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Bilingualism and Multilingualism in Street Level Social Welfare Service Settings: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism receives limited support in welfare systems, as shifting migration and rising nationalism complicate its management despite varying policy recognition across countries. This scoping review contributes to the growing body of literature on language and social welfare by examining how bilingualism and multilingualism are negotiated by street-level bureaucrats in their interactions with clients. While formal language policy is rarely shaped at the front lines of welfare services, street-level bureaucrats play a crucial role in its implementation, often exercising significant discretion that directly impacts client experiences. We searched for peer-reviewed, English language articles addressing multilingualism in social welfare work and the searches yielded 441 articles. Data extracted from 13 articles are presented. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the 13 selected using Hult and Hornberger's ([2016]. "Revisiting Orientations in Language Planning: Problem Right, and Resource as an Analytical Heuristic." *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* 33:3) adaptation of Richard Ruiz's ([1984]. "Orientations in Language Planning." *NABE Journal* 8 (2): 15–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464>; "Reorienting Language-as-Resource." In *International Perspectives on Bilingual Education: Policy, Practice, and Controversy*, edited by J. E. Petrovic, 155–172. Charlotte, NC: Information Age) three orientations to language planning. Findings reveal that all three orientations are present to varying extents, influencing both how bilingual professionals perceive language and how they interpret the treatment of clients. Notably, the prevalence of the 'language as problem' orientation raises ethical concerns, whereas the 'language as right' and 'language as resource' perspectives offer more ethically sound foundations for inclusive and equitable social welfare work.

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Introduction

While national contexts differ in their political and policy-level recognition of linguistic diversity, multilingualism is generally underemphasized and under-resourced (Schinkel

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2017). Welfare institutions are facing increasingly complex challenges related to language diversity brought on by shifting migration patterns and increasingly nationalistic identity politics. Despite this, there is a paucity of research examining the specific role language plays in the quotidian institutional engagements between social welfare workers and service users (Gustafsson et al. 2023). This article seeks to add to this existing knowledge base by focusing on how international social work and social welfare literature examines how bi- and multilingualism is experienced and negotiated by street-level bureaucrats in their interactions with clients. By street-level bureaucrats, we refer to actors such as social welfare workers, unemployment administrators, and community interpreters, among others, whose actions are circumscribed by the social contexts and conditions of their welfare institutions. Within these settings, they engage in the ‘mass processing’ of clients, utilizing discretionary practices that may involve convenience, routinization, or stereotyping while also extending them opportunities to influence public policy implementation and public service delivery (Dobson 2015). In so doing, Hult and Hornberger’s (2016) heuristic model of Richard Ruiz’ (1984; 2010) three orientations to language planning: *language as problem*, *language as right* and *language as resource* serves as our analytical framework. Its utility lies in providing helpful *etic* concepts that can be used by researchers to guide deductive analysis of the values and institutional policies that shape and circumscribe negotiations on language while also allowing space for an *emic* perspective with its focus on the everyday in multilingual interactions. How street-level bureaucrats ‘orient’ themselves in debates and practice relating to bi- and multilingualism is of crucial importance in explaining how they make decisions and how, in turn, these decisions are embedded within organizational policies and public discourse (Johnson and Johnson 2015). The unique contribution of our analysis lies in applying Hult & Hornberger’s model of language planning to the grass roots level of interactions between street-level bureaucrats and social service clients instead of at the policy document level, as was Ruiz’ (1984) original iteration. However, in examining bi- and multilingualism from a grass roots perspective, our examination of the included articles also indirectly reflects larger policy questions embedded in institutional practices and societal attitudes.

Street-level bureaucrats operate within a framework of public ethics, which encompasses both formal rules, referring to written down laws and other official documents, and informal norms to guide their decision-making. Their discretion highlights the insufficiency of formal rules alone to determine behavior, allowing them to adapt practices, especially in the absence of specific laws, to best serve their clients, including multilingual ones (Stensöta 2019). In social and welfare services, professional ethics also strongly guide practice. The inherent value conflicts that social welfare workers face in their practice, such as balancing client needs with organizational demands, further illustrate the complexity of their role (Chechak 2015). In this article, we also discuss how the actions of these bureaucrats are perceived in various studies and highlight their role in policymaking at the grassroots level through both formal and informal means.

As minority Swedish speakers in Finland, where official bilingualism is legally enshrined, and as researchers in a multicase study on bilingual social welfare services which examines, among other topics, multilingualism in child protection interactions – our interest in language issues is both practical and scientific. Most of our articles highlight negotiations around bi- and/or multilingualism between so-called street-level bureaucrats and clients within established welfare systems or welfare regimes. Other

contexts, from less bureaucratic welfare contexts, are not found to the same extent in the included material. Selecting only research papers written in the English language raise ethical concerns by excluding potentially significant scholarly discussions conducted in other languages. We elucidate the research ethical implications of this choice in the discussion section of the review.

Theoretical foundation

Hult and Hornberger (2016) have amalgamated the three orientations' central characteristics into an inventory (see Figure 1) that delineates their differences.

The table, in conjunction with a list of reflective questions complementing each orientation, serves as a heuristic scaffold for analysis. However, the inventory and subsequent questions are not intended to be comprehensive. Instead, for us, they serve as starting points for critical reflection and discussion.

The *language as problem* orientation as synthesized in Hult & Hornberger's (2016) inventory is founded on ideals of monolingualism as well as cultural and linguistic assimilation. In this nativist ideology, linguistic diversity is perceived as incompatible with strivings for social cohesion and national unity. Consequently, language policies and practices posit the dominant or majority language as the norm while curtailing or even seeking to eliminate expressions of linguistic diversity. Social welfare services guided by this orientation are typically structured monolingually, based on the rationale that linguistic minorities benefit most from extensive exposure to the dominant language in promoting their absorption into a bordered, static, national society. Their multilinguality is seen as an impediment to integration and they are conveniently reified within a deficit perspective (Ruiz 1984) in which minorities are identified by what they lack. Explanations for language problems or performance deficits are attributed to 'cultural differences' or individuals' otherness and linked to additional social problems such as poverty, which are also personalized. They are not, however, placed at the door of the social welfare system with which they interact (Scheibelhofer, Holzinger, and Drax 2021). Indeed, within the *language as problem* orientation promoting language diversity is counterproductive as it is deemed to entrench the linguistic marginalization of certain groups and obfuscate strivings for social cohesion (Marácz and Csata 2021). As a heuristic aid, Hult and Hornberger (2016, 35) pose reflective questions which generated ideas for our scoping analysis without imposing an analytical structure. Some of the most interesting are: For whom is language a problem? Which languages are positioned as problems? If any languages are prohibited, in what settings and for what functions are they not permitted? What specific concerns are raised about individual and societal bi-/multilingualism? What challenges are linguistic minorities described as needing to overcome? & How is the power relationship between the dominant national language and other languages framed?

The *language as right* orientation (Ibid, pp. 35-38) distinguishes between positive and negative rights in redressing language-based inequalities through compensatory legal mechanisms. Positive rights as enshrined in statutory legislation guarantee and safeguard that a person may use their (minority) language in certain described societal contexts, such as in procuring social welfare service provision. Negative rights can, on the other hand, be designed to protect the minority language speaker from discrimination or other curtailments of their linguistic rights in law. In essence, language rights codify



Table 1. (Pre)dispositions in the Orientations to Language Planning

Language as Problem	Language as Right	Language as Resource
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monolingualism in a dominant majority language is valued • Policies seek to limit or eliminate multilingualism • Linguistic diversity is a threat to assimilation and national unity • Minority languages are a threat to the status of the dominant majority language • Language problems are (falsely) equated with social problems • Speaking a minority language is a communicative disability to be overcome • Minority language speakers are defined based on missing linguistic abilities in the dominant majority language • Minority language maintenance is unnecessary; minority language loss is a solution to language problems • Language education aims at transition to the dominant majority language • Educational programs that facilitate bilingual language development exacerbate social divisiveness • Skepticism that bilingual programs in general may focus on the minority language to the detriment of majority language development • Bilingualism is related to cognitive difficulties and reduced academic achievement • Second language and mainstream immersion programs are favored over bilingual education (i.e., minority students are best served by as much exposure to the dominant majority language as possible) • Language learning is generally subtractive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language mediates access to society including, but not limited to, employment, healthcare, jurisprudence, voting, education, and media • Concern that linguistic inequality leads to social inequality • Rights to use one's language in specific domains, such as those above, are codified in <i>de jure</i> policy (positive rights) • Rights to non-discrimination based on language are codified in <i>de jure</i> policy (negative rights) • Rights may be framed in relation to international conventions and treaties • Speaking and maintaining one's language is a human right • Access to civil rights may not be denied due to linguistic ability • Language is related to personal freedom • Language rights may be limited to certain specifically defined individuals or groups • Rights may focus on opportunities to attain proficiency in a dominant majority language and/or opportunities to develop and maintain minority languages • Academic programs for linguistic minorities facilitate equal access to education; program types may vary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Societal multilingualism and cultural diversity are valued • National unity includes linguistic diversity • Languages are resources for everyone, not only for linguistic minorities and their communities • Languages are both a personal and a national resource • Linguistic minority communities have unique linguistic expertise to contribute to society • Languages have extrinsic value for purposes such as national security, diplomacy, military action, espionage, business, media, public relations, among other possibilities • Languages have intrinsic value for purposes such as cultural reproduction, community relations, identity construction, building self-esteem, intellectual engagement, civic participation, among other possibilities • Rationales for language maintenance are aligned with extrinsic and/or intrinsic values • The interests and needs of a nation or of linguistic minorities themselves may be variously foregrounded • Bi-/multilingualism can enhance academic achievement • Awareness of different languages and cultures reduces ethnocentrism and xenophobia and enhances intercultural understanding • Linguistic minorities are resources for the multilingual development of a dominant majority • Academic programs focus on the development of life-long bi-/multilingualism; program types may be designed for linguistic minorities or both linguistic minorities and a dominant majority • Language learning is generally additive

Figure 1. (Pre)disposition in the orientations to language planning (Hult and Homberger 2016, 30).

the nature and extent of language use and while they may defend the policies of language maintenance for minorities, they can also be used to bulwark the existing monolingual hegemony of dominant language speakers. Accordingly, such rights can be sweeping or blinkered in scope falling along a continuum from suppression, toleration, approbation, and promotion (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). It must be recognized that granting language rights explicitly does not necessarily ensure fair treatment of linguistic minorities, as resistance to these rights may persist in practice (Barakos 2020). Critics fear that prioritizing language rights may create tensions between linguistic groups, while supporters believe it reduces marginalization and affirms minority languages as valuable (Hult and Hornberger 2016). Selected reflective questions which illuminate the *language as right* orientation in interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients are: What restrictions are placed on granted language rights? For whom are language rights granted (i.e. which individuals or groups)? What resources (especially human and financial) are allocated to the implementation of language rights? What implicit resistance is there in practice to statutory language rights? (Hult and Hornberger 2016.)

The *language as resource* orientation with its premise that linguistic and cultural diversity are both compatible with, and desirable in fostering social cohesion is the antithesis of the language as problem discourse. In this narrative, linguistic diversity is lauded as a general societal good and not solely of personal benefit for minorities as it enhances a culture's social, economic and transnational potential (Piller 2016). A critical question, however, relates to the concept of 'language resource' itself. How is it framed and defined, and as a corollary, who does this framing benefit? In Hult and Hornberger's (2016) inventory this framing is elucidated by distinguishing between extrinsic values and intrinsic values when referencing how 'resources' are understood. Intrinsic values denote a language's innate worth in facilitating cultural transmission, community building, identity formation, self-esteem enhancement, intellectual exchange, *inter alia* (Ruiz 2010). Extrinsic values prioritize languages as national resources, linking their worth to national interests like security and commerce, while often undervaluing ethical and community benefits (Ricento 2005). It may be reasonable to conclude that in the *language as resource* orientation, extrinsic components cannot entirely be divorced from intrinsic ones as economic considerations are central to language politics and social life. If these are in balance, however, valuing bi- or multilingualism has the potential of counteracting ethnocentrism, racism and linguistic discrimination while enhancing intercultural understanding (Ruiz 2010). Selected reflective questions which Hult and Hornberger (2016) pose as heuristic aids in analyzing this orientation include: For whom are what languages resources? Who decides and who benefits from which linguistic resources? What resources (human, financial, symbolic, etc.) are provided for supporting which languages? What differences might there be between how the dominant national language and minority languages are considered as resources? What special linguistic expertise are linguistic minorities identified as having? Is language maintenance among linguistic minority communities facilitated?

Taken together the *language as right* and the *language as resource* orientations can be seen as complementary in nature, where valuing linguistic pluralism becomes a necessary precursor for entrenching language rights in law. However, it may also be argued that statutory protection of minority languages and language rights, in general, are crucial preconditions for multilingualism to be valued as a resource at all. Regardless, both orientations in concert 'represent a potentially powerful combination of top-down planning

such as de jure policy in the form of language rights and bottom-up planning such as community-based initiatives that promote situated linguistic resources' (Hult and Hornberger 2016, 42).

Street-level social welfare services

Street-level bureaucracies are organizations where the role of street-level bureaucrats and the welfare policies they implement have a substantial impact. The implementation of different welfare policies by street-level bureaucrats is carried out by individuals, in direct interactions with various client groups, in different organizational settings and geographical areas (Gofen, Sella, and Gassner 2019). In Lipsky's (1980; xii) words 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out'. Welfare social services thus involve different types of interaction routines and different levels of discretion. While our study primarily focuses on analyzing how international literature addresses street-level bureaucrats' experiences and negotiation of bi- and multilingualism in a social welfare context, we also aim to examine not only their interactions with clients but also how the literature recognizes the influence of organizational and broader societal factors on language practices. The complexity of implementing language practices in social welfare services requires different levels of analysis, including micro, meso- and macro levels.

While the focus on different levels of analysis has become more prevalent in studies on street-level organizations, explorations of ethical considerations are less common. Sten-söta (2019) emphasizes the need for using ethics as a lens to interrogate the practices of street-level bureaucracy but also as a means for improving policy outputs. Hence, when discussing public ethics in relation to street-level bureaucrats, we address a phenomenon larger than any specific professional ethical codex.

Effective communication is crucial in social work practice, making communication skills essential for social workers in general (Healy 2018). According to studies in social work, social workers reflect a great deal on the importance of communication skills in multilingual and multicultural environments (Anis and Turtiainen 2021). In their study, they emphasize that, beyond professional skills, it is also crucial to have knowledge of refugee and asylum processes, national and international asylum laws and systems, and human rights, as well as an understanding of how precarious legal statuses and trauma affect people's lives. All these factors intersect and play a role in shaping language practices.

Material and methods

This article builds on a scoping literature review of international literature from the fields of social- and welfare services between the years of 2010–2023. The first methodological framework for how to conduct a scoping review was set forth by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). The main emphasis in scoping reviews is laid on establishing how extensively a certain topic has been researched in a chosen field of interest. The methodology of scoping reviews has undergone extensive discussion and development, resulting in a range of practical applications (Pollock et al. 2023). To ensure validity, we adhered to the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses

extension for Scoping Reviews) checklist on how to conduct scoping reviews (Tricco et al. 2018). The following chapters explain our method in greater detail.

For the analysis, we used Hult and Hornberger (2016) as a heuristic guide and investigated whether pre-dispositions of *language as problem*, *language as right* or *language as resource* emerged from the material. From a street-level perspective we investigated the included articles on two levels: the professional and the organizational.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The review focuses on negotiations of bi- and multilingualism in street-level bureaucrats' interactions with clients of social welfare services and social work. We searched for peer-reviewed papers published in English or Nordic languages after 2010 until August 2023. We excluded literature reviews and monographs. In addition to the searches, we included two articles from outside the search parameters, contributed by the authors of a special issue of *Nordic Social Work Research* focusing on language. The inclusion of only English and Nordic language publications was a pragmatic choice, reflecting the linguistic competencies of the authors. This does, however, exclude scholarly discussions about multilingualism and bilingualism in any other languages, thus potentially limiting the national contexts we were likely to find. We had several meetings with the whole group to decide on the inclusion of studies. If there were conflicting opinions about the inclusion or exclusion of an article, they were resolved by all authors reading the article and reaching a consensus through discussion. In particular, the inclusion criterion 'Does the paper address multilingualism/bilingualism in welfare/social services/social work?' was an ongoing discussion-based process throughout the writing of the article, and the meaning and understanding of it evolved over time, leading us to specifically exclude, for example, studies that focused primarily on interpreting services.

Search procedure and methods

A search was conducted in August 2023 using the following online databases of peer-reviewed journals: Web of Science (Core Collection), ProQuest (Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), Social Services Abstracts), and Scopus. The search string used was: ('Welfare* Service*' OR 'social* service*' OR 'Social* Work*') AND ('bilingual*' OR 'Multilingual*') and the target was the titles and abstracts of the articles.

This initial search uncovered 581 relevant target articles after removing duplicates reading titles and abstracts. Of these 581 articles, 97 were identified as preliminarily interesting for the study based on the title and abstract of the article. This initial reading of the abstracts excluded articles that did not seem relevant to a 'social welfare work' setting, only co-incidentally mentioning 'social welfare work' in their title or abstract but neglecting to focus on it in the actual study. Of these 97 articles, 51 were selected for further analysis and discussion. The second screening included reading the article, looking for the nature of the empirical material and the relevance of the research for social welfare work, as this was not always clear from the abstract. Our discussion regarding which articles to select for analysis focused on to what extent 'social welfare' and 'social work' were focal points in the articles. If they only occupied a minor role, we excluded them. Of these 51 articles, 13 were finally selected for analysis (Figure 2).

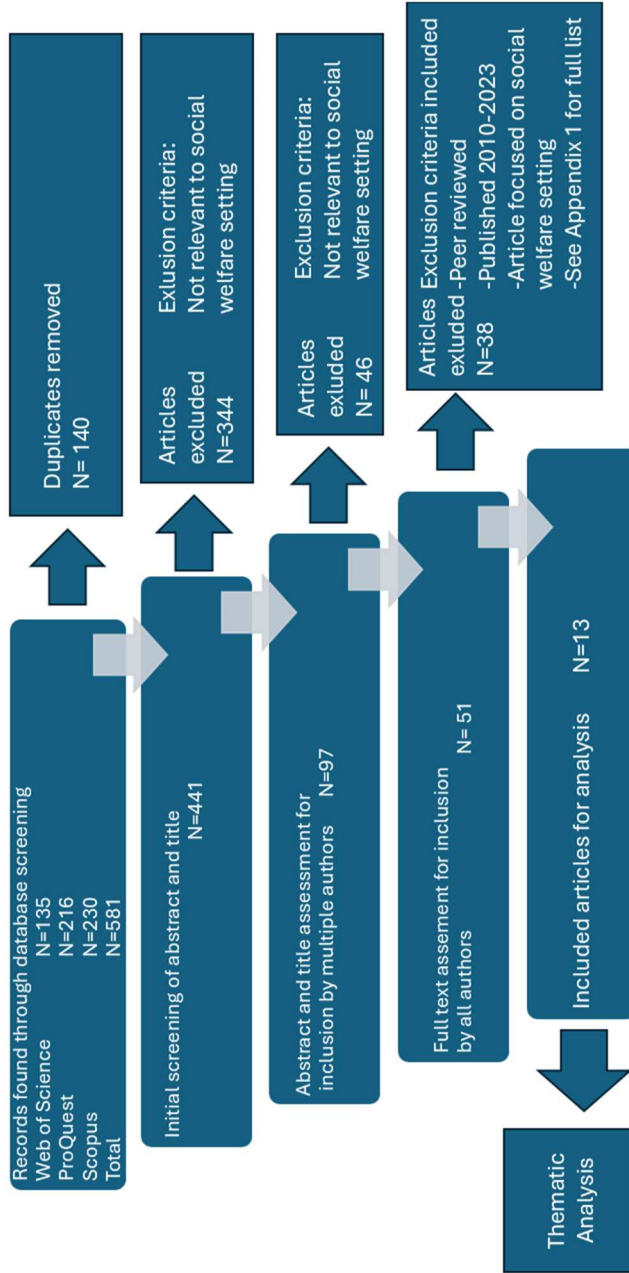


Figure 2. Scoping process.

One author (AUTHOR) screened the titles and abstracts of all electronic database references and other sources. Zotero was used to keep track of references. Four reviewers (AUTHORS) independently scrutinized full texts of studies that were likely to meet the inclusion criteria. An eligibility form based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria was used for screening abstracts and full texts (see Appendix). When the reviewers' conclusions differed, the study was reviewed jointly. All authors (AUTHORS) extracted the following data from included studies and transferred them onto a data extraction Word file: Author and name of the article, Country context, How does it relate to 'welfare services?', How does it relate to 'Bilingualism / Multilingualism?', Methods and data, Theoretical underpinning, Key findings, Practice relevance, and Reflections. Lastly, the authors summarized three articles each and jointly discussed their analysis.

When doing the thematic analysis, we divided the three orientations from the heuristic of Hult and Hornberger (2016) and additionally ethical considerations as a separate theme, among the contributing authors. The questions from each orientation, discussed in the Theoretical Foundation chapter, worked as a heuristic guide for our collaborative analysis. Through successive meetings, we discussed and confirmed the analysis results.

Results

All articles included in our study were qualitative in nature, indicating a clear lack of quantitative research on the topic. The majority of articles centered on interviews with street-level bureaucrats, employing various qualitative analytical approaches, whereas the perspectives of clients were notably underrepresented. Participant observations included examining interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients, but only two articles (Buzungu and Rugkåsa 2023; Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund 2019) directly involved interviews or interactions with clients (Table 1).

As indicated in the table, the national contexts of the included articles are exclusively either Anglo-American or European. The Anglo-American articles focused on English as the major language while the European articles focused on their national major languages and various minority languages. There was a clear lack of representation of articles from the Global South. While we recognize that national contexts are different, analyzing or comparing the legal contexts in more detail was beyond the scope of this article.

Bi- and multilinguality

Bilingualism and multilingualism as research terms have a varied history (Dewaele 2015), but for this article we were content with simply accepting the chosen articles' more practical definition. The articles generally did not explore the continuum of bilingualism, or multilingualism of their interviewed or observed street-level bureaucrats. Instead, they generally assumed that the social workers who were described as bilingual or multilingual were fluent in two or more languages, without going into further detail. Thus, a deeper analysis of bilingualism and multilingualism as phenomena falls outside the scope of this article.

Methodological debates suggest that the scoping method (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Pollock et al. 2023) is mainly based on a descriptive summary analysis, but that this can well be combined with thematic qualitative analysis. In this study we have utilized a

Table 1. Overview of 13 included studies, including information on articles, country, methods and problem-rights-resource perspective.

Article author and name	Country where study conducted and language focus	Methods	Problem, right or resource perspective
Lanesskog (2018)	USA (Midwest) Migration-focused (English as majority language, Spanish as minority language)	Participant observation, informal interviews, and a focus group	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Logan (2018)	USA Migration-focused (English as majority language, Spanish as minority language)	Focus group interviews	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Harrison (2013)	Australia, Migration-focused Native speakers	Individual semi-structured interviews	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Drolet et al. (2014)	Canada Established-minority focused, English as majority language, French as minority language	Focus group interviews	Right perspective appears prominently
Liu (2013)	USA, New York Migration focused, with Chinese minority in New York as an established community. English as majority language and several Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Cantonese, Fuzhou)	A qualitative study, employing a phenomenological approach	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Buzungu and Rugkása (2023)	Norway Migration focused, Norwegian as majority language and several languages as minority languages.	Observational study on the interactions between social workers and clients.	Right perspective appears prominently
Andersson (2022)	Sweden Migration-focused	Focus group interviews with 8 social workers. Three focus group interviews, two with three participants, and one with two participants.	Problem & Resource perspectives appear Resource perspective prominent
Maiter et al. (2017)	Canada Migration focused, with English as the majority language and several minority languages. Punjabi as a specific language community.	Focus groups and individual interviews with social workers, file reviews	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund (2019)	Sweden Migration-focused, Swedish as majority language and several minority languages	Mixed methods, including two online surveys targeting professionals in healthcare and social services, and seven group interviews.	All three perspectives, Problem, Right & Resource appear.
Hall and Valdiviezo (2020)	USA, New York and Virginia Migration-focused, does not mention specific minority languages	A combination of autoethnography and insights gleaned from a workshop.	Problem & Resource perspectives appear
Arriaza (2015)	USA Unclear if migration or established-minority community. Spanish language focus, English as majority, Spanish as minority.	Quantitative analysis of online survey sent to Spanish-speaking social work professionals	Problem & Right perspectives appear, Resource perspective is implied Problem perspective prominent
Anis and Turtiainen (2021)	Finland Migration-focused Does not mention specific minority languages	Qualitative analysis of essays by social workers and reflections from a group discussion	Problem & Resource perspectives appear.
Holzinger (2019)	Austria Migration-focused, German as majority language, Hungarian as minority language	Qualitative interviews and participant observations	Problem perspective appears

thematic analysis based on the three orientations to language planning: *language as problem*, *language as right* and *language as resource* as outlined in Hult and Hornberger's (2016) heuristic model, which we will present in the following sections.

Language as problem in welfare services

Most of the articles focused on how bi- or multilingualism were experienced by street-level bureaucrats. Language skills could be seen as a problem by both bilingual professionals themselves and by monolingual professionals. Logan (2018) describes a scenario in which monolingual staff expressed mistrust towards bilingual colleagues who communicated in what was perceived as a 'secret code' in a language not understood by the monolingual staff. This dismissive attitude towards language skills shows a latent language as problem perspective and soured workplace relations. In a couple of articles (Harrison 2013; Logan 2018), bilingual staff expressed concerns that their language skills might hinder their career advancement. They felt that their multilinguistic competence made them too valuable in their current roles, which limited their opportunities to move into higher positions. Additionally, Harrison (2013) concluded that there isn't only a difference between different languages, but that there can also be a perceived power difference between accents of the same language. British English accents were seen as having a higher status than other accents of English, making it harder for NESB, non-English speaking background street-level bureaucrats to advance in their careers since they spoke the 'wrong' pronunciation of English.

While none of the articles investigated social work organizations or agencies per se, pre-dispositions towards language could still be analyzed on an organizational level as described by the articles' analysis of interviews with street-level bureaucrats. Holzinger (2019) describes a situation where an organization transferred responsibility for cross-language communication to the client, telling them to bring their own interpreter if needed and seemingly not being able to communicate in any other language than the dominant language. Thus, the organization that Holzinger investigated ascribed to an assimilationist policy, addressing language barriers by imposing the majority dominant language on all their clients. However, organizations that did allow for multiple languages could also encounter difficulties. Several articles investigating organizations with bilingual or bicultural staff (e.g. Andersson 2022; Maiter et al. 2017) highlighted a common theme: a general lack of resources, particularly a shortage of bilingual professionals. This lack of staff was compounded by the notion that 'LEP' – low-English proficient clients – were seen as more burdensome to work with than other service users, placing a heavy burden on the limited number of skilled staff proficient in their respective languages. While this problem was acknowledged in the articles, there was a noticeable lack of descriptions of concrete strategies for organizations to address challenges associated with operating in multilingual societies. This lack of planning forced street-level bureaucrats to rely on ad-hoc solutions. Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund (2019), investigated the usage of child interpreters, using a client family's children to act as ad-hoc interpreters or language brokers. This practice was described as uncommon yet harmless by professionals but as commonplace and burdensome by former child interpreters. This discrepancy of descriptions clearly demonstrates the difference in power-levels between dominant-language speaking professionals and clients in minority language interactions.

Similarly, in Maiter et al. (2017), some street-level bureaucrats reported being compelled to rely on whoever was available – such as neighbors or relatives – to communicate with minority language clients on-site when no other solutions were available.

In Maiter et al. (2017), some bilingual social workers noted that while they could communicate effectively with their minority language clients, the services they could provide or refer their clients to were often constrained by the language proficiency of the service providers. Similarly, Andersson (2022) described a situation where clients would call their social workers from hospital because no one at there could speak the minority language and, as a result, clients had no one else to turn to, creating situations where social workers felt they had to act as interpreters for other organizations.

Language as right in welfare services

Only four of the articles highlighting *language as right* distinguished between positive and negative rights in redressing language-based inequalities through compensatory legal mechanisms relating to welfare services. Two of the articles focused on bilingualism and two on multilingualism. The heuristic frame we use in this study illuminates the rights perspective by reflecting on how the rights relate to different levels of society, whether the rights are indirect or direct, how the rights are implemented and what form of resistance – either direct or indirect – exists in practice. Most of the articles analyze how language rights as policies and legislations are implemented and find solutions on a professional and organizational level.

Although studies generally examine the professional level, there are studies that address how policies and guidelines created to address the needs of culturally diverse individuals do not explicitly operationalize bilingualism or linguistic proficiency. Arriaza (2015) concludes that in the absence of conceptual, operational, and practical definitions, Spanish-speaking social workers in the United States will encounter several challenges related to practice and ethics when providing social work services in Spanish. For example, social workers face dual roles in their practice, as they are not only expected to fulfill their primary responsibilities but also to be available for interpreting and translating when needed. The *language as right* orientation is perceived mainly through the professional perspective emphasizing linguistic awareness training for social workers and the need to learn about existing language policies such as the mandate by the NASW on language diversity enshrined in the Civil Rights Act, of the United States leaving the implementation entirely to the responsibility of street-level bureaucrats. Building on a literature review and a focus group study among professionals in health and welfare settings Drolet et al. (2014) focus specifically on the language as right perspective, as it discusses problems faced by French speaking clients and bilingual professionals, as well as the strategies that professionals must employ to address such challenges. The analysis of the focus groups revealed that participants spent significantly more time discussing the challenges they faced in a bilingual work environment, rather than focusing on aspects that facilitated their work with Francophone minority clients. The authors espouse precise organizational support and strategies and policies to enable concrete, positive, and measurable language practice results.

At the end of the discussion, the authors briefly elucidate their own position in two cases, namely that local solutions street-level bureaucrats have developed are not

really solving the structural problems. They urge for more research examining how minority language statuses affect social work. Broader structural and societal concerns are addressed by probing the implications for legal and human rights, as well as various manifestations of discrimination, such as in cases where children are used as interpreters. Gustafsson and her colleagues (2019) discuss the legal arguments for protecting language as a right of linguistic minorities in highlighting the obligation of public authorities to address language barriers in Sweden. The authors draw on versatile material scrutinizing many ethical questions concerned with using children as interpreters. They criticize the institutionalization of language brokering as a part of public services and emphasize that the legal rights of clients must constitute a primary concern for legislators and that these cannot be compromised due to linguistic limitations.

Buzungu and Rugkåsa's (2023) Norwegian study is also critical of the practice of culturalization by social workers, in which clients' problems are explained away by reference to 'cultural differences' as their inherent point of origin, rather than situating them within communication barriers between social workers and clients. The authors point out that there is a significant power imbalance between majority speaking professionals and minority, non-Norwegian speaking clients. The rights perspective is not strong, and the article does not fully align with the Problem, Right, or Resource approach. However, the authors argue strongly that addressing language disadvantage must be a focus of social justice. It must go beyond the individual level. Language discordance, as described in the article, works as a barrier and creates problems for social workers to understand the clients' situation. Unresolved language discord thus leads to difficulties in achieving mutual understanding, and the authors argue for the need to ensure access to interpretation services of a sufficient quality.

Language as resource in welfare services

Of the thirteen articles included in our scoping analysis, nine allude to the *language as resource* orientation in some manner from both complementary but also contrasting perspectives. Interpreting language diversity as a resource is frequently connected to the language as right dimension especially in articles which turn a spotlight on interactions between street-level bureaucrats and social welfare clients (e.g. Anis and Turtiainen 2021; Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund 2019; Hall and Valdiviezo 2020). Reflecting Hult and Hornberger's (2016) inventory, examinations of bi- or multilingualism, oscillate between viewing them either as intrinsic or extrinsic resources with several articles incorporating both perspectives. In our analysis, we have maintained the *intrinsic-extrinsic* distinction in presenting our findings.

Extrinsic resources

In positing multilingualism as an extrinsic resource, most articles discuss the benefit derived by social welfare clients from having street-level bureaucrats who recognize the value of language diversity and are linguistically competent as well as organizations which foster bi- or multilingual service provision. Logan (2018) and Maiter et al. (2017) elucidate that social workers in drawing upon and supplementing their own language skills improve client outcomes by gaining a better understanding of multicultural contexts and facilitating client participation. Logan (2018) expounds on the benefits of monolingual

workers expanding their own linguistic repertoire in order to engage in more meaningful interactions with minority clients. An added benefit of language learning is that it also allows them to interrogate their own attitudes towards minority groups and develop potentially more compassionate ways of working. Liu (2013) and Harrison (2013) argue that the value of bilingual social workers should not simply be calculated by focusing on client outcomes. They are also to be considered as an asset for workplaces in general by addressing the perceived 'need' for diversity while serving as teachers and guides for their colleagues. Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund (2019) & Maiter et al. (2017) examine the perceived benefits of engaging either licensed interpreters or language brokers (unlicensed interpreters, often family members or relatives) in facilitating social service provision.

While Maiter et al. (2017) discusses the extrinsic resource of using interpreters as enhancing communication and lessening workloads, Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund (2019) evaluates using language brokers multilingual competence in far more critical terms. In these interactions, minority language speakers were often exploited to streamline the integration efforts of street-level bureaucrats, effectively serving to 'grease the wheels' of the social welfare system. Their intrinsic value was not recognized, nor was the bi/multilingualism of social workers considered a desirable goal in fostering reciprocal exchanges between workers and clients from linguistic minority backgrounds.

A less highlighted yet attendant extrinsic resource of bi- and multilingualism can be found in articles by Andersson (2022), Anis and Turtiainen (2021) and Harrison (2013). It relates to the benefits derived by society at large from adopting a positive and proactive stance on issues of language diversity in social services. These studies situate modern social work practice in a global, postcolonial context, which is reflected in work environments that are increasingly linguistically diverse. Consequentially, there is a need for street-level bureaucrats to reevaluate their service users' situations from unique, even unorthodox perspectives, to comprehend and appreciate the multilingual nature of social relations. However, a cautionary note is also interjected by pointing out that sometimes social welfare providers want to give the impression of being international and linguistically sensitive by, for example, employing social workers from different ethnic backgrounds while failing to deconstruct existing monolingual hegemonies in institutional policy and practice.

Intrinsic resources

The *language as resource* orientation referenced within the nine articles also included reflections on bi- and multilingualism's intrinsic value. Such positionings implied a rejection of depicting languages or language competence as having a primarily extrinsic value (i.e. service provision, integration, social cohesion) as this perspective may reinforce power imbalances between minority and majority language speakers (Anis and Turtiainen 2021; Hall and Valdiviezo 2020). Alternatively, the authors (see Andersson 2022; Arriaza 2015; Drolet et al. 2014, among others) postulate that languages have an intrinsic value for purposes such as cultural reproduction, community relations, identity construction, building self-esteem, intellectual engagement, civic participation, etc. Language in this context is better understood 'as an active social practice', as a communal medium in which numerous individuals, institutions, and assumptions are at play during every linguistic interaction.

Language is never confined to a simple exchange between two people. Rather, it must be perceived as an interactive phenomenon that both influences and is influenced by the social environment in which it operates (Hall and Valdiviezo 2020). Therefore, a precondition for viewing multilingual language practice as an intrinsic resource is to recognize its enmeshment within everyday social interactions as well as institutional policies that shape and circumscribe negotiations on language. As argued by Hall and Valdiviezo (2020), Andersson (2022), and others, linguistic awareness and competence, viewed in this context, become crucial tools. They not only support ethical principles of cultural sensitivity and social justice but also help to critically examine how essentialist monocultures can oppress and racialize, while perpetuating privilege and dominance. Consequently, the *language as resource* orientation perspective places upon street-level bureaucrats a moral imperative to provide services in a language suitable for the client while developing their competence in anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice (Anis and Turtiainen 2021) including self-reflection (Arriaza 2015) and creating solidaristic support networks (Drolet et al. 2014).

In returning to Hult and Hornberger's (2016) reflective questions, the *intrinsic-extrinsic* distinction nuances how these are addressed within the *language as resource* orientation. For example, queries such as, *For whom are what languages resources?* And *Who decides and who benefits from which linguistic resources?* depend greatly upon if language competence is interpreted as 'a means to an end' (e.g. expedient social welfare provision, integration) or as 'an end unto itself' (e.g. cultural maintenance, self-esteem building). A majority of the included articles highlight extrinsic motivations for promoting bi- and multilingualism, which is perhaps unsurprising as the focus of many rests specifically on how social welfare provision is experienced by street-level bureaucrats in their negotiations with clients from linguistic minorities and thus reflects linguistic-utilitarian priorities. Here, language competence is posited as a resource for professionals as it allows them to better serve clients and, as a corollary, society. However, language hierarchies, while acknowledged, remain largely unexamined and questions such as *What special linguistic expertise are linguistic minorities identified as having?* and *Is language maintenance among linguistic minority communities facilitated?* are not typically considered in extrinsic motivations. However, several articles also denote intrinsic justifications for promoting linguistic diversity that embrace an *additive view* (Hult and Hornberger 2016, 33), where languages are not seen in opposition, as in forcing speakers to choose between a minority language and a majority language. Rather the spotlight shifts to highlighting the linguistic resources minority clients possess and how their languages should be supported and maintained. As such, the question, *What resources (human, financial, symbolic, etc.) are provided for supporting which languages?* becomes very relevant. Hall and Valdiviezo (2020, 20–21) offer a succinct outcome of intrinsic motivations for envisaging *language as resource*. They label this as a 'third place' mindset in which intercultural interaction is neither a question of maintaining one's own cultural frame nor of assimilating to one's interactant's cultural frame. It is rather a question of finding an intermediary place between these two positions of adopting a 'third place'. The significance of adopting this mindset is that it allows both street-level bureaucrats and clients to perceive their cultural perspective as merely one of many frames, and their native language as not necessarily an absolute reflection of reality.

Each of these three orientations also have specific ethical ramifications referring to how bi- and multilingualism is negotiated within institutional contexts and how tensions

between professional and public ethics are managed according to which language orientation dominates. These are discussed in the following section.

Language as a problem, right and resource – ethical considerations

The *language as resource* orientation is considered more ethical than, *language as problem*, for example. While the ‘language as problem’ approach may support the assimilation of minority cultures into the majority by promoting the hegemony of the majority language in policy and education, the ‘language as right’ approach might safeguard the rights of a single minority group through legal protections (subject to local and international agreements) (Hult and Hornberger 2016; Ruiz 1984, 2010). However, this approach often fails to consider the broader societal context of multilingualism, leaving other languages that lack statutory protection unaddressed. A ‘language as resource’ approach, in contrast, inherently values multiculturalism and therefore accepts and promotes linguistic diversity.

In order to reach the level of how language is used in practice when meeting with service users, we supplemented the analysis of ethical stances in the articles by placing them on an axis between professional and public ethics (Stensöta 2019). When examining the ethical consideration of the significance of how language is used in street-level social and welfare services, we found that there were several different approaches.

Some of the articles (Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund 2019; Lanesskog 2018; Logan 2018) discuss situations in which language is seen primarily as a tool for transmitting information between street-level bureaucrats and clients. Bilingual professionals are asked to provide ad-hoc interpretation and translation in addition to their regular duties (Logan 2018). The transmission of information between people with different linguistic backgrounds is simply interpretation, word for word. This view is most common among monolingual workers who overlook the social and cultural aspects of language. This mechanical view of language reflects a common bureaucratic way of implementing public ethics that challenges the possibility of professional discretion.

Another view of language found in the articles (Harrison 2013; Lanesskog 2018; Liu 2013) is when language is seen as a means of communication. Language is seen as more than a mechanical tool, as it also carries cultural meanings, which means that word for word interpretation is not always appropriate. This requires cultural competence and sensitivity on the part of street-level bureaucrats working with clients from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This view allows for professional discretion but still falls under public ethics (Stensöta 2019).

Cultural competence alone does not necessarily ensure inclusive and mutual understanding. Clients from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds need cross-cultural skills, such as legal literacy, to understand the local welfare system and, in the case of street-level bureaucrats, to be able to explain how the welfare system works (Hall and Valdiviezo 2020; Holzinger 2019). It is important to remember that language bears social capital. The practical meaning of this for street-level bureaucrats and clients is that knowing the language and the appropriate words may not in all situations be enough to be correctly understood, accepted and met with respect (Buzungu and Rugkåsa 2023; Harrison 2013).

The case-specific situation of the client, including the client’s emotions (grief, fear, anger), affects communication and influences interactions, requiring a sensitive approach

as well as the ability to use more than the 'right words' (Anis and Turtiainen 2021). When meeting with clients in emotionally sensitive situations, street-level bureaucrats may need to apply professional ethics in addition to public ethics.

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to chart existing literature on bi- and multilingualism in relation to social work and social welfare organizations, and further to thematically analyze how street-level bureaucrats and social welfare organizations perceived bi- and multilingualism on a problem-right-resource scale. When considering the guiding question posed by Hult and Hornberger (2016), 'For whom is language perceived as a problem?', the articles present language barriers as either a problem for clients to solve (Holzinger 2019) or a challenge for street-level bureaucrats to address (Maiter et al. 2017). However, it is noteworthy how often street-level bureaucrats resorted to ad-hoc interpretation solutions. There is an endemic lack of organizational-level planning for multilingual societies in the articles, even as they vary between national contexts. The *language as rights* perspective appeared in the least number of articles but is central when researching what could be called established-minority language groups, which can be partly defined through their legal protections in their national contexts such as the French-speakers of Canada (Drolet et al. 2014). Although the perception of language as a protected right compelled social work welfare agencies to consider the needs of a specific minority language group, the street-level bureaucrats interviewed by Drolet and colleagues continued to express criticism. They highlighted a persistent lack of bilingual staff and insufficient resources, despite the enshrinement of language rights. While street-level bureaucrats adopt a resource-focused approach to bilingualism, the organizational approach, in contrast, is more problem-focused which creates tensions. Even when the organization adopted a resource-focused approach, they tended to focus on the extrinsic utilitarian value of bilingual staff, ignoring more intrinsic, multicultural values. Furthermore, most bilingual staff in the analyzed articles reported that their language skills as interpreters were exclusively used by their organizations, rather than relying on professional interpreters. This led to various negative impacts, including increased workload without additional pay or recognition, conflicts between their professional and personal identities, and microaggressions related to perceived language competency. Even when organizations employed interpreters, unless these interpreters were held to a high standard, their services often failed to assist street-level bureaucrats in decision-making. Instead, their incomplete or deficient translations could lead social workers to make decisions without fully understanding their clients' situations (Buzungu and Rugkåsa 2023).

It is at the intersection of public policy and individual street-level bureaucrats' discretion (Stensöta 2019) that language orientations can play a crucial role. As our analysis has shown, these vary from ethically minded solutions (Hall and Valdiviezo 2020) to more blatant linguistic discrimination (Holzinger 2019). More research on the public ethics of care should be done on how policy affects practice, and how practice affects clients, when it comes to the ethical judgement and decision-making made by both street-level bureaucrats and by policy makers.

Although our study aims to map research published in social work-related journals on bilingualism in social welfare settings, the decision to include only papers published in

English carries certain research ethical implications. To provide a more comprehensive account of current academic perspectives on bilingualism in social welfare settings, future literature reviews employing scoping or other methodologies and incorporating studies in multiple languages would be highly beneficial. Similarly, our analysis is limited by our choice to only analyze the texts of the chosen articles, while devoting less focus to the national or linguistic contexts in which they were written. Although beyond the scope and aim of the present study, a comparative analysis of national contexts that examines policies, legislation, or political discourses across bilingual, multilingual, or minority language settings within social work or social welfare systems could generate valuable and thought-provoking insights for advancing linguistic justice.

We acknowledge, since we only analyzed peer-reviewed published journal articles, that there are multiple linguistic plentitude settings, national, regional or otherwise, that fall outside of this study's purview, since they are either not discussed in social work journals in English, or were not captured by our choice of search terms. Our aim with this study is not to define the discussions on bilingualism or multilingualism in social welfare regimes but rather to provide a structured overview of what has been academically discussed, in English, in social work-related journals, on the topic of how bilingualism and multilingualism are negotiated by street-level bureaucrats in their interactions with clients. These limitations are important to bear in mind, since research on bilingualism, multilingualism and minority language situations can be used by political actors to further various linguistic politics and policy related agendas. While this study does not offer specific policy recommendations, we underscore the importance of giving increased attention to bilingualism, multilingualism, and minority language rights in both the research and practice of social work and social welfare particularly as they pertain to the rights and needs of both practitioners and service users.

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- *Articles included in the scoping review.

Appendix. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Yes	No
Does the paper address multilingualism/bilingualism in welfare services/ social services/ social work?		
Is the paper an empirical study?		
The paper is published in English or Nordic languages		
Is the paper peer-reviewed?		
Is the paper published after 2010?		
The paper is NOT a literature review		
The paper is NOT a monography.		