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Latinas’ bilingual cultural identities and the reporting of abuse in US institutional settings

Against the background of momentous societal changes, including the emergence of the Hispanic (or Latino) minority that is transforming the landscape of the United States’ population, the present study aims at investigating the outcomes of phenomena of bilingual, bicultural encounters in US institutional settings, where the victim-survivors of domestic violence narrate their experience of abuse either in (non-standard) English, or with the help of a Spanish-English interpreter.

A qualitative selection of sanitized interviews, both from socio-legal protection order interviews (Trinch 2006, 2007), and from non-legalistic interviews for socio-psychological research (Brabeck and Gunzman 2008) was analysed with a focus both on the communication accommodation strategies enacted and on the interplay of bilingual/cultural aspects from a lingua-cultural perspective (Riesager 2014. See infra 3.2.1).

In particular, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) allowed for a more accurate identification of the use of strategic forms of behaviour (convergence, divergence and maintenance) enacted by Latina interviewees in the two different settings – the protection order interview (POI) being the more face-threatening setting – to contrastively highlight their context-sensitive specificity.

Issues of language contact and cultural hurdles were considered in an attempt to describe and interpret aspects of the multifaceted scenario of Latinos’ lingua-cultural interactions in the US, whose richness of cultural information – often transmitted through non-standard English varieties/accents – is often lost or ineffective in institutional settings.

Such issues entail the coexistence of elements of societal patriarchal conservatism, gender-based and ethnic discrimination, abuse-coping strategies, as well as efforts for self-empowerment and innovation. A major role appears to be played by the Catholic Church which is rapidly changing its attitude towards gender roles.

Research outcomes both from field investigations and from a discourse analytical reframing of such data can be practically relevant for socio-legal professional practice in those circumstances.
of engagement, e.g. by helping professionals to focus on the protection order (PO) applicants’ needs for special support and empathic advocacy in those bicultural and virtually bilingual settings.