationed at the Psychology Department of Florida International University.

This discussion draws, specifically, on two of the studies conducted under this program. The first was a series of field interviews that I conducted with twenty social service professionals (including welfare case workers, non-profit workers, and com-

munity advocates) about service barriers and service trends for Haitian immigrants. The second study was a comparative survey of welfare clients at two One Stop Centers that were regularly visited by Haitian, Hispanic, and African American welfare clients. A total of thirty four (34) Haitian clients, fifty eight (58) Hispanic clients, and fifty six (56) African American clients were interviewed on the premises of these One Step Centers over a four day period. The survey was carried out by a team of ten interviewers, who were organized into two groups, each of which included at least one bilingual person who was fluent in English /Spanish and English/Haitian Creole. Each of the interviewers was responsible for initiating interviews without the direct supervision of the center's personnel and were required to inform the interviewees that the survey was being conducted by an independent research team that was not obligated to report its findings to the administration of the county welfare system.

Because of the emphasis on language barriers, the study focused primarily on the reports of Hispanic and Haitian clients. The reports of African American clients help to clarify the nature of the barriers encountered by these two immigrant groups.

It is also important to note that the One Stop Centers chosen for this study catered to distinct, ethnic segments of the Miami-Dade welfare caseload. The Miami Beach Center catered to a predominantly Hispanic client group whereas the Little River Center catered to a predominantly African American and Haitian client group. According to many of the service professionals whom I interviewed, this ethnic segmentation was typical of the environments in which most immigrants encounter the Miami-Dade welfare system (Fleurine, 2001; Guirand 2001; Laurenceau, 2001). At the time of the study, there were a total of twenty four One Stop Centers in Miami-Dade and Greater Miami area. Of this collection of twenty four centers, eight were located in Spanish-speaking enclaves (most notably in the Hialeah, Little Havana, and downtown Miami areas) and two were located in the Little Haiti enclave.

It also bears noting that there were significant disparities in the bilingual fluency of the staff at these One Stop Centers. Whereas all of the staff at the Miami Beach Center were fluent in Spanish and English, the staff of the Little River Center (at

the time of this study) contained no more than two caseworkers who were fluent in Haitian Creole and English. The manager of the Little River Center acknowledged that most of his staff were not fluent in Creole but did not provide a precise estimate of the number of Creole speaking caseworkers on staff (Brown, 2001). The estimate provided here was given by a Haitian non-profit worker who regularly routes Haitian clients to the Little River Center (Laurenceau, 2001). The estimate of the Spanish fluency of the Miami Beach Center staff was provided by the center's manager (Menendez, 2001). As I explain later on, these disparities in the bilingual fluency of frontline staff are consistent with general disparities in the socio-economic position of the Haitian and Hispanic populations in South Florida.

#### Comparing Service Barriers for Haitian, Hispanic and African American Welfare Recipients

The survey findings revealed consistent variations by ethnicity in both the quality of service delivery and in client perceptions of caseworker bias. For Haitian and Hispanic clients, in particular, these differences are underscored by the fact that both groups reported very similar levels of English fluency. Sixty nine percent of Haitian clients and 68 percent Hispanic clients reported that they could not fluently speak, write, read or understand English. There was some variation in the demographic and socio-economic status of both groups, but none of these differences were statistically significant. For example, Haitian clients were more likely to be women (by a margin of 18 percent) caring for larger numbers of children than Hispanic clients (averaging 2.3 children as opposed to 1.5 children for Hispanic clients). Hispanic clients were also more likely to have a college education (by a margin of 9 percent) and were more likely to be under the age of 40 than Haitian clients (by a margin of 13 percent). There were no significant variations in the kinds of welfare services accessed by both groups.

This is contrasted by significant differences in the way these groups experienced the service delivery process. Over one third of Haitian clients (37 percent) waited more than 2 months or longer before beginning to receive services as opposed to 8 percent of

Hispanic clients (Chi Square 10.346,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, thirty percent of Haitian clients had to visit their One Stop Centers more than three times before their application for service was accepted as opposed to only 8 percent of Hispanic clients (Chi Square 7.592  $p < .05$ ). These Chi Square figures focus specifically on Haitian/Hispanic comparisons. ANOVA tests which included responses for all three client groups (including African American clients) also showed that there were significant variations by ethnicity. These tests revealed that there statistically significant variations by ethnicity for the questions "How long did it take you start receiving services?" ( $F = 3.756$   $p < .01$ ) and "How many times did you have to visit the One Stop Center before your application was accepted?" ( $F = 3.089$   $p < .05$ ). Descriptive data also showed that although African American clients experienced more delays than Hispanic clients, Haitian clients consistently reported experiencing more service delays than African American clients (by a margin of at least 10 percent in all cases).

Haitian clients were also much more likely to have been in a situation where they needed translation services but none were available. Twenty six percent of Haitian clients reported this problem as opposed to 9 percent of Hispanic clients (Chi Square 4.956,  $p > .05$ , comparing Hispanic and Haitian responses only). This finding was not surprising, given the anecdotal information we had obtained about the dearth of Creole-speaking case workers.

The survey data also showed that Haitian clients were much more likely to view their caseworkers as acting in a biased manner. On each of the five questions used to measure perceptions of bias, Haitian clients reported much higher levels of sensitivity. On average, Haitians were twice as likely as Hispanic clients to respond "yes" to every item on the five question scale (Chi Square 21.797,  $p < .001$ ). Again, this Chi Square finding is based exclusively on a comparison of Haitian and Hispanic responses, but ANOVA results which include African American responses also revealed significant variations by ethnicity ( $F = 4.571$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Descriptive data showed that African American clients reported higher levels of caseworker bias than Hispanic clients but they did not report caseworker bias as frequently as Haitian

clients. For example, 5 percent of Hispanic clients ranked in the upper end of the perceptions of bias scale (scoring higher than "3" on the 5 point scale) compared to approximately 10 percent of African American clients and 15 percent of Haitian clients. Following a similar pattern, less than 10 percent of Haitian clients believed that welfare clients "were treated all the same" by caseworkers, as opposed to 25 percent of African American clients, and over 55 percent of Hispanic clients.

These findings show that Haitian immigrants had an experience of the Miami-Dade welfare system that was distinctly different from both Hispanic and African American clients. Just as significant, these findings give some indication of the wide variation in the impact that language barriers had for both migrant groups. Haitian migrants, for example, gave more frequent reports of bias and experienced more service delays than African Americans. In contrast, Hispanic migrants—who were, on average, no more fluent in English than Haitian migrants—seemed to experience minimal service problems and actually fared better than the African American client group which was completely fluent in English.

#### Language Barriers for Haitian and Hispanic Clients: A Closer Look

A closer look at the data provides more insights into the ways that language barriers effected Haitian and Hispanic clients. As noted earlier, 26 percents of Haitian clients and 9 percent of Hispanic clients reported difficulties accessing adequate translation services. For both of these groups, there was a statistically significant relationship between their problems accessing adequate translation services and the tendency to view their caseworkers as being biased against them. For Haitian clients, Spearman's Rho statistics revealed a correlation of .422 ( $p < .01$ ) and for Hispanic clients .317 ( $p < .05$ ).

The Haitian client group is distinguished by the fact that perceptions of bias reported by the minority who could not access adequate translation services were also shared by the broader group of Haitian clients. In contrast, for Hispanic clients, sensitivities to caseworker bias drop considerably when one steps outside the small minority of Hispanic clients who had prob-

lems accessing adequate translation services. This highlights the possibility that language barriers were distorting communication between welfare clients and caseworkers in two distinct ways. The first kind of distortion was experienced by both Hispanic and Haitian clients who could not access translation assistance. In this case, welfare recipients with poor English fluency found themselves in situations where they literally could not understand what their caseworkers were saying. As a result, language barriers obstructed the transmission of information between the caseworker and welfare recipient.

Outside of this group, there was a larger segment of the sample (69 percent of the Haitian group and 68 percent of the Hispanic group) who reported having poor English-fluency but who did not necessarily experience problems accessing adequate translation services. In this case, it appears that Haitian clients who felt they could understand "enough" of what their caseworkers were telling them still did not trust their caseworkers. For example, one Haitian-American caseworker explained that he is regularly contacted by Haitian welfare recipients who are being helped by workers at other One Stop Centers. He noted that, although many of these persons have basic English-fluency skills, they still feel the need to cross-check what their caseworker is telling them by talking to him. As a result, his bilingual fluency enhanced the client's trust-level by improving the quality of their social relationship. He goes on to explain that, ". . . they [Haitian clients] will ask for someone who knows Creole . . . they want to work with a person who they feel knows their situation. They are sensitive to strangers inquiring into their private business, especially if [government caseworkers] are not sensitive communicators." (Montfort, 2001).

Again, it is significant that the staff at the Little River Center, where all of the Haitian clients were interviewed, were composed entirely of African American and Afro-Caribbean (but not necessarily Haitian) caseworkers. In contrast, the staff at the Miami Beach Center, where all of the Hispanic clients were interviewed, were composed entirely of Spanish-speaking, Hispanic caseworkers. When considering these differences in staff composition in conjunction with the survey findings, it appears that Haitian clients saw themselves as being treated differently specifically

because their cultural-linguistic difference with their caseworkers (rather than, for example, their racial difference). In this context, it is likely that the presence or absence of Creole-speaking case workers could become important indicators of the "friendliness" of the One Stop Center for Haitian clients, regardless of their level of English fluency.

### Placing Ethnic Disparities in Context

As I have already suggested, the disparate experiences of Haitian and Hispanic welfare recipients are symptomatic of broader differences in the socio-economic position and migration experiences of both groups. The South Florida Hispanic population occupies a relatively privileged position not only in relation to other local, minority groups but also in relation to Hispanic populations in other parts of the country. For example, the state-wide research that was conducted just prior to this survey revealed that Hispanic welfare leavers in Miami-Dade earn incomes that are approximately 13 percent higher than non-Hispanic black welfare leavers and 7 percent higher than non-Hispanic white welfare-leavers. (Beneckson, 2000).

On the other hand, studies of Hispanic welfare use in other parts of the U.S. have documented the same translation problems and sensitivities to caseworker bias that were reported by Haitian clients in this study. Ana Aparicio (2004) has noted, for example, that Dominican immigrants in New York City frequently visit welfare agencies that are understaffed with Spanish-speaking workers. Unlike the Hispanic welfare clients included in this study, many Dominican immigrants also encountered caseworkers who are reluctant to refer them to other government agencies and aggressively discouraged them from applying for government services. Doris Ng (2001) has also found that in Santa Clara California, language barriers impacted service outcomes for Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant women in very similar ways. In this case, Mexican immigrants were not more likely to encounter a caseworker who was fluent in their primary language and they did not fare any better than Vietnamese welfare-leavers once they entered the local labor market.

The unique situation of Hispanic welfare recipients in South Florida is, in many respects, a reflection of the success of the Hispanic middle and upper class in creating an economic and political sphere that accommodates the interests of Spanish-speaking minorities. As Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick (1993) have explained, the first major flow of Hispanic migrants was composed of middle and upper class Cubans ex-patriates who arrived in the early 1960s and transformed the ethnic stratification of South Florida. In addition to their own resources, Cuban refugees received re-settlement assistance from the U.S. federal government that allowed them to carve out their own niche in the South Florida economy (Dunn and Stepick 1992). The attractiveness and vitality of this enclave economy is best illustrated by trends in intra-national Cuban migration since the 1960s. As Boswell and Curtis (1991) have pointed out, a significant amount of the growth of the Miami, Cuban population since the 1960s is due to the "return flow" of Cuban immigrants to Miami from other parts of the United States. Whereas the Miami-Dade Cuban population represented only 26 percent of the U.S. Cuban population in the early 1960s, it composed 56 percent of the U.S. Cuban population by the 1990s. During this same time, however, the Miami-Dade Cuban population shrank from 83 percent to 66 percent of Miami-Dade's total Hispanic population due to new surges in migration from other Hispanic groups (Boswell and Curtis 1991; Gale 1999; Portes and Stepick 1993).

Despite Miami-Dade's relatively high poverty rate, the average income of Hispanic households in the county exceeds the national average for Hispanic households (Portes and Bach 1985). Furthermore, Miami-Dade contains a disproportionately large share of Hispanic owned firms, although it only contains little more five percent of the U.S. Hispanic population (Perez 1992). The strength of the Miami-Dade, Hispanic business sector can be largely attributed to the expatriate Cuban middle class (Gale 1991; Portes and Stepick 1993). Although the wealth and political clout of the Cuban middle class has not necessarily "trickled down" to all low-income Hispanic households, the economic and civic institutions established by this group have provided

critical support for the settlement of later cohorts of Hispanic and Spanish-speaking immigrants.

This situation stands in stark contrast to the migration experience of South Florida's Haitian population. Whereas Hispanic households in Miami-Dade are wealthier, on average, than Hispanic households nationwide, the Miami-Dade Haitian enclave contains the largest concentration of Haitian poverty in North America (Stepick 1998). Unlike recent Hispanic immigrants, Haitians have not been able to rely on labor market opportunities or networks established by an earlier migrant cohort. Portes and Stepick (1993) have also noted that the entrance of Haitian migrants to South Florida was a cause of concern for some African American community leaders who believed their community was already being subjected to a "double subordination" by the Anglo and Hispanic communities. The poverty and cultural-linguistic differences of these two black minority groups contributed toward their mutual isolation.

In contrast to the Hispanic population, South Florida has historically been viewed as a refuge of last resort for Haitian migrants. The earliest concentrations of Haitian settlement in North America were in the cities of Boston, New York, and Montreal—which were all perceived as holding more opportunities for social mobility (Stepick 1998). The first major episode of Haitian immigration to South Florida occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the same time as the Cuban, Mariel boatlift (Stepick and Portes 1986). The vast majority of these persons were refugees fleeing the Duvalier regime who did not have the resources or connections to find a different port of entry. Haitians were also subjected to policies that were expressly designed to discourage their entry—leading to gross disparities in the criteria for granting asylum to Haitian and Cuban refugees. In recent years, the U.S. government has tightened the criteria for granting legal status to Haitian refugees. Under current policy, all Haitian refugees will be detained by the U.S. government regardless of whether they are apprehended at land or sea. Furthermore, Haitian refugees will be held, without possibility of being released on bond or parole, until they are brought before a judge. As policy analysts have noted, the stringent guidelines of the new Haitian-specific policy have been designed for the expressed purpose

of discouraging Haitian asylum seekers (PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer, 2002). The Department of Homeland Security has also increased its efforts to deport thousands of Haitian families who were granted temporary protected status in the early 1990s (Kretsedemas, 2004).

Not surprisingly, this difficult policy climate combined with a general climate of ethnic competition over scarce resources has not helped the economic status of Haitian households in Miami-Dade. Haitian service professionals have estimated that the average annual income of many households in Little Haiti (the “heart” of Miami’s Haitian enclave) is little more than the U.S. \$6000 (LaFortune, 2001). A household survey, conducted during a different phase of this project, found that approximately one third of Haitians who reported their household income fell into this income bracket (Kretsedemas 2004).

Haitian workers also tend to be concentrated in the lowest paying and most informalized segments of the local labor market, including the restaurant industry, domestic care, and many forms of unskilled labor. Portes and Stepick’s (1985) comparative study also demonstrated that the income and occupational achievement of Haitians is significantly lower than Hispanic immigrants. In his ethnographic research, Stepick (1998) has also noted that Haitian immigrants tend to experience a greater degree of social isolation than other minorities due to the intersecting effects of racial inequities, anti-immigrant attitudes, and their status as a linguistic minority that is marginalized from both the English and Spanish-speaking communities.

These conditions help to explain disparities in the representation of Haitian-Creole and Spanish-speaking caseworkers in the Miami-Dade welfare system. They also explain why many Haitians fear being singled out for exclusion, specifically because they are Haitian.

### Concluding Discussion: Policy Implications

These research findings carry some novel implications for policy debates on the problem of immigrant language barriers. Most important, they indicate that there are limitations to policy proposals—raised by most of the researchers who have addressed

this issue—that are focused solely on increasing federal funding for ESL courses. Although the expansion of ESL training would undoubtedly improve the employability of many immigrant welfare recipients, this study indicates that access to this support could vary widely because of pre-existing disparities between migrant groups.

For example, the survey findings showed that Haitian clients experienced greater service delays, despite the fact that their English-fluency was comparable to that of Hispanic clients. Furthermore, less than 10 percent of Hispanic welfare clients faced problems due to unavailable translation services as opposed to over 25 percent of Haitian clients. This indicates that, even in the current climate of substandard funding for language training courses, English-fluency seems to have relatively little impact on the quality of service that many Hispanic clients receive from the Miami-Dade welfare system. On the otherhand, even if funding was expanded for ESL courses, it is likely that Haitian clients would experience difficulties accessing these courses (referring to the finding that 30 percent of Haitian clients had to visit their One Stop Center more than three times before their applications for assistance were accepted). This points toward the need for solutions at the level of policy implementation and service delivery. Primarily, this would entail administrative liaison work with local governments and the county welfare system that would focus on correcting imbalances in the bilingual fluency of frontline staff and sensitivity training that focuses on the distinct needs of specific subgroups within the welfare caseload.

Another key observation stemming from this research is the local/regional specificity of the disparities it has documented. As I have emphasized throughout this article, the disparities between Hispanic and Haitian clients in Miami-Dade should be viewed in light of migration histories and patterns of racial-ethnic stratification that are somewhat unique to South Florida. As a result, it cannot be assumed that a comparative study of Haitian and Hispanic welfare clients in Boston, Massachusetts or Montreal, Canada would produce similar findings.

Although these findings cannot be easily generalized, they provide an indication of the kinds of ethnic disparities that are likely to be emerging in other areas with large, linguistically

diverse, minority populations. For example, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area contains one of the largest East African migrant and urban, American Indian populations in the U.S. alongside a historic African American community, a re-settled Laotian/Hmong community and a fast growing Hispanic population. The migrant diversity of Toronto, Canada on the other hand, is defined by a very large group of first generation South-Asian and (English-speaking) Afro-Caribbean migrants combined with smaller but sizeable Middle Eastern and African migrant populations. Meanwhile, traditional immigration hubs like Chicago and New York are likely to contain disparities, not only between different ethnic groups, but between different cohorts within the same ethnic group whose migration flows span a half century or more.

As I have suggested, local disparities between minority groups have the potential to undermine the impact of one-size-fits-all policy solutions that are being advanced at the federal level. It is also likely that forms of discrimination tied to local histories of inequality and inter-group competition may have a greater impact on the subjective worldview of some minorities than forms of discrimination which are tied to identity categories that are broader and more abstract. This also means that researchers who are interested in documenting racial-ethnic disparities should challenge themselves to consider how conventional notions of white/non-white or immigrant/native-born inequities are being transformed by the local history and politics of ethnic stratification.

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