

# Supporting Bicultural workers: A literature Review

How can organisations employing Bicultural Workers better support them to navigate the complexity of living and working in their communities, specifically in relation to self-care, boundary setting and role creep.

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## Introduction

Research on the importance of Bicultural Workers (BCWs) in contemporary multicultural countries such as Australia and New Zealand is growing. The bulk of this research underscores BCWs' importance because of their belonging to the communities with whom they work. This belonging enables cultural legitimacy, shared language, trust and acceptance and an understanding of community-based systems, networks and structures. BCWs also understand Western or mainstream culture and bring cultural bridging skills among many other benefits. These studies also evidenced that BCWs experience pressure, managing organisational and community expectations in their roles which can create burnout, identity crisis, as well as undermining their capacity to deliver. BCWs live and work in their communities and can experience challenges in separating personal and professional lives. There are cultural obligations and expectations they may also have to manage, leading to extra work responsibilities, including work outside of official working hours and beyond the scope of their roles, often unrecognised by employers. The aim of this brief literature review is to highlight these challenges and the complexities of BCWs role to bring to the fore the issues affecting their wellbeing and factors that affect their capacity to deliver. The review also discusses some of the recommendations given in the literature regarding supports for BCWs in the workplace including the extent to which they are applicable. It concludes with highlighting the importance of having a collaborative discussion between the employers and BCWs as a method to address role conflict and burn out among other issues BCWs face. Before exploring the central issues, it is useful to first briefly describe who are BCWs and some of the roles they play.

## Bicultural Workers

Cohealth (2019) defines a BCW as an individual "employed to use their cultural knowledge, language skills, lived experience and community connections to work with people who they share a lived experience with and mainstream organisations. BCWs elevate community voices, advocate for their needs, co-design and deliver programs, share information and facilitate cultural safety." This broad definition shows that BCWs have certain aspects such as language, cultural understanding, and similar lived experiences in common with the people they work with. However, for one to be engaged as a BCW additional skills are required. In its development of professional standards for BCWs, Cohealth (2019) has listed some of the minimum requirements for the role. BCWs must be able to communicate in English and the language of the targeted community, demonstrate cultural knowledge, have effective cross-cultural communication skills, understand community strengths and challenges, have extensive community networks and an understanding of the diversity and differences among community members. Educational qualification including those from their countries of origin are also useful in bicultural work, as they provide many transferable skills that may be useful in the role. It is important to highlight that while this review consistently uses the term BCW, this cohort of employees is described differently across literature and resources. Refugee liaison, cultural broker, outreach support worker, indigenous worker, cultural liaison officer are some of the descriptions used to refer to such workers (Prem et al. 2021).

## The Importance of Bicultural Work

BCWs are crucial in the success of community engagement strategies because they bring valuable cultural knowledge and shared lived experiences that are useful when designing and delivering programmes with community groups (Fischer, Sauaia & Kutner 2007). They are also agents for enhancing service use, Mortensen (2011) explains that BCWs in New Zealand play an important role in assisting patients to navigate the often-complex multilayered and multidisciplinary healthcare system. Fischer, Sauaia and Kutner (2007) report that BCWs are instrumental points for building trust with their communities in the provision of culturally appropriate and client empowering interventions and educating them about services which some vulnerable groups such as refugees may not be familiar with. These cohorts may also have negative or traumatic past experiences with immigration, police or other government agencies including the healthcare system prior to or during their migration, this can also affect communities' utilisation of and trust in services. BCWs can provide culturally appropriate

services to their communities and offer a safe space (Piper 2016) thus instilling a positive attitude to services in the community.

### *Shared language, culture, and lived experience*

As a result of their ability to speak in the language and understanding culture of the targeted community, BCWs can be instrumental in sharing messages clearly, in language and in a culturally appropriate manner especially on issues that have specific meanings and terminology exclusive to their group (Deshmukh, Abbott & Reath 2014). They also understand the community's unique issues because of shared lived experiences and their belongingness to the community (CMY 2011). The work by Deshmukh, Abbott and Reath (2014) shows that Australian Indigenous BCWs are instrumental in cultural brokering by guiding their non-Indigenous team members and ensuring that they provide services in a way that is culturally safe and appropriate to Indigenous clients. In discussing some of the benefits of employing workers who share lived experience, cultural background and community with their clients, Dickson (2020) further draws on the evidence of Indigenous Australians which showed improved engagement with maternal health services due to familiarity in communication styles, and the nature of relationships that often extended beyond the clearly defined professional interaction. Dickson (2020) also draws on several other studies demonstrating the importance of such relationships and familiarity when dealing with drug and alcohol issues.

Even in the business sector, as contemporary societies continue to become more diverse in terms of service users, customer base and workforce, BCWs have increasingly become valuable assets in creating an environment for businesses and organisations to thrive as they can informedly advise how specific services could be tailored to reflect the diversity of its stakeholders (The Conversation, 2019). What this indicates is that in both social and business services, bicultural workers have a particular advantage as they carry social and cultural legitimacies that come with the community trust and acceptability.

### *Community-led approaches*

Durey et al. (2016) demonstrate the importance of BCWs particularly in delivering community-led projects to respond to community needs in their work with the Australian Indigenous community. For example, despite massive resource allocation to address health issues among Australian Indigenous community members in Australia and improve the morbidity and mortality disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, limited outcomes were recorded (Vos et al. 2009). By actively engaging the community through BCWs to drive the process, however, community priorities were communicated back to health services and their needs prioritised having a greater impact on health outcomes through provision of services in a culturally safe environment (Durey et al. 2016). In their work with the Wikwemikong, an Indigenous community in Canada, Schinke et al. (2009) report that BCWs were crucial in enhancing community-led practices through ensuring that the voices and perspectives of the community were at the centre of the interventions. The language and approaches used in the project reflected the priorities and goals of the Wikwemikong community thereby leading to a more successful project (Schinke et al. 2009).

## **Complexities and Challenges faced by Bicultural Workers**

While the importance of BCWs is well-documented, there is also a body of literature showing that the complex setting in which they operate exposes them to a multiplicity of challenges.

### *Values and culture clash*

Discussing some of these issues, Henderson, Kendall and See (2011) note that BCWs can face challenges in balancing the expectations of their communities and employers that can at times be opposed. This can be apparent when BCWs are employed to work with communities on issues around mental health, family planning, safe sex practices or other topics that might be a taboo. For instance, in a study among the Ethiopian community, Tilahun et al. (2013) report unfavourable attitudes towards providing sexual

and reproductive health services for adolescents and BCWs experiencing backlash when employed to discuss these issues. Holt et al (2012) discuss another example in South Africa, where BCWs were of the view that young women should not have sex before marriage, 20 percent also believed young women should abstain from sex as a family planning method. In this instance BCWs cultural values contradicted their professional responsibility to share the organisations values regarding sexual health. By sticking with the employer's objectives BCWs can experience an identity crisis according to Brannen and Thomas (2010). Additionally, carrying a message that undermines the core values of the community may come with negative ramifications for the BCW in their personal life, including prejudicial labels of losing identity, abandoning cultural values, and pushing western agendas.

### *Community expectations*

There are community expectations that BCWs must deal with. It can be a common occurrence to be asked for assistance or about issues that are not directly related to their job descriptions. Community members may see BCWs as a trusted and knowledgeable person that understands western systems yet shares a lived experience with them and therefore, they rely on their altruism for support. For example, Zanchetta et al. (2012) report that in Brazil, bicultural workers employed as family health educators found themselves being supports or advocates on other issues such as unemployment, even though they lacked experience in employment support. BCWs sense of obligation or duty to their fellow community members and inherent altruism (Dickson 2020) can result in BCWs performing tasks beyond their job descriptions - including being lay councillors, advocates, and networkers on behalf of their community members. According to CMY (2011), because BCWs both live and work with their community they encounter these issues both during and outside working hours and environments. This means that BCWs are continuously dealing with work issues and pressures even during their down time, this can be a source of stress when one tries to manage the boundary between community and work expectations.

The extra responsibilities from the community also emanate from the belief that bicultural workers know and are able to respond to all the issues in their communities (CMY 2011). This is likely to be pronounced among the more experienced BCWs and those that have other responsibility such as community elders. Deshmukh, Abbott and Reath (2014) document that among the Indigenous communities in Australia, these additional roles came in the form of community visits and clients' expectation for support with other issues not just those that fall directly under the BCWs responsibilities. Deshmukh and colleagues observe that despite the burden of extra work, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers still shouldered the extra tasks for cultural reasons and as a duty or sense of obligation to help their communities to thrive. Apart from the issues raised by their communities, Deshmukh, Abbott and Reath (2014) also report that additional work was given by their non-indigenous colleagues who regarded indigenous workers as more knowledgeable and experienced to deal with the community issues. Dickson (2020) highlight that this leads to increased workload and a heavy burden of responsibility for bicultural workers which can result in overworking, burnout and undermining physical and mental wellbeing.

### *Additional responsibilities*

This expansion of the roles and responsibilities of BCWs, without the corresponding training, recognition and remuneration comes with challenges. Tyrrell et al. (2016) observe that employers generally lack understanding about the complexity of BCWs roles and the increased workload that they bare. This can mean that BCWs are over worked, under paid, lack opportunities to attend relevant training, receive targeted support and network (in a paid capacity) with others who have similar responsibilities. The lack of formal recognition also means that BCWs may not receive appropriate organisational guidelines or inductions. Therefore, these issues go unresolved, as managers fail to recognise the informal work BCWs are expected to perform by the communities, which extends beyond what they have been officially hired to do (Tribe 1999). At the same time, it has also been argued that some of the BCWs who are burdened with additional work might still be dealing with their own integration and settlement issues which require some flexibility from the managers, rather than extra workload.

## Recommendations from the literature

Several studies and research projects have generated recommendations on how some of the challenges faced by BCWs could be addressed.

### *Boundary setting*

Piper (2016) suggests drawing a line between personal and professional life is of paramount importance to negotiate role overlap. Having a separate phone for work which one may turn off outside their contracted hours, or only answering work phone in emergency cases can be helpful (CMY 2011). This also works well when BCWs follow organisational policies such as not disclosing personal phone and address and clarifying one's professional role including the associated boundaries when one is being asked to address issues beyond their job description and scope. Polite responses such as "I am sorry I can't give you my address and personal phone numbers because my organisation's policy doesn't allow workers to do so" have also been suggested (CMY 2011; Piper 2016). This essentially entails creating boundaries with their community through "acting" professionally (Piper 2016). CMY (2011) also implores BCWs to delegate some of the community work to colleagues as part of workload management, and in recognising that it is not possible to be responsible for all the community members' needs. It is also important to note that BCWs who receive additional responsibilities from their colleagues due to their "knowledge and belonging of community" may find it difficult to decline due to power inequalities in the workplace and their sense of obligation or altruism to the community according to Dickson (2020).

### *Co-design*

There is also a need to acknowledge that BCWs bring methodological and cultural expertise to their workplaces (Zanchetta et al. 2012). Therefore, including them in a co-design process early in the planning phase, incorporating their lived experience and expertise as BCWs will enable development of BCW roles and programs that are culturally safe and align with the interests and needs of target communities (Tyrrell et al. 2016). Putting BCWs in strategic leadership and policy-development position is useful for creating an environment where they are supported in honouring and respecting their values and also spearheading projects from their perspective rather than implementing what has been developed by others (Burke 2018).

### *Capacity building*

It is also important to ensure that BCWs design their learning and development plan, and management can assist them with identifying training opportunities that are suitable for their plan, as well as ensuring that they access these opportunities like their non-bicultural colleagues (Tyrrell et al. 2016; Zanchetta et al. 2012). This entails flexibility, adequate resourcing and a recognition that BCWs may still be negotiating their own resettlement and thus such plans should be as flexible as possible (CMY 2011). Acknowledging that BCWs are important to the organisation may include setting up platforms for mentorship or buddying with staff from other organisations to further gain experience, including forums, skills development workshops and communities of practice according to the (Tyrrell et al. 2016).

### *Supervision*

Husband and Hoffman (2004) emphasise the importance of regular supervision between BCWs and managers to determine the extent to which workers deal with issues outside their normal time as part of dealing with role conflict. This could then be addressed through recognising that time as part of the official working hours, and through implementing strategies such as reducing the workload, and the official work hours, as well as paying BCWs for those hours (Tyrrell et al. 2016).



## Limitations

Nemcek and Sabatier (2003) however, note that in some instances the nature of the suggestions usually given are general, hence they may face challenges when not tailored for specific contexts. Ensuring that BCWS meet certain community criteria incl age, gender and language for community acceptability in some cases may not go far enough to address the challenges faced by BCWs (Brannen & Thomas 2010). Those of the same ethnicity, gender or language as the broader targeted community can still struggle to negotiate different subcultures, norms, values and beliefs and therefore may struggle to deal with the specific issues of particular individuals – no one BCW can represent the diversity of an entire community.

Western procedural norms such as drawing boundaries around what is inside or outside the scope of someone's roles, and/or drawing boundaries about contact hours and request for assistance during personal time may undermine a BCWs sense of duty to their community or obligation to respect elders or family ties. These cultural obligations and expectations from the community make it harder for the workers to "refuse" to respond to community issues outside their working hours, as well as those unrelated to their job descriptions (Zanchetta et al. 2012). It might be culturally inappropriate for some BCWs to refuse to support a community member even though in some cases it goes against the organisational policies such as sharing of personal address and mobile numbers. More so, in some instances, community members may already have a BCWs personal details due to their personal relationships outside of the work context. This may bring into question what is more important or compelling to them, between following the policy on the one hand, or attending to community needs on the other, even though doing so might mean going beyond policy stipulations which is likely to create personal and professional conflict.

While the above evidence shows that the work of BCWs has been explored, and recommendations have been given to address the challenges they face, some of the evidence presented also shows that the extent to which those recommendations can be applied is limited due to various reasons. As also shown, some of the recommendations have been produced through studies with people from certain contexts. Considering the heterogeneity of the BCWs and the different environments they operate, there is a need for organisations employing BCWs to further appreciate the challenges BCWs face in order to be well-equipped to support them. Furthermore, since BCWs are increasingly becoming instrumental for accessing and delivering services in a culturally appropriate way in some multicultural societies, it remains crucial to research ways in which the gap between theory and practice can be addressed for a more empowering and conducive environment in BCWs.

## Conclusion

The importance of BCWs is well demonstrated in literature and various organisational reports. They bring valuable cultural knowledge useful for assisting clients to navigate complex services, empower community members through community-led initiatives, building trust, advocacy, and provision of accessible information in relevant languages. Yet, they deal with multiple challenges and complexities due to structural deficiencies and their dual identities drawn from living and working in their communities. As a result, despite working towards the wellbeing of their community and meeting their organisations' goals, the space in which they function is likely to overwork them and cause burnout, and the associated health effects. Both cultural and professional factors require a closer look to ensure the self-care of BCWs through culturally appropriate boundary setting and steps to address role creep among other issues to ensure the wellbeing of BCWs. Opening discussions and the development of trust between the employer and BCW would appear to be crucial in supporting BCW's through role conflict and burn out among other issues they face.

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