

## **The emotional impact of interpreting in asylum interviews**

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### **What we know**

Interpreting is a complicated task. Interpreters need to listen to and remember the information in one language, find a match in their mind in another language and then translate verbally to the language of the host country. Interpreters report that interpreting emotional information, for example information about feelings and violence, is harder than interpreting information that is not emotional. They worry that they make more errors when interpreting emotional information. This might be because emotional information takes more effort when it is processed in one's mind than information that is not emotional. Also, regularly listening to a lot of emotional information, for example distressing stories about traumatic experiences, can build up into an emotional response which has been called secondary traumatic stress. Compared to the general population, interpreters report higher secondary traumatic stress.

Asylum interviews often include emotional information. Interpreting accurately is important in asylum interviews, as information from these interviews is used to make decisions about asylum applications. Therefore, it is important to understand how emotional information affects interpreters during their assignments. Understanding this can help make a case for more support for interpreters in their work context, as interpreters often work freelance and do not benefit from organisational support.

### **What we did**

The research study looked at whether:

- 1) Interpreters make more errors when interpreting emotional information
- 2) Interpreters with higher secondary traumatic stress find interpreting emotional information more difficult.

Twenty-eight interpreters participated in a simulated asylum interview through video conferencing. An actor played a fictional asylum applicant, the researcher played a fictional interviewer and the interpreter interpreted between the two. The actor and researcher followed a script that was written specifically for the study. The applicant's responses in the script included both neutral and emotional information. The interviews were recorded and the interpreter's interpretations of the fictional applicant's responses were transcribed so that interpreting errors for neutral and emotional information could be counted.

Before the simulated asylum interview, participating interpreters completed a questionnaire on secondary traumatic stress, an emotional response that can develop when frequently hearing about traumatic experiences. After the simulated asylum interview, participating interpreters were asked to rate their emotional reaction to the interview on a scale.

### **What we found**

The study found that interpreters made more interpreting errors when they interpreted the emotional responses than when they interpreted neutral responses. Having higher secondary traumatic stress did not influence this. However, interpreters with higher secondary traumatic stress found the content of the interview more distressing. These findings suggest that emotional information is harder to interpret accurately. They also suggest that interpreters who previously had stronger emotional reactions to hearing about traumatic experiences (as measured by the questionnaire on secondary traumatic stress) also had a stronger emotional reaction to the simulated interview (as rated by the interpreter after the simulated interview).

### **Recommendations for practice**

The results highlight the need for interpreters to get support and training in interpreting emotional information and in interpreting for asylum interviews. Inspired by the trauma-informed interpreting approach (Bancroft et al., 2016), this may include:

- Consistent offers of pre- and debriefing before and after interpreting assignments by service providers buying in services from interpreters
- Use of note-taking during interpreting
- Promotion of self-care strategies and rituals which interpreters can use before, during and after interpreting assignments
- Provision of training in specific techniques used by service providers (e.g. specific interview skills used in asylum interviews, specific types of questions used in therapy sessions)

It is also important for these recommendations to be further explored as part of future research studies.

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