



Speak Your Mind

Supporting Interpreters working with Counsellors and Therapists

A GUIDE TO BEST PRACTICE

In the Spring of 2007 four West of England organisations engaged with counselling and therapy—the Bridge Foundation for Psychotherapy and the Arts, the Bath Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Childtime and Womankind – in partnership with Refugee Action (Bristol) - were awarded a two-year grant from the Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales Collaborative programme. The project - *Speak Your Mind* – aimed to support the needs of interpreters. The grant was for an innovative and path-breaking project - *Speak Your Mind* – aiming to support the needs of interpreters.

Counselling for BME groups in general, and for refugees and asylum seekers in particular, is complex as a consequence of the interplay of social, emotional and cultural factors. This complexity is increased when interpretation is involved. Interpreters often find themselves fulfilling (or partially fulfilling) a number of roles - translator, interpreter, advocate or co-counsellor.

In Bristol and Bath interpreters received little support in reconciling and filling these roles. Each of the five partner organisations had made some effort to meet the needs of interpreters, but their efforts were inevitably limited, confusing, and often overlapping. Through the Interpreters' Forum, Refugee Action had produced Guidelines for Interpreter Use, but there was limited advice/materials available which is relevant to interpreters themselves. Indeed we were unaware of any systematic support to interpreters elsewhere in the South West.

Two years on *Speak Your Mind* has formally finished. An independent evaluation report is available on all our web sites but the most significant output is ***A Guide to Best Practice for counsellors and psychotherapists working with interpreters***. Aimed at all those who use or work with interpreters this guide captures not simply the challenges involved in interpretation work but also gives helpful guidance to enable therapists and interpreters to work effectively together.

As far as resources allow, our intention is to maintain a modest but focussed programme of work in support of interpreters. The main message from two years work, however, is that it is the responsibility of those who fund the delivery of services which involve an element of interpretation to make provision for interpreter support. Without such provision the quality of service offered to those whose access to services is dependent on an interpreter is likely to suffer. *A Guide to Best Practice* appendix at the end of the evaluation report sets out what can be done to support interpreters and work with them in a positive way.

On behalf of all the partner organisations, (regrettably Childtime has closed down), I would like to express our gratitude to Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales for supporting this work, and to all those who co-operated with the project, above all the many interpreters with whom we talked and worked.

Murray Stewart
Chairman of the *Speak Your Mind* Steering Group,



A Guide to Best Practice for counsellors and psychotherapists working with interpreters

Introduction

Working with an interpreter involves the unusual situation of having a third party in the room. At first sight this situation may seem to breach confidentiality of the work and the special intimacy of the consulting room in which a therapeutic relationship is fostered. In order to maintain the primacy of the therapist/client relationship, it is tempting to regard an interpreter as a sort of machine who makes the two intelligible to each other, or a conduit through which conversation flows back and forth in a mechanical translation process, and therefore they are largely ignored as another live human being in the room. However, a culture of respect and humanity is more easily created if we take into account that there are three people in the room, albeit with different roles. We therefore do not advocate practices such as not making eye contact with the interpreter or never speaking directly to them. It may be necessary sometimes to talk to the interpreter to check out how they understand what they are being asked to interpret. Furthermore, the dynamic in the room inevitably changes with the presence of the interpreter and this more complex dynamic can often usefully be commented on and incorporated into the work. Sometimes the client may form a stronger alliance with the interpreter than with the therapist. This can be reflected on in supervision and then worked with in the consulting room.

Those using interpreters often worry that their words are not being accurately interpreted. Our view is that an accurate interpretation of the English can only be worked towards rather than achieved. In the to and fro of the therapeutic dialogue misunderstandings can be struggled with and worked out, just as happens when one language is shared.

In the light of the above here are some guidelines for good practice in working with interpreters which may help to make the therapy a real human encounter:

Training/Supervision/Support

Where possible it is good if therapists and interpreters have some training in working with each other so that they come to understand how each other work and why they work as they do. On-going support and supervision for interpreters is really important and needs to be highlighted and supported by therapists and their organisations.

Induction to the work for interpreters

Even when training has been provided, interpreters need induction with each therapist they work with, so interpreter and therapist understand more intimately how each other works, the way that language will be used and the sorts of interventions the therapist may make. This may include the use of silence, staying focused in a painful area with difficult emotions, or the use of words that cannot easily be interpreted. It is also vitally important for the therapist and interpreter to meet together before the very first session with a client for a fuller briefing about the work ahead, including practicalities, term of contract, pay and confidentiality issues, which will provide a good basis for their on-going work as professional colleagues.

Pre and Post-session meetings between therapist and interpreter

Therapists need to bear in mind that interpreters usually do not have support or supervision in this emotionally demanding work. A short meeting before each session is vitally important to ensure that the therapist and interpreter are ready to work together. A debrief meeting after each session is also of critical importance to discuss issues, thoughts or feelings aroused during the session. As well as being mutually supportive, this also helps the therapist and interpreter understand any emotional, language or cultural issues that have come up in the session and also begins the task of understanding the counter-transference/co-transference themes that will have emerged between the three of them, therapist, interpreter, and client.

The Wellbeing of the Interpreter

Therapists have a mental health training and generally receive supervision: interpreters most often do not. It is the therapist's responsibility to care for the wellbeing of the interpreter. They might help them access further support and mentor them in their career as interpreters working with complex mental health and emotional issues.

Finding Interpreters

It is best to have access to interpreters who are trained or experienced in working with therapists. Once a relationship has been established with one interpreter it is obviously beneficial to work with them again if that becomes possible. An ideal situation is not always available and sometimes the only interpreter who is able to do the work is a friend or family member of the client. This is by no means best practice and should be avoided if possible. Clients who are unable to speak English may well be people who are coping with great stress and need help quickly so it is sometimes necessary to relax rules before finding something more appropriate. Once a relationship of greater trust with the therapist is established it is often much easier to introduce a trusted and independent interpreter.

Summary of points to enable therapists and interpreters to work effectively together

This best practice can be summarized in the following guidelines:

- ❖ Therapist and interpreter should meet before the session with the client to get to know each other and to try to develop trust. In this initial session they should (1) think through any particular language issues (2) try to find an agreed and assured way for the interpreter to convey the client's mood and emotions, and (3) consider how they will work together with pauses and moments of silence in the session.
- ❖ There will be important emotional 'trigger issues' for all interpreters and therapists: share and discuss these with each other as far as your developing trust allows.
- ❖ It will be helpful for the interpreter to share their assumed knowledge of the client's cultural and political situation with the therapist. The therapist however, should also brief themselves about the culture, politics and history of the client's country of origin, and should not rely on the interpreter as the sole source of country information.
- ❖ Ideally, the interpreter should have no contact with the client other than during the therapy session. If this is not possible, the interpreter and therapist should have an open minded discussion and reach an agreement about any contact the interpreter may need to have outside the therapeutic setting.
- ❖ Consider confidentiality issues, these may differ for both therapist and interpreter.
- ❖ Be clear with each other about the terms of contract and payment and payment for any 'extra' time and duties involved in work with the client.
- ❖ Both interpreter and therapist should be clear about the time commitment and set appointments up in a way that honours the time involved for each of them.
- ❖ Come to appreciate together the shared experiences of therapy as an internal journey. At best the interpreter will be curious and try to understand and learn the therapist's methods. Equally, the therapist should mentor the interpreter and develop their understanding of the therapeutic process.
- ❖ Always debrief after the session and share the feelings aroused during the session, also consider transference and countertransference, language, and cultural issues and any other important themes that emerged for either interpreter or therapist or both.
- ❖ Remember that the therapist is a trained mental health professional and as such has responsibility for the mental well being of the interpreter.
- ❖ If the interpreter feels undue distress, they should seek help and guidance with these from the therapist. The therapist should try to hold an awareness of the distress an interpreter may experience and be prepared to help them with avenues of help and support.