Interpreting the Interpreter:
Navigating Translation, Interpretation and Mediation

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Short Bio:
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Abstract

As a psychologist who has conducted research interviews in a foreign language setting I have found that the methodological literature does not provide needed insights on how to tackle the issue of interpreters and the following article is an attempt to untangle some of the methodological and theoretical concerns this situation entails. The starting point of analysis is the qualitative research interview and discusses what the methodological challenges and theoretical opportunities data gathering through interviews with the help of interpreters might entail.

Keywords: Translation, interpretation, mediation, discourse, interviews, Bosnia-Herzegovina, sexual violence in armed conflict (SVAC)
Introduction

“How would you like my story to be told?” asks my interviewee in English. I am in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter: Bosnia) doing interviews with women survivors of sexual violence in armed conflicts (hereafter: SVAC). They have varied proficiency in English and my Bosnian language skills are below par. My interviewee looks at my interpreter who again looks at me like a question mark. We thought the woman did not speak English at all, but it soon turns out that this is close to the only English sentence she knows. She has been interviewed by many internationals before. She quickly continues to explain to the interpreter about the various options for how she can narrate her war trauma story which is the subject of my research. The interpreter conveys the options to me, and explains that her sense is that the interviewees would like to avoid narrating details about the trauma again. I respond, and say that we can start after the trauma, and the interpreter explains back in Bosnian. The interviewee accepts, nods to me and I turn on the recorder to start the interview.

Who is the interpreter in this setting; a mere translator of words; an interpreter of the social setting; or, a research mediator between researcher and interviewee? Further, why is there such a lack of writing of the role of interpreters within psychological and social science scholarship? And, what does the positioning of the interpreter do to the conceptualization of the interview data? These questions will be explored in the following by asking how to interpret the interpreter and what the navigation between translation, interpretation and mediation might entail.

Field work experiences in Bosnia as a Bosnian illiterate

The immediate background for this article is my own fieldwork, and experiences with interpreters, in Bosnia as a Bosnian illiterate; meaning I did not speak nor read the language where I did my research. The field work took place in connection with different research projects on different themes, but the major bulk was a study to map the aftermath of SVAC experiences on individual victims, their families and communities through a series of interviews, field visits and participant observation at psychosocial centers for war trauma survivors. This field work consisted of five trips in 2001 – 2002. Other projects were focused on changing norms (of gender equality) and political perceptions linked to Bosnia’s efforts towards gaining EU applicant status and again the dyadic and focus group interview was the main methodological approach. This field work consisted of five trips from 2007 – 2015. All dyadic

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1 For a full elaboration of the studies see Skjelsbæk (2012)
interviews were carried out with interpreters.\textsuperscript{2} I have used different interpreters, all local women\textsuperscript{3} from different places in Bosnia. One was a professional interpreter who worked for the international community in Bosnia; the others had worked as interpreters for different representatives for the international community during the 1992–95 war in Bosnia but no longer worked professionally as interpreters.

Throughout these studies I was engaged in what Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 31) would describe as research focused on the cultural, every day and situated aspects of human thinking, learning, knowledge and actions. In plain terms, this meant that I was interested in mapping out how victimization and survival, norm changes and political perceptions of particular war experiences was seen and understood by those affected, and their surroundings. I aimed to do this in a linguistic and cultural setting that was foreign to me. I aimed to do this, not as an anthropologist who would aim to go native and create knowledge from within the culture under study, but as a psychologist aiming to increase understanding for the cultural complexities involved in the individual and societal dealing with a particular forms of war experiences and their personal, social and political implications.

**Interviews, language and culture**

In both the quantitative and qualitative methodological literature in psychology the research interview is central (see for instance Lewin, 1979; Smith 2003). Approaches (such as focus groups, dyadic, face-to-face and phone/electronic interviews) vary as well as the ways in which interviews are structured (such as open, semi-structured, structured) and interpreted (how the data gathered from the interviews are analyzed and understood). A central notion in the methodological literature is an in-built assumption that the interviewee and the researcher share a common language. This assumption often results in research interviews taking place in language areas where

\textsuperscript{2} The SVAC data consisted mainly of interviews with three primary categories of informants: therapists (psychological, pedagogical, and occupational) in Bosnia who have worked with women subject to violence (in war and afterwards); women who have been traumatized during the war (loss of family members and home, torture and sexual violence) and have received therapy; and gender-mixed but ethnically homogenous focus groups. The gender norm and political perception data consisted of interviews with central stakeholders in civil society.

\textsuperscript{3} Since my major data collection was linked to SVAC experiences and all interviewees were women it was important to have women interpreters.
interviewer and interviewee share the same linguistic background. This effect ought to be a concern for qualitative research in social, political, cultural and community psychology. The aim is this field is, on an overly simplistic level, to contextualize individual and group experiences and dynamics within different social, cultural and political settings, where cross-linguistic issues might need to be tackled in research interview settings. To be able to work in these settings the researcher must often rely on interlocutors such as field assistants, fixers and interpreters before during and after an interview. Without these helpers the researcher is an outsider with limited resources for interaction with research subjects. The centrality of the interpreter is therefore in dire need of analysis and this article is an attempt at such an undertaking.

**Translation**

The major task of an interpreter is to translate words between researcher and interviewee. It might seem straightforward, but this role begs two important questions; what are contextual factors that impact translation of words and what sort of language is the translated interview data? Consider the following situation:

*My translator and I drive up a steep hill and enter a house which is partly destroyed by war and decay. It is getting dark and the half-functional apartment building seems deserted. But as we enter the building we see light and hear children playing. We look for the right number on the door and when we find it my translator knocks and we hear a voice from the inside wishing us welcome. We come into a one room apartment with a woman in her 30s who looks tired and exhausted. The room is small, dark and cold. Her son who is about early school age is sitting on the floor and her older mother is sitting on the couch. We are there to interview the young mother about her war trauma, but her mother has nowhere to go and the son is not leaving either. I quickly understand that interview guide with questions about sexual violence survival will not work; the son may very well be a result of war-rape and the mother of the interviewee may not know about the fate of her daughter. We had been told that the woman was raped and was willing to talk, but we did not know that her closest family would be present at the interview. I have to surrender to my translator’s wisdom to find the right words to talk about war trauma in a way that is possible without disclosing more than the interviewee is comfortable with in the setting. The original words carefully chosen by me in the interviews guide were of no use.*

What kind of data could such an interview setting produce? What kind of access could I claim to have of the interviewee’s everyday experiences and narration of war-traumas? I found the methodological literature I had studied was not very helpful.
From Neutral to Engaged

The social science methodological literature – and the psychological methodological literature, in particular – provide numerous accounts of how interviews should be carried out in order to obtain the most reliable and valid data. In any given setting, interviews fall under what Robson (1993, p. 227) calls self-reporting techniques, and the assumption is that the less influence the interviewer has on an interviewee’s thoughts and reflections, the more accurate such self-reporting will be. ‘The reliability and validity of an interview depend largely on the skill of the interviewer’, argues Lewin ([1979] 1987, p. 230), adding that ‘if the interviewer is clumsy and tactless the respondent will say little’. If we adapt this line of thinking to the case of a field interview in a foreign-language setting with an interpreter, logic suggests that similar requirements need to be made of the interpreter – that is, the interpreter should be tactful, skillful, and, above all, ‘invisible’. Kapborg & Berterö (2002) even ask whether the interpreter in the qualitative interview threatens validity. Much of the existing literature argues that interpreters are inherently problematic. But can the scholarly field of psychology limit itself only to research in settings which are linguistically and culturally known to the researcher? I believe that this would be a great misfortune for the field.

In my situation described above, should I simply have discarded the interview and deemed it invalid? When I discovered that it would be difficult to interview directly on the topic at hand I could have left, but it did not seem appropriate. The woman had agreed to meet me and she had something to tell. Further, had I insisted on neutrality on the part of my translator and myself and stuck to my interview guide to ensure equality across interview settings I would have compromised the situation for the interviewee and I would have violated basic ethical standards. Rather than making the translator invisible I found myself in a situation where I had to do the complete opposite; namely to rely on the translator not only to navigate sensitive translation between me as researcher and the interviewee, but also to assess what kinds of questions I could ask, i.e. which words I could choose and how they would be appropriate in the given setting. Words such as “sexual violence”, “rape”, “perpetrator” and “victim” had to be replaced because they would be too revealing for the interviewee. At the blink of a moment I had to improvise my own research guide and rely on my interpreter ability to improvise with me; words had to be rephrased not only in my English communication with my interpreter but also in her careful
translation to Bosnian. When we were formulating questions she would ask me if she could use for instance the word *survivor* instead of *victim*, if she could use *war hero* instead of *disappeared husband* and so on. Fortunately, the interpreter had been in this situation many times before because she worked at a psychosocial center for war survivors so she knew how to handle the setting and which carefully selected words to avoid in the conversation. My credibility as a researcher both academically and ethically rested on my interpreter’s ability to find the most appropriate words in the interview setting. This co-improvising is also determined by good training and communication in the pre-interview phase, which will be discussed in the section on mediation. But, given that contextual factors impacts the choice of words, how can the translated language be understood? What sort of insights can the researcher claim to have through translated, i.e. filtered, language?

Lost in Translation and Language

In my SVAC research several situations were sensitive like the one described above, but the majority of the dyadic interviews were not with others present beyond researcher, interviewee and translator. Still tact, sensitivity and attentiveness to language were key, within a myriad of different languages. My native tongue is Norwegian, the translators’ and interviewees’ native language was Bosnian, but the translated interview text and conversation was in English (this was also the case for the other research projects). Attempting then to do a discourse analysis of SVAC victimhood and survival I was again confronted with what appeared as new difficulties that the methodological literature could not solve for me. For what kind of status could English, as a non-native language to all involved in the research process, have within discourse analysis?

Taylor (2001, p. 6) argues that the epistemological understanding of language within discourse analysis is that it is not transparent, but referential and constitutive\(^4\). The path to knowledge, then, must go through language, and good discourse analysis

\(^4\) This understanding can be traced back to a number of thinkers, but perhaps the most important is Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. In Gergen’s (1999, p. 34) account of Wittgenstein’s work, he emphasizes that Wittgenstein refuted the picture metaphor of language and replaced it with the metaphor of the game. As in the game of chess, individual parts of the game have no meaning unless they are used in accordance with the rules of the game: ‘*the meaning of a word is its use in language*’ (Wittgenstein, 1978, section 20e).
is largely determined by the researcher’s ability to master, interpret, and code language-in-use by the research subjects. Validity, therefore, Wetherell (2001, p. 395) argues must include logical coherence, generation of novel perspectives and findings, plausibility, grounding in previous research, and more. Taylor (2001, p. 18) argues that ‘at the most basic level, the researcher needs to understand the language and references used by the interview participants or the writers of documents’.

These arguments pose major research concerns for cross-cultural research in foreign language settings. Agian, discourse analysis easily becomes restricted to language areas where the researcher has language competence. This can clearly be seen in many textbooks on discourse analysis, where the majority of the studies that are used as examples involve English-speaking researchers in English-speaking (sub)cultures. Needless to say, this limits research and knowledge and ought to be challenged. Also, although anthropological field methodology is held up as an ideal for data collection in cross cultural settings, there is reason to be skeptical about just how ‘native’ anthropologists actually are in the field. The need to resort to interpreters and to base ethnographic data on translated social text may be much more common than is reflected in much of the field work methodology literature. Borchgrevink (2003) argues that the lack of discussion about the role of the interpreter reduces the question of language competence to an either/or: either you know the language or you work through interpreters. The fact that you might have learned a language but have poor command of it and a heavy accent is therefore not a theme for analysis within the methodological literature. In their account of the interview method within qualitative research, Fontana & Frey (1994) argue that even when an interviewer is fluent in the foreign language, the possibility of grave misunderstandings is always present, and they point to a 1960 study by Wax as an example. In this study, a US researcher (Wax) was carrying out research on ‘disloyal’ Japanese in concentration camps in the

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6 It is therefore interesting to note that in the field of anthropology there have been discussions about the use of translators. Berreman’s 1962 monograph Behind Many Masks discussed his fieldwork in a peasant village of the lower Himalayas of northern India. In that study, he used different interpreters (one Muslim and one Brahmin), which gave him access to different types of people – and in the end different data for analysis. In his conclusion, he argued that the use of interpreters in the field was a methodologically advantageous aspect of his fieldwork.
United States between 1943 and 1945 (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366). Despite the researcher’s command of Japanese, she had difficulties communicating with her informants because there were cultural codes of which she was unaware.

Clearly, direct translation of words can be deceiving; there is more at stake and the task of the translator is to convey more than an assumed linguistic parallelism, as was the case in my research interview setting described above.

Interpretation
My decision against conducting the interviews in the Bosnian language was based not only on my very limited knowledge of the language, but also on a recognition that it would be extremely difficult for me to achieve sufficient command of the language to master the nuances and distinctions regarding SVAC and other kinds of war trauma that would be necessitated by the studies’ sensitive themes. In using an interpreter aware of these problems, my thought was that such an approach might make it easier for the traumatized women to talk, which it undoubtedly did. “Care should be taken to select an interpreter who is culturally acceptable as well as proficient in the language” writes Kvale (2007, p.68). The interpreters I used were all very good at making the interviewees feel at ease and create an interview setting built on trust and empathy; because they were, as Kvale urges, interpreting the situation as well as the words. But, when attempting to analyze the transcribed interview texts and relating to the interpreters over the course of several field trips, an unexpected issue emerged. Consider the following excerpt from transcribed interviews with two SVAC survivors:

“…I do not feel anything towards the Serbs who were coming back...who are returnees...because she thinks that all of them had to be in the army...and she thinks that all of them were doing that...that they were acting like the same ways as the soldiers who were raping her ...but she sees we have to live together because we used to live together for centuries…”

“No... I want to stay here...the reason she does not want to leave...is that her sister who left in 1996...also does not have a husband but has a daughter...and life is really hard here...and she has to work a lot...and everything is so expensive...but she sent

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7 There is much confusion about what the language in the region is called. In the Yugoslav period, the official language was Serbo-Croatian; but, since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the official language in Bosnia is now Bosnian, in Croatia it is Croatian, and in Serbia it is Serbian.
her some money so that I could buy a field and we can build a house...and I would like to build a house...with at least one floor for her sister”

My transcribed field interview texts are full of conflicting uses of pronouns. In some cases, an interpreter will use the first-person pronoun ‘I’ when referring to what the interviewee is saying, thereby merging her own voice with that of the raped woman. In other cases, she may use the third-person pronoun and say ‘she’, thereby distancing herself from the interviewee. Further, the interpreters are also inconsistent in their use of the core terms of my study. The transcribed text is also full of different descriptions of SVAC, using words such as ‘rape’, ‘war trauma’, ‘it’, ‘that thing’, ‘the war crime’ and ‘those criminal acts’. Sometimes, I heard the interviewee use the Bosnian word for rape, silovanje, but this was not the word used by the interpreter who could decide to use some of the terms suggested above. Clearly, the interpreter does “something” beyond translating words; she positions herself (most likely unconsciously) in relation to the stories, the trauma, the interviewee and the sociopolitical context in which the interviews took place. The varied use of pronouns suggests how this positioning takes form. The transcribed interview text is therefore an interpreted translation of the interviewee’s accounts in which the interpreter adds an analytical layer to the interview data by varied use of pronouns. This opens up for an additional layer of analysis which I did not explore specifically in my study, but which can be done. Had I done this exercise, I could have gained an even sharper image of the societal gaze on traumatized individuals who had been subject to stigmatizing crimes.

Translating Insights and Truths

Can interpreted interview data provide “truths” conveyed by the interviewees? Ultimately this question relates to how language is perceived. If we lean on Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole, where the latter is the spoken word and the former is the structure of signs and symbols then the approach to truth and knowledge, is through analyzing the structure of language and the oppositions and contrasts that constitute meaning (Culler, 1986). Conversation analyses (see, for instance, Wooffitt, 2001, pp. 49–92) can be regarded as examples of research based on such an understanding of language. In this form of analysis, naturally occurring language is in focus – that is, the speaker’s own selection of words and phrases. The problem in an interpretation setting is that the spoken word in this situation will be
both the common language of the interviewer and the interpreter and, simultaneously, another and different common language shared by the interviewee and the translator. The transcribed text that will form the basis of analysis will therefore be not be the ‘pure’ parole of neither interviewee nor interviewer, and the transcribed text must therefore be regarded as a hybrid parole. It is a new constructed language which emerged in the interview situation. Further, this hybrid parole also creates a hybrid structure of langue. The internal system of signs and signifiers will be based on a language that belongs only to the interview setting and the three people involved. It could therefore be difficult to argue that the analysis of the transcribed text can have validity outside of the particular setting in which the analysis has taken place.

By approaching my Bosnian interviews from a structural or semiotic approach described above, my data were problematic. In the translation process, which took the form of summaries, much information and nuances in the spoken language were lost. But, would that entail that such interviews did not have value? Is the hybrid parole generated by the translator less “true” than language-in-use? I think that in order to answer this we need to consider contextual issues such as other signs, languages and translations. For example, in my Bosnian field work several of my interviewees had relatively good command of English, but almost all preferred to be interviewed with translators. Especially those who were interviewed about sensitive and traumatic SVAC experiences, the option of talking in their native language was preferred. But, the fact that most knew basic English also meant that they were able to sensor the translator. They would stop and correct or suggest a different word if they were not entirely happy about the words chosen by the translator. These corrections would happen in relation to central concepts describing identity issues such as “victim”, “survivor”, “ethnic belonging”, “rural/urban belonging”, “traditional/transitional family structures”, and more. These words were central in situating their everyday experience of post-war SVAC life. This way the “truths” or validity of the words chose were often checked by the interviewee. Another possibility to secure as accurate translation as possible could have been to have a second or third translator listen through interviews and provide two or three translations of the same interviews. I my case I have been unable to do so due to time and money constraints.

Transactional data
Returning from Bosnia ready to start analyzing my field data, I was confused and uncertain as to what kind of text I was actually analyzing when I was going through my interview data. The hybrid parole was the result of transcribed interviews with many different voices (the interviewer, the interviewee, and the interpreter). The text was also a manifestation of translations that were delayed in time and given in the form of summaries. In addition, textbooks in discourse analysis to a large extent rely on examples of texts that contain detailed and precise accounts of the conversation that has taken place – a prerequisite for analysis that my interviews did not fulfill.\(^8\)

The problem I was facing in my analysis was that my fieldwork interviews seemed to fall between several different modes of qualitative research; my use of interpreters in the field prevented me from going ‘native’ in the anthropological sense and hindered direct access to the language-in-use of informants, which forms the basis for the majority of psychological discourse analyses.

But, if we view the interview situation as a dialogical setting in which all participants – that is, interviewer, interviewee, and interpreter – interact in ways that create transactional data, we are forced to reconsider both the social position and the impact of the interpreter has on the notion of language and translation, and this can open up for new levels of analysis. “Translation is more than a technical exercise; it is also a social relationship involving power, status and the imperfect mediation of cultures” writes Bujra (2006, p. 172) suggesting that the main task of the interpreter is to convey the position of the interviewee. In addition, Kvale (1996, p.147) writes that the “interviewer is him or herself the research instrument” and by consequence would likely suggest that the interpreter is also an extension of the interviewer, i.e. as a research instrument. Elsewhere Kvale (2007, p. 68) says that “the role of the interpreter is to assist and not to take over the role of the interviewer or the interviewee”. In other words, the social positioning of the interpreter is between the interviewee and the interpreter in a limbo position which is under explored and underutilized. As transactional data the transcribed texts, the use of pronouns and selected words for translating core theme, are possible to analyze as a meta-data on sociopolitical issues.

\(^8\) On discourse psychology, see Willig (2003), Jørgensen & Phillips (1999, Chapter 4); on discourse and social psychology, see Potter & Wetherell (1987).
One possibility for analysis then would be to have an external interpreter go through the recorded interviews and create an alternative interpretation. The aim of this endeavor would not only be to create more nuances in the transcribed text: such an approach would also be a way of indicating how the interpreters in the interview setting managed and reconstructed the information and accounts provided by the interviewees. This form of analysis could, potentially, show which contextual settings in the interviewees’ accounts bring out which terminology for war rape and also suggest when a non-victim (i.e. the interpreter) identifies with the victim (when using the pronoun ‘I’ and ‘we’) and when she creates a distance (when using the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘they’). By doing so, it might be possible to delineate the contextual settings in which the woman who experienced rape is seen as a war survivor and when she is seen as a victim, or other power dynamics might come to the fore. This was a potential which I did not explore in my own study, but which could have been done and which can be considered in other studies.

Also, it is clear that the interpreter has different subject positions in the interview setting, and in turn positions the stories and identities of the interviewee within different social categories. By virtue of his/her choice of words, the interpreter serves as social interpreter and resource for the researcher and not only facilitates communication between the two parties in the interview situation, but also blurs the power relations in the situation. Thus, creating a system of representations that is more complex than that of regular interview situation, and has an analytical potential which far too often is overlooked.

Mediation

The interview is in itself a hierarchical power situation, where it is the interviewer – that is, the academic scholar – who sets the parameters for the situation. It is the interviewer who decides the questions, themes, and (sometimes) venue for the interview. Furthermore, the questions, themes, and choice of setting have been decided on the basis of recommendations by other researchers, books on methodology, and other accumulated insights in the field of social science. The role of the interpreter is to give voice to the interviewee, whose words and metaphors will communicate to the centripetal forces represented by the questions asked, in other words mediate knowledge and language. But this is not always clear cut and the
situation described below shows. The description is from a focus group interview on changes in gender norms, which took an unexpected turn and shows how the role of interpreter as mediator can be challenging:

After about one hour of conversation with small focus group of civil society representatives in a hotel café in Bosnia my interpreter looks at me. She is tired after a long day of interviews and focus group interviews are particularly difficult to translate. She asks if she may say something to the group and step out of her role as interpreter. She has had enough; the rosy tale of the state of affairs in Bosnia by one of the focus group participants provokes her. Things are much more difficult than the woman lets on. She sees that the other focus group participants are afraid of counter arguing. Age, status and ethnicity are part of the power dynamics in the room. I have sensed it, but have not understood the full impact of the authoritative woman who has monopolized the focus group conversation. My interpreter’s comments light a fire and the authoritative woman yell back at her. The other participants are also ignited and they start yelling back and forth to each other in a mix of Bosnian and English. I have to stand up and make everyone calm down, and end the interview. Things calm down but everyone is talking. Interestingly everyone in the room is eager to talk to me after and explain to me how “things really are”. My interpreter is miserable and feels that she overstepped her responsivities and ruined my interview. But did she?

This situation was difficult for everyone involved; painful for the interpreter, embarrassing for the researcher (and interpreter), and frustrating for the focus group participants. I comforted everyone as best I could and all participants were offered to contact me and the interpreter to follow up (which several did). But, in my view it was not a failed interview; only more heated than normal. The interpreter had stepped out of her role and had gone from being a mediator to becoming a participant in the conversation. This was not according to our agreement, but provided for very valuable insights on the research topic in focus. This is not a recipe I would prescribe for politically sensitive focus group interviews, but it opens up for reflections on the interpreter’s role as mediator in an interview setting.

Giving voice

Part of the dilemma for the interpreter in the situation above was her role as giving voice to the interviewees. From a power perspective her role was to emancipate views and perceptions from affected individuals and communities on the changes in gender norms in Bosnia. This emancipatory aspect is exacerbated linguistically by the fact that the researcher and interpreter will speak the dominant language of power – for instance, English, French, Spanish, and/or other world languages. Through looking at
the dyadic field interview from a power perspective, it becomes clear that the primary role and social positioning of the interpreter is one of being on the side of the interviewee and making the interviewee’s viewpoints and reflections available in the common (power) language used in the interview. With this in mind, it will be crucial for the researcher to be sensitive to the interpreter’s background – including such factors as class, gender, ethnic, religious, and possibly political affiliation – in addition to his/her language skills. It is important that these non-linguistic aspects of the interpreter are in sync with the interviewee so that they do not hamper the latter’s willingness to talk. By being situated alongside the interviewee, both in a linguistic and sociopolitical sense, the interpreter empowers the language and experiences of the interviewee. The interpreter, therefore, contributes linguistically to the critical/transformational potential of the critical research aim. But, as seen from the situation above, this role is not without discomfort and potential pain for the interpreter.

The importance then of selecting the most suited interpreter for the given research project is pointed out in many articles on this theme (Borchgrevink, 2003; Bragason, 1997; Bujra, 2006; Kapborg & Berterö, 2002). But what is considered most suited varies. Needless to say, language skills are key meaning that the interpreters would need to be fluent in the common language with the interviewer (often this would mean English). Equally important, however, are the local language skills, and Bragason (1997) argues that ideally the interpreter should be a local in the field setting, arguing against bringing in a professional interpreter from the outside. This view is supported by Bujra (2006) who sees the interpreter as more than a mere translator of words, but also of culture. Based on my experiences I think that sociopolitical power dynamics should be added to this list. By extension the social and political positioning of the interpreter needs to be carefully assessed and in different settings this can entail different levels of risk depending on the nature of the research project and the political situation the field

Interpreter selection

9 For a discussion on what this can entail see Berreman’s (1962) elaborations on using a high caste interpreter in a Himalayan village.
Having carried out research in a tense post-conflict setting in Bosnia I was careful to consider both the gender and ethnicity of the interpreter. In my SVAC work I was particularly weary bout interpreter selection. Asking about SVAC experiences is difficult and I wanted the interviews to be a female collective assuming that this would be less difficult than if the interpreter were a man. I therefore refused offers to use male interpreters in the field. Further, the situation is still tense in Bosnia (as the situation above illustrates) and I was also cognizant of how different ethnic groups could view the war-rape accounts differently, a fact which was exacerbated by the international and national criminal prosecution of war crimes which was taking place. Again, I assessed that the interview setting should be a situation where the interpreter could be seen as an “ethnical extension” of the interviewee, by having the same ethnical background. Finally, it was important to select interpreters who had experience with traumatized war-survivors. Since my SVAC field work extended over repeated travels over 12 months in different locations in Bosnia it was important for me to find interpreters who were locally based, who had relevant experience and who were women (interviewing about SVAC became an all-female setting in my research project, hoping that this would create an atmosphere of trust with the interviewee).

These consideration superseded language proficiency. This resulted in the selection of three interpreters who had different levels of language proficiency in English, who had different affiliations to the local communities in which the interviews took place and who had different ethnic backgrounds. This also meant that I needed to be cognizant of potential security risks for the interpreters and this was handled by them telling me what their boundaries were in terms of travel (which areas they would not wish to go to) and how to present themselves in the interview setting (how much or how little they would say about their background, where they were from and their work situation at the time of the interviews).

**Interpreter training**

Having selected an interpreter it is important to start preparing for the actual research interview. Several steps need to be taken; getting to know the interpreter, getting the interpreter to know the researcher and the project, ensuring that the researcher understands the aims of the research project as a whole and the aims of the interviews in particular. Bragason (1997) suggests trial interviews should be undertaken as well as structuring and standardizing the questions in order to reach an agreement between
interviewer and interpreter which words to use. Borchgrevink (2003) and Bujra (2006) on the other hand argue that there needs to be a constant training between interpreter and interviewee throughout the research process. Bujra (2006, p. 177) explains:

The researcher may need the translator to be present on all occasions of data collection, so they need to work well together. Ultimately, there has to be trust on both sides, which can only be built up over a period of time.

In my own experience having selected interpreters who were familiar with the SVAC theme and the vulnerabilities and dilemmas involved in disclosing this trauma I could focus my training mostly on what kind of interview I was aiming for; semi-structured to open ended, translation in the form of summaries in order to ensure conversation flow, the length of the interviews and debrief with interviewee and interpreter. In practical terms this meant that I spent one day with each interpreter before doing the actual interviews in which we got to know each other, where they were informed and were able to ask about the research project’s aims and approaches, where they saw the interview guide and all the other relevant information about the research project which would be given to the interviewee. We also agreed that the interpreters should have considerable authority (given their background and expertise on the SVAC experience) as to how to react and respond to the interviewee’s potential discomfort in discussing the SVAC experience (for instance we agreed that she could suggest to stop the interview, to hold the hand of the interviewee, to allow herself to show how the pain discussed in the interview also affected her). Ultimately, we agreed on a strategy for improvisation as an essential part of the pre-interview training. Interviews come in many forms (open, structured, semi-structured) and so the translation will be of an equally varied kind.

The selection of interpreter and the training and preparing described above is aimed at this particular negotiation which is embedded in an inherent uneven power-dynamic (Bujra, 2006). For this reason interpreters “who are socially aware and interested in other people’s views are better than those who have rigid attitudes they might impose on the data” (Bujra, 2006, p. 177). In the interview setting I was surprised at how intimate a dyadic interview with an interpreter actually can get. The pace of the interview was slower than in the normal dyadic interview; and, while the interpreter was translating, it was possible for me to plan subsequent questions, think
through previous answers and assess the situation for the interviewee. Furthermore, the process forced me to be very clear and simple in my choice of words, which had been discussed with the interpreters before the actual interviews. I had asked my interpreters not to translate word for word, because this would be distracting for everyone involved, so translations were provided in the form of summaries of what had been said. This is a practice I have also used in my other projects on gender norms and political perceptions. With many of the interviewees I was able to talk to them before and after the interview in German, French or English (depending on their language skill) and many of them knew English quite well. Still, when talking about sensitive and difficult issues they wished to do this in their native language (as described above).

Careful selection, training, communication and debrief with an interpreter are crucial in crafting the mediation role of the interpreter.

**Discussion**

When aiming to generate knowledge with a critical and transformative potential, it is important to carefully select interpreters whose background and social positioning vis-à-vis the given field setting will be compatible with that of the interviewee. This will, potentially, increase the empowerment of the viewpoints and reflections of the interviewee. It might also create a social link between the interviewee and the interpreter which is of such a nature that ethical considerations normally reserved for the interviewee might need to be extended to the interpreter.

The interpreters and I discussed possible ways of asking about SVAC in ways that would not be too direct and intimidating for an interviewee. In addition, I urged of all the interpreters I used not to attempt to remain detached from the interviewees, but to feel free to suggest that we take a break if the interview process became too fraught or difficult. This resulted in the interpreters ‘taking care’ of the interviewees in ways that are perhaps uncommon but appropriate given the research theme. Several times during the interviews, especially during those with women who had experienced rape, interpreters were so affected by the informants’ stories that they cried while the stories were told (as did I). During discussions with local psychological experts, as well as with other torture victims in Bosnia, I had been told that this was a way of showing empathy with the interviewees’ war-rape experiences. What I had not
counted on, however, was the effect this particular aspect of the interviews might have on the interpreters. In retrospect, it is clear that I had empowered the interpreters to act as moderators and interpreters in the interview setting. Their ‘duties’ extended beyond the mere translation of words, because it was important for the study to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible in disclosing traumatizing and shame-ridden experiences. In this scenario, the interpreters were placed in a situation whose consequences I had not adequately thought through not had my methodological training and studies prepared me for this. I had been careful to secure a safety network for the interviewees in case of need, but neither I nor my methodological textbooks had reflected sufficiently on the needs of the interpreters themselves. It turned out that being the translator of traumatic experiences connected to a setting in which both the interpreters and the interviewees lived also caused the former considerable pain. Through the interviewees’ stories, the interpreters were reminded about their own war experiences, and they experienced significant discomfort in hearing about what had happened virtually next door to their present homes. This experience was exacerbated by the fact that there were on the same level with the victims in the interview situation and through this came to feel victimized.

Having established that the interpreters’ role is that of a linguistic as well as cultural and sociopolitical translator, the importance of structured debrief cannot be underestimated. This was important in the SVAC interviews but also in the gender norms and political perceptions interviews. This debrief needs to take place as soon as possible after the interviews have taken place, but also continuously throughout the research process as new reflections might arise in light of ever evolving data.

In my own research debrief took place at several times during the data collecting stage (immediately after the interviews, as well as continually during the research period through several visits). The debriefs focused on the interviewees; what they said and how they were seen by the interpreters. But, I had failed to see the interpreters’ need to talk about how the interviews had affected them. Only in the focus group interview where the interpreter stepped out of her role and started arguing with a focus group participant was this addressed directly. In the SVAC interviews earlier however, having carefully selected interpreters who were familiar with the SVAC theme, who were local and who were themselves survivors of the war (albeit not from this particular form of violence) the toll the interviews took on them was difficult to tackle. One interpreter told me, after some years, that after having worked
for me during one field stay that she had wanted to move from Bosnia and resettle somewhere else. She had her own personal war experiences and being exposed to the traumas experienced in her neighborhood, or with people, who were internally displaced and now lived in her neighborhood, was too much to bear. I was thankful that she disclosed this to me and we spend considerable time talking this through during my subsequent field visits (and she was still interested in working for me after that). This experience shows that there is a strong ethical duty to reflect on the role of the interpreters in research interviews; both in the methodological set up, as well as theoretical analysis of, data gathered with interpreters. My major concern is that mainstream methodological literature and training does not prove helpful, nor sufficiently engaged, in these dilemmas.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to conceptualize the impact/significance of the interpreter in fieldwork interviews. It is clear that the psychological field needs to be more sensitive to the significance and impact of interpreters. A first step is to admit that we use them, to acknowledge that we are dependent on them in many more cases than we might like to admit, and to make them part of our reflections on knowledge production. While this article is only a first attempt at grasping a large and complex phenomenon, I believe that further investigation and research is needed not only on the use of interpreters and language skills, but also on the role and potential of discourse research in foreign language-settings more broadly and how translation, interpretation and mediation limits some forms of knowledge generating efforts, but might open up for new one.

Returning then to the initial question asked by one of my interviewee’s in Bosnia: “how would you like to have my story told?” the problem was not her narration of her trauma, but the under analyzed and under explored complexities involved in analyzing her mediated, i.e. translated and interpreted, account. Did I capture the “truth” about her perceptions and explanations? I clearly did, but I did not uncover only one truth. Rather, through the scrutiny of co-interpretation with a translator and interpreter I learned and wrote about pathways to survival and victimization linked to SVAC experiences which would have been lost if I had limited my research to my own limited language proficiency contexts. Finally, I see that there
are several levels of analysis that my various studies could not fully explore due to funding and time constraints. Engaged cultural psychological research has the possibility to develop a richer theoretical and methodological literature which acknowledges and makes analytical use of interlocutors in foreign cultural settings; a potential which clearly will enrich the field and create better insights in life worlds that are not part of the researcher’s own cultural and linguistic settings.
References


