

# **A Magical Profession?**

## *Causes and Management of Occupational Stress in the Signed Language Interpreting Profession*

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**Abstract.** *The absence of literature on occupational stress in the signed language interpreting profession implies that such stress is either absent from, unrecognized by, or indeed considered unproblematic by the profession. This study aims to counter this perception and uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to gain insight into the experience of occupational stress amongst a sample of signed language interpreters in the North West of England. The findings suggest two significant causes of occupational stress for signed language interpreters. Firstly, the expectation that the interpreter performs ‘magic’ contrasts greatly with the participants’ own accounts of the complexity of their role and the responsibility they feel to ensure effective communication occurs. Secondly, interpreting can have considerable emotional and psychological impact on interpreters, exacerbated by working in isolation in the community without organizational support. Finally, this paper puts forward an argument for supervision as a beneficial means of on-going reflective practice and support for the signed language interpreting profession.*

**Keywords:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, supervision, occupational stress, isolation, psychological impact, practice profession, reflective practice.

The aim of this paper is to bring into discussion causes and management of occupational stress within the signed language interpreting profession. The absence of research literature on this subject could lead to the assumption that occupational stress is not of concern to the profession. However, my own experience as an interpreter and anecdotal evidence from colleagues paints a very different picture; interpreters regularly discuss stressful work-related situations and dilemmas. **This paper aims to** validate the experiences of signed language interpreters by considering anecdotal evidence of occupational stress through a qualitative study of some key issues. This study explores the occurrence and causes of occupational stress amongst a sample of signed language interpreters and their strategies for managing such stress.

The accounts given by participants in this study point to occupational stress

as a significant factor within the signed language interpreting profession. A lack of recognition of the complexity of the role by other professionals led participants to believe that there was an assumption that they can perform their duties without being noticed; described as an expectation to perform ‘magic’ by one participant. Furthermore, participants’ accounts indicate how exposure to the distress and trauma of others can have a marked impact on interpreters. The experience of occupational stress is compounded by working freelance, without recourse to organizational support structures. Participants predominantly relied on informal networks for support, a situation arising, I argue, due to the lack of established frameworks for reflective practice. The benefits of supervision within other professions are well researched and widely recognized (Hawkins and Shohet 2006; Inskipp and Proctor 1995; Page and Wosket 2001; Carroll 2007; Morton-Cooper and Palmer 2000; Butterworth *et al.* 1998; Cutcliffe *et al.* 2001), yet there has been an absence of discussion of supervision within the signed language interpreting profession. This study makes an argument for the benefits of supervision to support the work of interpreters.

## **1. Occupational stress and professional support frameworks for signed language interpreters**

An analysis of the literature on signed language interpreting highlights two major gaps. Firstly, there is a lack of literature on occupational stress amongst interpreters and secondly, an absence of research on professional frameworks to support the work of interpreters and provide opportunities for reflective practice. The implication is that these areas are either unrecognized or underestimated within the profession.

For example, a wide body of research, drawn from both signed and spoken language interpreting, has argued that the conduit model of interpreting does not accurately reflect interpreting practice; interpreters are required to use their judgement to manage complex communication dynamics and facilitate effective communication (Dean and Pollard 2001, 2005; Wadensjö 1998; Roy 2000; Berk-Seligson 2002; Hitesh 2002; Dysart-Gale 2005; Hsieh 2008; Lee 2009; Pöchhacker 2004; Dickinson and Turner 2009). However, there are continued restrictions on the interpreter’s role that are reminiscent of the conduit model. Dean and Pollard (2005) suggest that interpreting is often regarded as a ‘technical profession’, where the technical aspects of the work – linguistic ability in the case of interpreters – are sufficient for effective work practices. They argue that, although the demands of interpreting go beyond the linguistic, controls, such as ‘decision latitude’ (professional judgement), are restricted due to the prevailing expectation that interpreters are only required to make decisions which pertain to linguistic aspects of their work (Dean and Pollard 2001).

The expectation that interpreting is a technical profession has been reflected in codes of conduct for interpreters, resulting in anxiety and confusion on the part of interpreters regarding what is permitted within the confines of their role (Bahadir 2001; Atherton *et al.* 2002; Angelelli 2006; Dean and Pollard 2005; Dysart-Gale 2005). Dean *et al.* conducted a study of occupational health risks for signed language interpreters which identified “a problematic, stress-inducing gap between interpreting practice rhetoric versus the de facto practice experiences and behaviors of interpreters” (2010:41). This suggests that codes of conduct do not accurately reflect interpreting practice or allow for sufficient flexibility within the interpreting role. They add that “interpreters on the whole reported significantly more psychological distress, depression and physical exertion than either the practice profession or the technical profession norms” (*ibid.*).

Interpreting can involve work in highly sensitive and emotive situations, directly witnessing traumatic events or interpreting for Deaf people in the telling of traumatic events including death, violence, child abuse and neglect. Figley (1995:xiv) uses the term ‘compassion stress’ to describe how professional caregivers, in particular therapists, experience “the natural behaviors and emotions that arise from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other – the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person”. However, not only do interpreters ‘know about’ events, they are responsible for conveying the emotional content and affect of any narrative, often through use of the first person, which could potentially increase the likelihood of compassion stress. The impact the work can have on interpreters generally has received some acknowledgement (Baistow 1999; Angelelli 2003; Tribe 1999; Johnson *et al.* 2009; Wiebel 2009; Dean and Pollard 2001; Malcolm 2010; Bontempo and Van Loggerenberg 2010), yet there has been little research within the signed language interpreting profession specifically. Harvey (2003:211) explores signed language interpreters’ experience of empathy and highlights the risk of empathically ‘drowning’. This raises the question of what support is available for interpreters to work both safely and ethically.

The benefits of supervision within other professions are well researched and widely recognized (Inskipp and Proctor 1995; Page and Wosket 2001; Carroll 2007; Cutcliffe *et al.* 2001). However, there has been minimal discussion of supervision within the signed language interpreting profession (Dean and Pollard 2001, 2009; Hetherington 2010). In the UK, the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) has introduced formalized interpreter support through a mentoring programme; their policy document states:

ASLI wish to stress that mentoring is about working on specific objectives. An interpreter may choose to have 6 sessions one year to focus on a specific aspect of their work; 2 sessions another year just

to monitor progress on something else; or 0 sessions because they are developing themselves in other ways or have not identified anything specific to work on yet. (ASLI 2003:3)

This implies that mentoring is not intended for ongoing reflective practice and points to a continuing gap in formal support structures for interpreters. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore professional support frameworks in more depth; this will be the subject of further research.

## **2. Methodology, methods and participants**

The aim of this research study is to explore how participants make sense of their experiences as signed language interpreters and the meanings these experiences hold for them. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the chosen methodology as its primary concern is to gain an understanding of psychological processes and individual perception, rather than producing an objective ‘truth’. Furthermore, my role as the researcher within a range of possible methodologies was an important consideration in my selection of a method of enquiry. The core principle of IPA is that “the analyst explicitly enters into the research process” (Reid *et al.* 2005:20). I was aware that participants would relate to me as a fellow practitioner and I anticipated that our shared experience as interpreters would shape the interview process.

This study uses qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews to allow participants to give detailed, first person accounts of their experience of working as signed language interpreters. IPA uses purposive sampling to find a homogenous group for whom the research question will be significant, which then allows for in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. Six interpreters participated in the study; all participants are female between the ages of 29 and 58 years. The length of time as a Member of the Register of Sign Language Interpreters (MRSLI) in the UK ranged from 18 months to 10 years. All the participants work either solely as community interpreters, or spend a significant percentage of their working time in community interpreting situations. I informed participants that the information they provided would remain confidential and asked them to endeavour to avoid naming other interpreters or clients in order to protect their confidentiality. I assured them that in the event of this happening I would use pseudonyms to replace any identifying information. I obtained permission to use direct quotes, all of which have been made anonymous with pseudonyms ascribed to participants. The participants were asked if they wanted to choose their own pseudonym, and one participant chose to do this.

An effort was made to design open, non leading questions and follow up prompts, led by the desire to not influence the participants or make assumptions about their concerns. The interview schedule aimed to encourage participants

to reflect on their work experiences and I invited their narratives by asking sufficiently open questions such as “what do you like about being an interpreter?” and “what would you say are the main differences between a ‘good’ day and a ‘bad’ day?”. The interview schedule was consciously left flexible in order to ensure opportunities for participants to raise their own concerns that I had not considered. The aim was to obtain rich, detailed accounts from each participant of what they, as experienced practitioners, considered significant. This was particularly important as such accounts are underrepresented in the literature.

### **3. Findings**

The findings are divided into five themes drawn from the interviews. The themes and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data and reflect common threads that were apparent throughout the different participants’ accounts. Each sub-theme is introduced with a quote which summarizes the general feeling amongst the participants with regard to that particular topic.

#### **3.1 Theme 1: How interpreters feel they are perceived by hearing professionals**

##### **3.1.1 “They think I’m a magicians assistant”**

They think I’m a magician’s assistant, I wave my hands and the deaf person understands and they have no [] cognition around how I get from A to B or how things are being conveyed, or the amount of work that I need to do to enable this dialogue to happen. (Chris)

The impression that they are expected to perform ‘magic’ is echoed by all participants. In this sense interpreting is regarded as a technical profession (Dean and Pollard 2005), with interpreters solely working from a source to a target language, without an understanding of how they manage instances of non-equivalence between two languages and the complexities of human interaction. This perception echoes findings in other studies (Dysart-Gale 2005; Angelelli 2006; Hsieh 2008). One participant, Nikki, wondered whether hearing professionals were thinking

I want them [Deaf people] simply to understand A, B and C and why does it take the rest of the alphabet to explain it to them?

Nikki suggests that since the other professionals do not understand the interpreting process, they are frustrated by the time it takes. Val expresses her own frustration when working with a solicitor who was not taking time to present information in a way that his Deaf client would understand:

if they would give her more time in that interview or if they would consider other factors – or if they'd just let me do it my way!

Although Val laughed as she said this, the statement indicates both a frustration that the process was not accessible for the Deaf client and a desire to play more of an active role; this echoes previous studies (Dysart-Gale 2005; Fox and Avegad 2005; Angelelli 2004; Turner 2005; Dickinson and Turner 2009). Participants' accounts suggest that the image of the 'magical' role of the interpreter is based on a belief that they can just turn up and interpret effectively, without needing an understanding of the context they are working in. Three participants made reference to an expectation for them to be 'invisible' and emphasized that this did not reflect the realities of the work. The notion of invisibility has been widely challenged (Lee 2009; Davidson 2000; Roy 2000; Dean and Pollard 2001; Berk-Seligson 2002; Hitesh 2002; Dysart-Gale 2005; Hsieh 2008). Furthermore, the expectation for interpreters to remain invisible can have emotional consequences. Chris describes her experience of offering advice during assignments:

you are seen to interfere, where really I've often tried to offer some very polite advice but it's when that gets ignored and then they still do it, it's really quite painful.

The 'pain' she refers to is related to being unable to prevent discrimination against Deaf people; such empathy has been identified as a cause of stress for interpreters (Harvey 2003).

### ***3.1.2 "Preparation, what do they need it for?"***

Five of the interpreters described how they were expected to work with little or no preparation or background information prior to an interpreting assignment. Jenny sums up the general feeling when she says,

there is no other profession where you could go somewhere, all the other professionals in the room know exactly what's going to be going on.

She also talked about feeling "completely blind" prior to an assignment and continues

I really don't think I should go in there without understanding what they mean, because how can I give any kind of correct interpretation if I don't understand it?

### **3.1.3 “Does anyone really recognize our profession?”**

The perception that interpreters perform ‘magic’ and the associated lack of awareness of the need for preparation led participants to believe they are not regarded as professionals. Sandra talks about interpreters being regarded as “less than” other professionals. Chris’s impression that

everybody else in the room may have a certain amount of professional respect for each other and []when people don’t understand what you do, they can be dismissive

was echoed by all participants. Participants found the lack of awareness of their role by other professionals stressful, particularly as this required them to assert their needs when faced with the expectation that they would work solely as conduits. The desire to be recognized as a professional has also been identified in previous studies (Hsieh 2008; Bahadir 2001; Angelelli 2006; Dysart-Gale 2005).

### **3.1.4 “They don’t want a new face when they are dealing with all that”**

Nikki discusses the importance of continuity of interpreters for sensitive assignments. She describes working in child protection with a Deaf couple and stresses the importance of continuity in order for the interpreter to fully understand the context they are working in. She suggests that meetings should be arranged to also accommodate the interpreter’s diary to ensure continuity:

If you don’t know anything of the content, it is very difficult to start deciphering and decoding what the messages [are]. In those situations it’s wrong to bring someone new in. They should really move the meeting [because] the professionals might have their say but your client might not.

Jenny discusses being present during an emotional medical assignment and not being booked for the follow-up appointment. In addition to the distress this caused the patient, Jenny was left not knowing the outcome for the patient, which had an impact on her and raises the issue of closure for interpreters. The participants did not overtly mention the need for closure, however the concept featured in a back-grounded manner throughout their accounts. For example, in section 3.3.1, I discuss how one participant, Amy, describes staying with a patient after a distressing assignment, an act that may have served the important function of closure for Amy as well as providing an opportunity for the Deaf patient to talk about her experience to someone who knows their language.

### 3.1.5 *“You do really feel you are on an equal footing with the other professionals”*

The participants gave accounts of assignments where they felt there was an appreciation of the complexities within their work and a recognition that interpreters “supplement their technical knowledge and skills with input, exchange, and judgment regarding the consumers they are serving in a specific environment and in a specific communicative situation” (Dean and Pollard 2005:259). Their accounts describe situations where interpreters are working as practice professionals, that is, situations where the interpreter’s knowledge and expertise has been sought and their expertise recognized. Chris summarizes the positive impact that being seen in this light professionally has had on her:

[They] truly understand the complexities of interpreting and they make my job less stressful, because there’s, a respect for what I do [] you do really feel you are on an equal footing with the other professional and that, in that sense that you are respected in what you say.

## 3.2 Theme 2: Interpreters’ perspective on their role

Contrary to the expectation that they perform ‘magic’, the participants describe their own understanding of the complexities of the role.

### 3.2.1 *“I think ‘they’ve not got it’ and everyone else thinks ‘they’ve got it’”*

Chris describes how hearing professionals

can’t pick up on gaps in Deaf people’s knowledge themselves, it’s often the interpreter who will pick up on that.

This is a reference to their “fund of information” (Pollard 1998:182-3). A number of studies have acknowledged the responsibility interpreters have to ensure clarity when there is non-equivalence between languages (McCay and Miller 2001; Hsieh 2008), rather than regarding it as a collaborative effort by the primary participants. All participants gave examples where assumptions had been made by hearing professionals that Deaf clients would have the same level of understanding of a particular context as a hearing person. Jenny tells of a medical assignment she did with a young Deaf woman:

She’s basically got no sexual knowledge, other than what goes where [] She really, really didn’t understand and she’s what 22?[] Anybody else would think a 22 year old in this day and age, god they know more than I do!



All participants reported feeling a sense of responsibility to supplement gaps in their Deaf clients' 'fund of information' by providing explanations or background information to facilitate understanding. This contrasts greatly with the expectation of interpreting as a technical profession and is discussed further in the next section.

### ***3.2.2 "It's people's lives that we are dealing with on a daily basis"***

Participants made particular reference to their work in the fields of mental health, child protection and medical domains, which is unsurprising considering the sensitivity involved in these settings and the potential impact that decisions made in these contexts have on peoples' lives. For example, Val gives an account of the importance of an interpreter being present for Deaf parents during labour:

They need you to be there in case something goes wrong and they need to give instructions [] or sign consent forms and people don't realize we are not there to go "push", you know, we are there because at any point during that labour and that birth, something critical could happen that requires those parents to sign the consent form, or to make a decision.

In the context of such sensitive situations, it is not surprising that interpreters believed that interpersonal skills and trust were vital in their work.

### ***3.2.3 "Trust is absolutely paramount"***

The participants gave accounts of waiting in hospital or doctor's waiting rooms and being aware of the fine balance between "*how much of yourself you give away to maintain that professional level*" and "*still come across as being personable*" (Jenny). This suggests that the work of an interpreter extends either side of the interpreting assignment and involves building relationships grounded in trust. Studies on spoken language interpreting have also discussed the challenge of building trust whilst maintaining ethical boundaries (Hsieh 2008; Angelelli 2006; Davidson 2000).

### ***3.2.4 "You kind of step out of role sometimes"***

This final sub theme concerns ethical boundaries. Val describes being asked by a midwife to prop the Deaf patient's foot on her hip during the assignment referred to in section 3.2.2. Val did so, but in her discussion of the event, there was a sense that she felt required to justify her decision to do so:

Well I wasn't doing any harm, [] It was only a couple of minutes, but at the end of the day you are a human being [] I don't see what else I could have done, what am I going to do – “no she can give birth with one leg in the air and the other one dangling on the floor”.

She discussed how her physical engagement in this event might be regarded as breaching the boundaries of the interpreter's role, yet she felt that her response was appropriate in the circumstances she found herself in. Other participants also described how they made decisions based on the fact that they were “*a human being*” in situations where they might otherwise be perceived as having crossed ethical boundaries. They considered the code of practice for interpreters as too prescriptive and preferred to apply the ethical principle of ‘do no harm’ to their own practice. The principle of ‘do no harm’ has hitherto been one of the guiding ethical principles for interpreting practice in the UK. However, the current Code of Conduct in the UK no longer includes reference to ethical principles (NRCPD 2010). The accounts given by participants in this study reflect concerns raised in other studies (Atherton *et al.* 2002; Angelelli 2004, 2006; Dean and Pollard 2005; Dysart-Gale 2005).

Thus far I have described how participants in this study report how distant the perception of interpreting as ‘magic’ is from their daily reality of interpreting in the community. Furthermore, participants report that they feel a great sense of responsibility for their interpreting practice. In section 3.3 I describe the impact that interpreting work can have on interpreters.

### **3.3 Theme 3: The emotional impact of work on interpreters**

This study aims to contribute to an understanding of the effect that their work has on interpreters. I consider the feelings that arise and how interpreters manage these.

#### **3.3.1 “*It didn't go the way it should have done*”**

This first sub-theme relates to feelings of powerlessness. Participants gave accounts of not feeling respected as professionals and described how they often bear witness to events beyond their control, such as discrimination towards Deaf people. Chris alludes to magic once more and says

I know I can't wave [my] magic wand and make it all go away, but it's when [...] I do feel powerless or discrimination is going to happen anyway, regardless of what I'm going to say. That's hard for me, very hard.

The sense of Deaf people being disempowered seems to be mirrored in some of the participants' own feelings. These “intrapersonal demands” (Dean and

Pollard 2001:4) confirm the findings of previous studies (Harvey 2003; Dean and Pollard 2001). Amy tells of the effect of working with a Deaf patient who was “*devastated*” after receiving some news during a hospital appointment:

I got in my car and I cried just because of what had happened [] it just didn't go the way it should have gone and I was just, I think I was just so angry with this doctor that it came out in emotion. I wouldn't put up with it [] and I know she did challenge it, so that was great she did that.

It appears that the patient's actions had eased Amy's feelings to some extent, possibly because they reflected what Amy would have done herself. The participants were all candid about their desire for the outcome of events “*to be resolved in the way I think it should be resolved*”. The resolution they sought often related to Deaf people having access to services.

### 3.3.2 “*When you are involved at that level in people's lives, you're impacted*”

Earlier I made reference to how one participant, Amy, stayed with a Deaf patient in a hospital after her appointment had taken place. She rationalized this decision as follows:

I'm a human being. She's a human being. You're not just going to go 'right I'm going now my 3 hours are done, I'm off', so we sat and talked about it after, I know I'm confident she went away feeling a little bit better.

Amy's experience offers further insight into how some interpreters conceive of the role of the interpreter extending beyond the interpreted event. This too has been acknowledged in previous studies (Dysart-Gale 2005; Davidson 2000; Hsieh 2008). Amy's rationale is similar to that put forward by Val (as discussed above): like Val, Amy appears to feel a need to justify her decision on the basis that she is a “*human being*”. Staying with the client after the appointment may have benefited the Deaf patient, but may also have been beneficial for Amy as she would then have been able to enter into a dialogue that she was not able to have with the Deaf client during the interpreting assignment.

Thus empathy appears to be a necessary aspect of the role of an interpreter. However, Harvey (2003) emphasizes the need for this to be balanced with the ability to hold on to a sense of self as distinct from another. As described earlier, recent research by Dean and Pollard (2010) identified a high incidence of ‘psychological distress’ and ‘depression’ amongst interpreters. Associated with this, Chris describes how her own emotions were triggered during assignments:

Historically [the work] would trigger lots of feelings and emotions in me that I wasn't really prepared to let come out. That's why I went to go and do my own counselling and stuff, because those feelings and emotions did need to come out, but they were being pushed out through the type of work I was doing.

Chris's description of her feelings being 'pushed' out indicates that she was unable to prevent the surfacing of her own repressed feelings. Jenny describes how it was many years before she was able to interpret for oncology appointments, following from a family bereavement. These accounts highlight the need for further research into how interpreters manage and prevent 'leakage' of their own feelings during assignments. A question for the profession is whether it is indeed possible for interpreters to bracket their own emotions, and if so what effect does this have on interpreters and what they do with these feelings on completion of an assignment.

### 3.3.3 *"Jobs can weigh on your mind"*

Participants also reported having difficulty "*switching off*" from some jobs. Jenny describes the aftermath of interpreting for a patient who receives a diagnosis, reflecting on the fact that while she can physically walk away from the work environment, psychologically, the Deaf client's situation remains with her:

I can walk away from it, but I can't to some extent [be]cause I've got that knowledge.

Nikki expresses a similar sentiment,

if something bad happens, I'm a bit soft. I think I internalize it a little bit too much, I've not yet developed that strategy that I can just cut off from it.

The ability to 'cut off' varied amongst the participants and raises the question of what training input interpreters receive to manage these feelings. This supports Harvey's (2003) findings regarding the risk of emotionally 'drowning'. Nikki talks about the isolation she feels when leaving a difficult job

you have to keep it with you until you can talk about it, well we don't get the tools to deal with it there and then.

The lack of 'tools' she describes points to the need for training programmes to adequately prepare interpreters for the realities of the work and the importance of continued professional support on completion of training.

### 3.3.4 *“Who do you share the stress with?”*

A community interpreter tends to be the only interpreter present during assignments when working alongside other professionals such as doctors, solicitors and social workers. Five of the participants in this study are freelance interpreters and Amy’s comment reflects the views of the other participants when she says that

it can be quite lonely when you are freelance, you don’t always have that support and I can’t always go back [] and offload to anybody. Sometimes I do feel a little bit like you are out there on your own working.

In the next section, I consider how interpreters manage their stress.

## 3.4 **Theme 4: Strategies for managing stress**

### 3.4.1 *“I think as I’ve got older, I’ve just had to get more assertive”*

All participants describe how they assert themselves during assignments. Val talks about how she has

got a bit of strength and more confidence over the years to be able to say ‘this is what I need to do and this is why I need to do it to get a better outcome for both parties’.

She also explains how she clears up misunderstandings as they occur:

If I make an error on the day, I will hold my hands up on the day, at the time, and say “I’m sorry, I’ve just made a mistake. Can we go back [be]cause that was my fault?” I think it’s very important for us to own that and be able to be strong enough to say ‘I’m human I’ve just made a hiccup’.

All participants give accounts of taking an active role in interpreted interactions, which reflect more recent analyses of interpreter behaviour (Fox and Avegad 2005; Davidson 2000; Hsieh 2008; Dysart-Gale 2005) and further supports the argument for interpreting to be regarded as a practice profession. The practice profession model recognizes the complexity of the role of the interpreter and acknowledges the requirement for interpreters to use their professional judgement (or “decision latitude”; Dean and Pollard 2005:6). Two participants described how the practice profession model validates their practice and gives them confidence to use their professional judgement, which in turn reduces the amount of stress they experience. Conversely, some partici-

pants referred to how they frequently find themselves ‘stepping out of role’, a process that they considered to be an integral part of their work. This term implies that ‘stepping out of role’ is perceived to be outside the remit of the code of professional conduct, despite the frequency of its occurrence.

### ***3.4.2 “I’m a better interpreter when I have got a balance – a variety of work”***

Participants describe how a balance of work alleviates their experience of stress. Chris describes how she monitors the number of complex cases she takes on:

I’ve now been gauging my case load in terms of taking on complex cases, my limit is three. So if people start offering me really hard jobs, I’m more inclined to say, “actually no, I’m at my threshold. I’ve currently got three very complex cases and I need to be able to time manage that”. And when I say time manage it, I mean my own time and what I give to it and the impact it has on me and I never used to be like that.

The ‘really hard jobs’ refers to sensitive assignments such as mental health and child protection which can have a significant impact on the lives of the peoples involved. Sandra also limits how many of these assignments she undertakes and states:

having a variety of work keeps me sane.

Other interpreters describe how they aim to maintain a balance between working in familiar and unfamiliar environments. Unfamiliar environments are considered more stressful as interpreters do not have the same background information to underpin their practice, nor do they have an understanding of the context they will be working in.

### ***3.4.3 “I think I’ve learnt to reflect more on what I do over the years”***

Participants describe the importance of reflecting on their work. Val’s comments summarize the views expressed when she says,

I reflect on whether it was a good job, or I could have done that better, or might do that differently next time.

Jenny describes using reflection to acknowledge that

I did the best I could in that situation but we were up against a brick wall.

However, the limitations of self reflection are expressed by Val, who notes that

You can do it yourself but you can also fool yourself sometimes [be]cause you don't want to hear the bad stuff.

#### **3.4.4 “Everything you bring to a job is a part of yourself”**

Participants recognize how they may influence interpreted interactions and acknowledge the importance of their own self-awareness in order to minimize the impact they have on others. Sandra explains:

this is about people's lives, ours and theirs, whereas I might have thought it was just about them, but it is about me as well and I think that's become more and more apparent.

Nikki believes that

everything you bring to a job is a part of yourself. You bring everything that you've experienced; even the journey to work. I think that's why you have to be so in tune, you have to be aware of the way you are.

The acknowledgement of themselves within the interpreting process appears to be an important means of separating themselves from the clients they work with (Harvey 2003).

To summarize, interpreters suggest that they have a range of strategies for coping with work related stress. Some of these are preventative measures (saying no to too many stressful assignments, focusing on attaining a balance in the type of assignments they commit to), some are self-care measures (acknowledging that assignments can impact on them as individuals in an emotional or psychological manner, and using this knowledge to decline certain assignments), and others, as will be discussed further in the next section, are post-hoc.

### **3.5 Theme 5: Support**

Participants describe feelings that arise during the course of their work and a sense of loneliness when working in the community. They are strong in expressing the view that they want support from another interpreter; someone who has an understanding of their work. Their accounts suggest that they feel misunderstood in their everyday working lives and they may want to ensure that this is not the case when seeking support.

### 3.5.1 *“Some of my best friends are interpreters as well – I can offload to them”*

Participants prefer to obtain support from interpreters with whom they have a close working relationship. They report that trust is considered paramount. Amy explains this in the following terms:

I don't want to just tell just anybody, I want to make sure it's somebody that I know well, that understands, [be]cause they are an interpreter as well – and someone that I trust.

Nikki and Sandra each have a group of interpreters they meet with regularly to reflect on their work. These groups appear to have the features of peer supervision groups (Page and Wosket 2001; Hawkins and Shoheit 2006; Barnes *et al.* 1999) yet the participants do not refer to them as such.

In the absence of professional frameworks it appears that interpreters seek support from established friendships with colleagues. However, if this is not a regular commitment, there is the risk that interpreters will be reactive, rather than reflective. Jenny explains that

as an interpreter you don't really get to talk about it very much, unless it's 'I've had a really bad day'.

Informal networks are a vital source of support; however, the primary relationship is personal and the principal role is that of support. Colleagues may therefore be reluctant to challenge each other, which may limit opportunities for development and change. In addition, if interpreters meet as a group without a facilitator to manage the group process, there is a greater possibility that the group may inadvertently fall into 'traps', such as competitiveness within the group (Hawkins and Shoheit 2006:166), which presents the danger that a valuable source of support may become ineffective or destructive.

### 3.5.2 *“I have a great relationship with my co-workers, I am very lucky”*

Amy and Jenny describe how they miss working as part of a team since they became freelance interpreters. Jenny elaborates on this, arguing that

as a team you always have that support, you can always phone someone.

Conversely, Val feels more isolated now she is working for an agency than she did when she was a freelance interpreter. She says:



I miss, sometimes, having that close working relationship with other interpreters that you work with on a regular basis. I was working with people I knew well, that I had confidence in, that I had respect for

### 3.5.3 “I don’t know how people can do it without supervision”

One of the questions I put to participants related to their views on supervision and mentoring. In their responses, mentoring was associated with signposting, helping with transitions, reflecting on work, support, advice, and providing them with someone to look up to and learn from. Five participants link supervision to hierarchical line management relationships. Chris is the only participant who has consultative supervision and she explains why this has been an invaluable source of support for her:

That’s the thing that keeps me sane, because it allows me to reflect on my own behaviour, looking at what I do and the impact it has on me. I don’t know how people can do it without supervision [] I just can’t think back to a time whereby I didn’t.

The term ‘consultative’ supervision is often used to describe supervision that aims to provide ongoing reflective practice. All participants valued opportunities for reflective practice yet were unaware of models of supervision which could facilitate this.

The above themes suggest that occupational stress arises from the disparity between rhetoric and *de facto* practice and as a result of the emotional and psychological impact of the work of an interpreter. However, the enjoyment and sense of satisfaction experienced by all participants in their work appears to alleviate some of this stress; the following quote reflects the views of all participants:

It’s probably one of the best jobs in the world – I absolutely love it!

In section 4, I discuss the implications of these findings for the signed language interpreting profession and suggest areas for further research.

## 4. Discussion

A qualitative study necessitates a small sample and therefore generalizations cannot be applied to the profession as a whole. However, all the participants in this study raised very similar concerns despite being asked open, non-leading questions, which led to the emergence of robust thematic responses. The image of the interpreter as a ‘magician’ features throughout the accounts and demonstrates the disparity between rhetoric and *de facto* practice. The participants

themselves are aware of the complexities of their role and express a desire to play a more active part in interpreted events. However, this view was reportedly not shared by the professionals they worked with, many of whom had not previously worked with interpreters. The ability of participants to ensure effective communication is something they feel a great sense of responsibility for. Yet, they report how this goal is hindered by real and/or perceived constraints on their role. This results in feelings of powerlessness on the part of the interpreters, which is a significant cause of stress.

I further suggest that the perception of interpreting as a technical profession has an impact on the quality of service Deaf people receive. Participants expressed a need to receive sufficient preparation in order to understand the context and purpose of assignments they are engaged for. Such preparation enables them to make an informed choice about whether to accept a booking in the first instance, and facilitates more effective interpretation should they take on an assignment. Furthermore, the participant accounts suggest that interpreters are not interchangeable from assignment to assignment, noting that continuity of provision, particularly in emotionally sensitive contexts, is paramount.

All participants expressed feelings of empathy towards their Deaf clients and reported a sense of helplessness and frustration when witnessing discrimination. They also described their emotional responses when working in distressing or sensitive settings, including assignments that triggered their own emotions. Furthermore, Jenny described experiencing a sense of “*channelling somebody*”, and it is important to note that the use of the first person can intensify this sense of embodiment, as can the visual nature of a signed language. This paper thus presents an argument for further research on how interpreters are affected by their work and for training programmes to adequately prepare interpreters for the realities of interpreting. This, coupled with professional support on completion of training, would both benefit interpreters and protect consumers of interpreting services.

All participants expressed their desire to reflect on their work with trusted colleagues. Supervision is not currently a recognized feature of professional practice by the signed language interpreting profession and as such a valuable opportunity for reflection and support is unavailable to interpreters. The perception of supervision as ‘top down’ is the likely reason that mentoring rather than supervision has been developed within the signed language interpreting profession in the UK. However, mentoring is not intended for ongoing reflective practice, and this leaves a gap in the mechanisms of support available.

Given this context, I argue there is an urgent need for the development of consultative supervision within the signed language interpreting profession via a process where interpreters would meet regularly with a supervisor, either individually or in groups, to consider the choices they make and the strategies they use in the course of their duties. Furthermore, supervision

enables interpreters to gain a better understanding of how they work and recognizes their personal and professional limits, ultimately protecting both the interpreter and those they work with and for.

## 5. Conclusion

Occupational stress within the signed language interpreting profession has been underrepresented in literature, yet a significant incidence of occupational stress amongst interpreters has been observed (Dean 2010). This study further explored the causes of occupational stress and makes an argument for codes of conduct to reflect *de facto* work practices and to include ethical principles to support interpreters in their work. Furthermore, training programmes need to ensure there is sufficient input on the psychological and emotional impact of interpreting and there is a requirement to equip interpreters with strategies for dealing with this. Without such input, interpreters may not be aware of, or prepared for, the effect the work might have on them. In addition, training needs to reflect *de facto* interpreting practice to equip interpreters to use their professional judgement effectively and appropriately whilst continuing to maintain ethical boundaries. Finally, further research is required into the adoption and application of models of supervision for signed language interpreters as a means of providing opportunities for ongoing reflective practice and support.

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