



Linguistic Justice Division

Research Consortium on Gender-Based Violence

Using Interpreters when Conducting Research with Survivors of Gender-based Violence

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Using Interpreters

When Conducting Research with Survivors of Gender-based Violence

■ Overview

In this document you will find a) a practical definition of the concept of 'interpretation'; b) a brief explanation of the importance of interpretation when working with survivors of gender-based violence; c) key considerations when working with interpreters prior, during, and after an interview; and d) a vignette with a real example of the earlier concepts, followed by discussion questions.

■ Translation vs. Interpretation

Italians have a popular saying, “Traduttore, traditore,” which translates to English as “Translator, traitor.” The meaning behind this sonorous wordplay implies that, regardless of how accurate a translation may be, there is a risk of losing meaning when translating or interpreting from one language to another (Derrida, 1985). For practical purposes, let’s think about translation as a more literal approach towards written and oral language. In the example above, the translation process alone seems to fall short, and interpretation is needed to truly grasp the meaning of the phrase.

The distinction between translation and interpretation is key. Translation typically refers to the transfer of meaning from one language to another in written and visual materials, whereas interpretation refers to the facilitation of spoken or sign language communication between users of different languages. Interpretation includes the conscientious cognitive effort that incorporates meaning into this process. In other words, interpreting a message gives it value. The interpretation process involves not just the literal action of switching between two codes (e.g., from Italian to English), but also having awareness of other elements, such as the historical, cultural, and social components that belong to the language in which the message was conceived.

When engaging survivors of gender-based violence in research, it is important to be intentional and meticulous during the research design and planning stages of the project, particularly if the sample will include participants with limited-English proficiency. Consider that you will need to translate written and visual research materials, including recruitment materials (e.g., flyers, letters, guiding scripts) and data collection materials (e.g., consent forms, interview protocols, response cards). You must also consider whether you will need to translate any data collected prior to analysis (see [Considerations for Translation](#) for more details).

■ Interpretation in Research with Survivors of Gender-based Violence

Additionally, consider whether you will need to hire interpreters to conduct data collection or whether you will hire multilingual and multicultural data collectors. Working with interpreters may be helpful to facilitate communication between data collectors and participants, if a staff member that speaks the participant's preferred language is not available.

There are several groups working from a language justice perspective (e.g., Antena, Center for Participatory Change) that offer guidance and training around language justice practices for interpreters. However, it is also crucial for interpreters to receive additional training on trauma-informed research practices when working with survivors, as well as training around key applicable specialized terminology and procedures, and the definition of concepts related to gender-based violence (Gutiérrez & Ramos, 2015).

The use of phone interpreters may be appealing to some researchers due to their wide availability and convenience. However, there are multiple risks when using over-the-phone interpretation:

1

Interpreters might not have any previous experience with the content area. This might lead them to engage in literal translations of concepts during their interpretation, which may be confusing and even harmful to survivors.

2

Interpreters might not have previous experience as part of a research study and might not fully understand the rationale behind questions. Therefore, interpreters might need to clarify concepts and questions. If the interpreter is not able to ask questions before the interview, it may make the data collection process convoluted and long.

3

Without proper training, the data collected might be biased and unreliable.

Key Considerations

When Working with Interpreters

■ Prior to the Interview

1. ***Let survivors know they may participate in their preferred language and inform them about the availability of interpreters.*** Interpreters are a crucial tool to support effective communication between individuals who do not share a language. Welcoming participants' language(s) can be helpful to encourage survivors to participate in the research study in their preferred language. With that in mind, ask survivors if an interpreter would be helpful for them to be able to express themselves comfortably. Make sure to communicate that the interpreting support is also for data collectors who might not be fluent in their preferred language. Additionally, let survivors know that interpreters are also bound by the same confidentiality guidelines as the rest of the data collection team. If survivors agree to an interpreter, ***ask if they have worked with an interpreter who they like in the past and might be available for the interview.***
2. ***Ensure that interpreter(s) you will be working with are certified and/or highly trained.*** When considering working with interpreters, it is important to be aware of their language proficiency and training, and most importantly, their level of experience with working with survivors of gender-based violence and issues related to trauma in that particular language (Gutiérrez and Ramos, 2015). For instance, hearing people tend to assume that ASL and English are the same or very similar languages, although that is not the case. When only a hearing ASL interpreter is present, critical communication elements such as body language, facial expressions, movements and visual elements often get lost. Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI) incorporate these elements and work alongside hearing ASL interpreters in order to provide a deaf person with full access to meaning of communications. Thus, CDIs facilitate interpretation so that a deaf person will have equal access to effective communication.
3. ***Contact the interpreter with enough time in advance.*** Certified/highly trained interpreters might be hard to find. Further, they might need additional training on the research instrument and content area. Therefore, establish contact early and schedule an initial phone call/meeting (without the research participant) to assess and provide necessary training.
4. ***Train prior to the interview.*** Make sure the interpreter is familiar with all data collection materials and that you answer any questions they might have.

5. **Be mindful of time.** The use of interpreters may lengthen an interview. Thus, estimate to the best of your ability the length of the interview so that interpreters can adequately prepare for it.

■ During the Interview

1. **Direct your attention to survivor(s) and not interpreter(s).** The interpreter should never be the focus of attention when conducting an interview. Data collectors must ensure they are making eye contact and asking questions directly to participants using the first person. For example, it is important to avoid asking questions using the third person to refer to participants such as “How is she feeling today?” or to focus attention primarily on the interpreter.

2. **Take breaks.** If the interview is lengthy, make sure to include restroom breaks and/or consider splitting the interview in sections, if necessary.

■ After the Interview

1. **Check in with survivor(s).** A good way of knowing whether or not an interpreter is appropriate for the task at hand is to ask participants about their experience. Did they feel the interpreter was fluent in their preferred language? Was their behavior appropriate? Were they sensitive and respectful to their experiences? Did they feel like the interpreter facilitated communication or did it make the interview more confusing? This kind of feedback will be key to know how to proceed next time.



Vignette

The Importance of Training when Using Interpreters in Research with Survivors

■ **The following vignette describes the importance of ensuring that interpreters are familiar with the data collection instruments prior to the interview.**

During an initial interview with a native Russian participant, the interviewer used an over-the-phone interpretation service to facilitate communication. The interpreter was unfamiliar with the data collection instrument, which included many quantitative scales. The interpreter seemed confused at times and asked the interviewer multiple clarifying questions, resulting in a tedious and long interview process. At the end of the interview, the interviewer and the participant both felt exhausted.

The research team recognized that they needed to establish a better process when conducting interviews with Russian survivors. The research team was able to get in touch with a Russian interpreter available for the interview and held a session prior to the interview to clarify any questions. The interviewer and interpreter met to discuss the data collection materials prior to the interview to ensure that the interpreter was adequately familiarized with all the materials. During this training session, the interpreter shared that the notion of 'satisfaction' did not have a straightforward translation to Russian. She then asked for further clarifications on the rationale behind multiple questions that referred to satisfaction of services provided by domestic violence agencies. After the interviewer was able to provide the context and rationale of the questions, the interviewer and interpreter were able to negotiate meaning and come to an understanding of how to describe these questions during the interview. The following day, the interviewer and the participant met for the interview. With the support of the trained interpreter, the interview was smooth, and the participant felt comfortable and engaged throughout the interview.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the challenges that you can identify in this situation?
- If you were to establish a protocol for working with interpreters, which steps would you include?
- How would you describe the participants' experiences during this process?
- What are some of the potential benefits of providing additional training to interpreters participating in research?



References

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