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Abstract

Background: The literature concerning interpretation in research primarily concentrates on rigorous techniques to eliminate bias. This article analyses other significant issues that arise when interpreters participate in research.

Material: Empirical examples are drawn from a research project concerning mental ill health in a multicultural neighbourhood.

Discussion: Interpreters influence interview data in ways commonly unnoticed by researchers. One often-overlooked factor is that languages are dynamic and interpreters are not instruments.

Conclusion: Research conducted with an interpreter is a complex undertaking. Solely relying on checklists to improve methodological rigour can result in a false sense of the material's validity.

Keywords

interpreter, cross-cultural research, Sweden, mental ill-health, methodological rigour

Introduction

There is a growing interest in the research and treatment of ethnic minorities. The complexity associated with such research in cross-cultural settings has resulted in an increasing number of studies across several disciplines (Engstrom et al., 2010; Larkin et al., 2007; Murray and Wynne, 2001; Raval, 2003; Squires, 2009; Tribe and Keefe, 2009). Working with interpreters in qualitative research is broadly acknowledged to have methodological implications (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002; Marshall and While, 1994; Wallin and Ahlstrom, 2006). In the field of medicine, informants who could not speak the researcher's language were formerly excluded from research. However, in recent years the demand for information concerning ethnic minorities has grown and the use of interpreters has consequently increased (Larkin et al., 2007; Squires, 2009).

The authors of the present study became interested in the role of the interpreter because of a project regarding the perception of mental ill health in a multicultural neighbourhood in the Swedish city of Malmö. It was found that people in one specific borough utilized considerably fewer mental health services, in comparison to the rest of the city's population, than they were estimated to require. In order to find possible reasons behind the low utilization of psychiatric care, the researchers sought to explore different perceptions of mental ill health.

The earlier study, which will be published elsewhere, concluded that many informants perceived human suffering and similar conditions that the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) classifies as mental disorders as normal life crises, rather than pathological medical states for which one needs treatment. Shame and stigma were also implicated as barriers to seeking mental health services. Nevertheless, Malmö has no specialized public facility catering for culturally specific expressions of mental ill health.

In the course of interviewing people living and working in the borough, half of whom had an inadequate knowledge of Swedish, it was necessary to engage interpreters. Furthermore, due to the various languages spoken, it was not possible to use the same interpreter for all interviews. As the interviews proceeded, it became apparent that the involvement of an interpreter influences the outcome of an interview and affects the data gathered, although it appears that this has rarely been studied (Larkin et al., 2007; Temple and Edwards, 2002). The primary intention here is to

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identify some significant but hitherto overlooked issues that arise when using an interpreter as a partner in research.

Background

The number of articles on the use of interpreters in research is growing, yet much of the literature concentrates on procedures contributing to a successful interview and the need to adhere to rigorous techniques. The matters discussed include the choice of an interpreter, matching informant and interpreter, determining seating arrangements, and selecting a mode of interpretation (Irvine et al., 2007; Squires, 2008; Wallin and Ahlstrom, 2006).

Choosing an interpreter is one of the main tasks in planning field interviews and various recommendations have been given in this regard (Squires, 2008). Some authors recommend that an interpreter should be a well-established person from the group in question – someone in whom the informant has confidence and would feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with (Hennings et al., 1996). Thus, rather than engage professional interpreters, some researchers (particularly anthropologists) have chosen to use bilingual key informants from the study group (Borchgrevink, 2003). In this way the researcher interacts with a person who not only knows the language, but who is also acquainted with the prospective informants and is trusted by them. Such an interpreter can be of immeasurable help throughout the project and often becomes a valued long-term research assistant. Others argue that an interpreter who is known to one's informants may inhibit the interviewees and hinder them from talking about delicate matters (Murray and Wynne, 2001). If the interpreter holds a position of status in the group, other interviewees may be anxious because they are dependent on maintaining good relations with him/her. This might have a negative influence on the interview – particularly if the relationship is concealed from the researcher (Berreman, 1962; Edwards, 1998).

Along with the selection of an interpreter, there is also the challenge of matching interpreter and participants with regard to gender, class, generation, religion, ethnicity or other characteristics that may affect the dynamics of the interview situation (Hennings et al., 1996). Selecting those characteristics the researcher should seek to match may be a difficult task. For example, Edwards (Temple and Edwards, 2002), in interviewing Bangladeshi women with the assistance of a female interpreter, found that although she had matched the interpreter to her informants with respect to ethnicity and gender, there remained a large gap with regard to professional status and class positioning. The relationship between researcher and interpreter can also be complex. Edwards and her interpreter had different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, yet could identify with one another with regard to gender, class and professional status. Murray and Wynne (2001) advocate situated choices in which research purposes together with the personal preferences of

those being interviewed equally determine the selection of an interpreter.

Degree of activity and style

The literature on interpreters offers different recommendations on how such a person should function. At one end of the spectrum an interpreter is expected to translate verbatim, acting as a passive interface between subject and interpreter. At the other end the interpreter is allowed to more or less take over, or at least play a dominant role in the interview by summarizing, explaining and sometimes even responding to the researcher's questions without consulting the informant (Edwards, 1998; Squires, 2008; Wallin and Ahlstrom, 2006). These different styles have advantages and disadvantages. Verbatim translation can result in an unintelligible flow of words, with no consideration given to the social or cultural context that frames the interview. Moreover, the connotations of certain words and sentences can mean something completely different in another language. On the other hand, the intrusion of the interpreter's own understanding of what the informant is trying to convey, and the likelihood that the subject's voice is being suppressed, decreases if the interpreter translates verbatim.

Most researchers advocate a position somewhere between the two extremes, although they may favour one pole or the other (Squires, 2008). In her work with an interpreter from Bangladesh, Hennings (Hennings et al., 1996) describes the interview situation as a partnership in which the interpreter is at liberty to take cultural aspects into consideration and judge when it may be appropriate to ask sensitive questions. On the other hand, Irvine et al. (2007) appear to have an instrumental view of the interview, seeing the interpreter as not much more than a link between the informant and the researcher. The present authors' own research experiences suggest that the issue of activity and style is far more complicated than that commonly presented in the literature. It is closely related to theoretical views of language and the relationship between language and 'reality', which is briefly considered here.

The most commonly encountered starting point in texts concerning language and culture is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis developed in the 1920s. It holds that people have different 'realities', depending on what language they speak: our words filter everything we perceive and process. If this hypothesis were entirely correct, it would hardly be possible to translate from one language to another (Werner and Campbell, 1970). The structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s moved away from this focus on dissimilarities and in its place stressed linguistic commonalities and a universal underlying structure (Barnard, 2000).

The current view, somewhere between structuralism and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, holds that there is some kind of relationship between language and worldview. Charlotte Linde (1993) elucidates the correlation between language

and coherence that plays an important role in research interviews in general, and cross-cultural interviews in particular. She defines a coherence system as one 'that claims to provide a means for understanding, evaluating and constructing accounts of experience' (Linde, 1993: 164). In her view, a researcher conducting an interview asks questions based on his/her coherence system. The informant, in turn, receives the question and comprehends it only according to his/her own coherence system, which may differ considerably. The informant delivers an answer that, once again, the researcher interprets from his/her way of understanding. In the end, the two people might have completely different views of an issue, while on a verbal level they may appear to be in total agreement.

Although the above phenomenon may frequently occur between people who share the same culture but different coherence systems, common sense ensures that matters are comprehended within a given society. The difficulties are magnified, however, when people come from widely varying backgrounds. With an interpreter involved, the situation could become even more complex. An interpreter and an informant sharing the same coherence system may have an unarticulated understanding that remains concealed from the researcher.

As a result, spoken words can be misunderstood in a cross-cultural interview, while unspoken metacommunication is taking place between the interpreter and the informant. The latter includes everything that accompanies oral communication, such as non-verbal information conveyed through eye contact, body language, gestures and whatever else the initiated can read 'between the lines' (Bateson, 1999; Branco, 2005).

Methods and materials

Contextualising research with interpreters

The interviews in the present study concerned mental ill health, a topic the informants agreed was sensitive and taboo. A Swedish researcher, working with interpreters recommended as qualified in the target language, conducted the interviews, which were audio-taped in their entirety (researcher to interpreter in Swedish; interpreter to interviewee in the interviewee's native tongue; and interpreter back to researcher in Swedish). The researcher then transcribed the Swedish part of the interview and translated it into English for the present article.

The interpreters were engaged through a national interpretation firm. As far as possible, authorized interpreters were used. The Swedish government has a Legal, Financial and Administrative Service Agency (LFASA) responsible for giving national certification to interpreters and translators. Since those who use these services cannot be expected to judge the qualifications of interpreters and translators, the state undertakes this on behalf of the general public. The

company that supplied the interpreter for this study is certified in accordance with international standards (ISO 9001:2000). All interpreters employed by the company have to pass qualifying examinations and attend regular training sessions. However, while it is possible to obtain certified interpreters for the more common languages, minority tongues, like Pashto, may not have such authorized personnel, so researchers may not always be able to obtain specific interpreters with credentials.

Many concerns involving interpreters came up during the interviews with our informants. One interview in particular was pursued because it stood out as unusual. The atmosphere surrounding the interview was tense and the answers from the informant, who spoke Pashto, did not seem to correspond to the questions posed by the researcher. In order to better understand what had transpired, a second opinion of the interpretation was obtained by having others retranslate the conversation between the interpreter and the informant into Swedish. In order not to prejudice the 'follow-up translator', the original audio file was edited to remove the Swedish, which contained the researcher's conversation with the interpreter. All that was sent out for retranslation was the conversation in Pashto between the interpreter and the informant. As a control, another recorded interview from the study was chosen and similarly edited, this one with an informant of Arabic origin conversing with an Arabic interpreter. The second interview was chosen because the researcher considered it rich and fruitful, in contrast to the Pashto one. The conversation flowed, the mood was calm and relaxed, the informant seemed to speak freely, and the interpreter gave a professional impression.

The edited Pashto and Arabic audio files were sent to independent translators in another part of Sweden. They translated what they heard into Swedish and returned a written transcript. The different transcriptions were then compared in order to identify issues that might emerge in working with interpreters.

The method used in this study should not be confused with 'back-translation', in which 'a phrase or question is translated from one language to another and then back again. For example, a phrase in English is translated into Korean and then independently translated from Korean back into English' (Neuman, 2006). In this case, two different interpreters had translated the Pashto and Arabic interviews into Swedish, and two other translators repeated the same process independently. For clarity, the translation of the original interview, as rendered into Swedish by the interpreter, will be referred to as *the interpreter's translation*, and the retranslated versions will be *the follow-up translation*.

Two subsequent interviews were conducted about the interpretation process in which interpreters and translators were the interviewees. One such interview was with an authorized interpreter not involved in the present project. The other was with a professional interpreter and a translator

whom had also been engaged to do the follow-up translation of the Pashto interview.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was given by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund for the study from which the interviews were chosen (Dnr 101/2006), and for this new way of investigating methodological issues (Dnr 13-2008). The two original interpreters, whose conversations with the native informant were retranslated, were not told about the retranslation beforehand since it was not originally planned.

Although some may question this from an ethical point of view, the choice was made for the following reasons. First, the mindset of the interpreters might have been influenced in the interviews if they were aware their work was being subject to extra scrutiny. Second, the audio files containing the interpreters' voices were electronically

disguised so that neither interpreters nor informants could be personally identified.

Findings

Two versions of the same interview

The example that follows is from the interview that was conducted in Arabic and was considered successful by the researcher involved. In the left column is the researcher's transcription of her conversation in Swedish with the interpreter, as audio-taped and here rendered into English by the researcher. In the right column is the follow-up translator's account of the original dialogue between the interpreter and the informant, as translated into Swedish by the independent translator, conveyed to the authors in written form, and presented here in an English translation by the researcher (R = researcher; I = interpreter; Inf = informant).

Interpreter's translation (Interpreter and researcher)	Follow-up translation (Informant and interpreter)
<p>I: I think it primarily concerns depression. When you are depressed you do not want to associate with people. Take, for instance, a relative of mine who lives here in Sweden. He was so depressed that he wouldn't go out, and he is not in contact with the rest of his family. He was so depressed that he returned to Iraq.</p>	<p>Inf: Primarily it concerns depression. Isolation. You sit alone and you don't want to associate. Here in Sweden there is a person, a relative of mine, who was so depressed he wouldn't go out. He didn't want to associate with anyone. Finally, he returned to his home country, Iraq. He couldn't manage to adjust to the situation.</p>
<p>R: Did he get help in Iraq?</p>	<p>I: Did he get help there?</p>
<p>I: No. He came here and he got permission to stay, and then his family could also come. He was normal, he was happy, he even sang. He had a beautiful voice. When he came here he wasn't able to... how do you say it?... integrate or acclimatize himself, so he started having problems, even with his wife.</p>	<p>Inf: No. When he came here he quickly got permission to stay and found an apartment. His family came here, but he couldn't adjust. He became depressed. I knew him as a happy person. He even used to sing. He had a beautiful voice. He became depressed and wanted to sit all alone. In the end he also started having problems with his family.</p>

The two translations above, while they have slight differences in emphasis and content, are even at a close reading relatively similar, with no significant discrepancies. However,

a comparison of the two translations of the Pashto interview that originally awakened suspicions, reveals striking differences.

Interpreter's translation (Interpreter and researcher)	Follow-up translation (Informant and interpreter)
<p>R: Why did you end up in Sweden?</p>	<p>I: She is asking how you came to Sweden. Why not somewhere else? What was the reason?</p>
<p>I: Well, relatives and friends and such were here and then I married a girl who was already living here.</p>	<p>Inf: Our family was already here. My cousins came earlier. I married her. When I married her she already lived here. [I interrupts Inf]: So you got married in Sweden, did you?</p>

- R:** What I'd like to know is: If I say mental ill health, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
- I:** He didn't answer the question you asked. He asked a question himself instead. He wonders if mental ill health in the borough isn't good, the utilization. [sic] How do you know that this problem exists in this borough?
- R:** There is an instrument we use in order to estimate how large the needs are. You investigate different factors. For example, how many people in the area are single parents, children under five years, immigrants, retired... you look at different factors...
- I:** So he talks about other things. He doesn't answer your questions...
- R:** That's all right.
- I:** OK, so that's all right.
- I:** Someone mentions the name of a mental illness. What comes to your mind, in other words, what is mental illness? What picture pops up in your head?
- Inf:** I have talked about mental illness with others who interviewed me. They pointed out that there are mental illnesses in the borough, that people are ill...
- I:** All right, but you didn't answer her. You asked your own question?
- Inf:** No.
- I:** There are different reasons, we know. The people in this area use a lot of medical treatment because of mental illness. We look at the area and we can see that people have been going to doctors a lot and using medicines. Because of this we want to find the reason for this illness.
- Inf:** That sounds good. There are different clans in the neighbourhood. . .
- I:** You didn't answer what she said. You said something else to her. She says that it's all right though, so go on.

It is apparent that there were a number of things taking place in the above interview that the researcher was not aware of at the time. First, there was a conversation between the interpreter and the informant that excluded the researcher. Then the interpreter interjected evaluative remarks ('So you got married in Sweden, did you?') and tried to make the informant answer the questions 'correctly'. Although the interpreter asked the researcher if it was all right for the informant not to answer the question as posed, what we did not know was that he also told the informant to reply in a certain way. This might well have constrained the informant's subsequent responses.

It may be revealing that the interpreter never mentioned anything to the researcher about the informant's cousin. In the follow-up translation it seems apparent that the informant came to Sweden to marry his cousin. However, in the interpreter's translation he was just marrying 'a girl'. The interpreter may have avoided translating what was actually stated because he knew that marrying one's cousin is not customary in Swedish culture, so he may have been trying to protect the informant from being perceived as 'primitive'. On the other hand, he might have had inadequate interpreting or linguistic competence, either in Swedish or in his mother tongue. In fact the researcher sensed that the language skills and vocabulary of the interpreter were limited. The follow-up translator commented that the informant might have even taught the interpreter a few new words.

One example of an instance where the interpreter seems to have misunderstood the researcher completely was at the beginning of the interview. Each interview began with the

informant being told by the researcher that the interview was voluntary and that he/she was free to terminate it at any time. However, according to the follow-up translator, what the interpreter said to the informant was 'X-ray [sic] is voluntary. They won't force you to do it.'

Another example of a serious misunderstanding occurred while explaining the background of the study. One of the researcher's aims was to ask informants if they had any idea why there was such a *low* utilization of mental health services in their neighbourhood. Instead, the interpreter asked why people utilized *a lot* of mental healthcare.

In a later interview, the follow-up translator of the Pashto interview explained that the original interpreter and informant spoke different dialects. He added that the interpreter's dialect is considered the most beautiful one in the language and is spoken by people who generally view themselves intellectually superior to others. The informant, on the other hand, spoke a dialect indicating he was from a rural area in the eastern or north-eastern part of the country. (According to other Pashto-speaking informants as well as the interpretation firm, Pashto dialects are not so different that the people speaking them cannot understand each other, although they do act as strong class markers). From listening to the interview, the follow-up translator could tell that the interpreter looked down on the informant. He observed the importance of addressing a stranger courteously in the second person plural. Instead, throughout the interview, the interpreter spoke to the informant in the second person singular, which is considered disrespectful. Finally, the follow-up translator pointed out that

the interpreter failed to observe the code of interpreting etiquette by interrupting the informant and carrying on side conversations which he failed to interpret to the researcher.

Discussion

Investigating mental ill health in a multicultural neighbourhood is a delicate matter. Working with an interpreter adds an additional variable. As cited in the introduction, the literature on the role of interpreters in research has predominantly offered technical advice on how to avoid errors (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002; Squires, 2009; Wallin and Ahlstrom, 2006). Squires (2009) even claims to have created methodological consensus in cross-language research.

While there are important issues such as the qualifications of the interpreter to be addressed, it does not suffice to simply require that a person engaged should 'possess certification from a professional translator's association' or at least meet 'the standard described by the translator's association' (Squires, 2009: 279). Moreover, as noted earlier, in Sweden it is not always possible to obtain authorized interpreters for minority languages like Pashto. Finally, although the Pashto interpreter engaged for this study was provided by a large company certified in accordance with international standards, upon closer scrutiny the interpreter appeared to have shortcomings in his linguistic and professional skills.

The term 'correct translations' has been proposed as the goal for an interpreter (Patton, 2002; Squires, 2008). However, a correct translation need not be synonymous with a verbatim translation: instead, it could be about finding 'conceptual equivalence' (Squires, 2009: 278). The assumption behind the phrase 'correct translation' is that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' in the realm of translation, and that understanding an interpreted conversation does not depend on such factors as a person's cultural background or coherence system.

Technical issues such as matching interpreter and informant, assessing the qualifications of an interpreter and considering the mode of interpretation are important, but it is equally vital to beware of uncritically adopting 'technical fixes' in the belief they will confer rigour without taking into account broader issues of method and epistemology.

In the two interviews this study focused on, the interpreters and the informants were matched with regard to generation and gender: they were all early middle-aged men. The Arabic interpreter's origin was unknown, but the Pashto interpreter and informant came from the same country. None of the interpreters or informants knew each other. Despite selecting people whose backgrounds were similar, the two interviews turned out completely differently. Superficial matching does not appear to strengthen the credibility of the interview data and may, in fact, have the reverse effect – as evidenced here.

This study heard from Swedish-speaking participants associated with various ethnic groups who underlined the difficulty of discussing mental ill health with someone from the same cultural background. Doing so, in their estimation, would put a person at risk of being considered 'mad' by

others. However, they stated that they felt comfortable talking about such things with Swedish people, whom they found more open-minded and tolerant towards people who suffered from mental health problems. As one participant stated:

'In my home country, if you find out that someone is getting mental treatment, we speak of him or her as abnormal or mad. As long as he is in treatment and seeing a psychologist, people call him crazy. They say he is stupid and things like that. But here in Sweden it is normal and nothing to be ashamed of.'

It is impossible to devise an all-embracing strategy for conducting research with an interpreter; general guidelines may be given, but specific procedures have to be determined by the context.

A number of authors have emphasized the value of considering the epistemological approach of the researcher. They generally agree that the interpreter is an element in producing the research data (Squires, 2009; Temple, 2002; Temple and Edwards, 2002; Temple and Young, 2004; Wallin and Ahlstrom, 2006). However, interpreters and informants are human, and the language they use is dynamic. When Squires suggests that 'if the translator and participant come from the same country but have different class backgrounds, the translator will not allow this difference to interfere in communications with the participant' (Squires, 2008: 269), it exemplifies how general recommendations can oversimplify a complex context and create a false sense of methodological validity. Notwithstanding an interpreter's qualifications, the fact that he or she is perceived by the informant as the bearer of a certain culture, ethnicity or religion may affect the interview data in a way that is not under the control of the interpreter or the researcher.

A criterion that has been suggested to maximize the trustworthiness of the data collected has been pilot-testing the interview guide (Squires, 2009). However, the present study used an unstructured interview format in which each interview started with an open-end question and from there would take different and often unexpected turns. Moreover, as evidenced by the Pashto interview, metacommunication can play a significant role in determining the interview's outcome. Thus, recognizing a certain dialect as a class marker was perceived to affect the interview dynamics. Enhancing methodological control by getting a second opinion on the interpretation of the interview, as this study was able to do, may be a valuable way of trying to evaluate the qualitative data. However, research projects have time and budget constraints, making this strategy generally prohibitive.

Limitations and further research

The present article is intended as a broad illustration of methodological issues researchers need to consider when working with interpreters, not as a definitive analysis of the qualifications of particular interpreters on the basis of only two interviews. In order to assess the work of interpreters

as research assistants, many more cases would be required – a task for further research. In addition, working with three languages, as happened here of necessity, adds another layer to the problem. Nevertheless, this remains a practical reality for those conducting research in societies where English is not spoken, or for researchers who have no choice but to write in English if they are to share their findings through international publications.

Conclusion

Working with an interpreter holds out new possibilities for research by increasing an investigator's potential study population and permitting new areas of research to be attempted. This study has highlighted the complexity of conducting qualitative research with an interpreter. Conventional recommendations that one employ detailed checklists to improve methodological rigour may not only fail to adequately address many latent issues, they can give rise to a false sense of the data's validity.

Each research setting is unique and calls for its own strategy to fulfil its aim. The existence of different coherence systems, the role played by metacommunication, and the subtle ways participants in an interview situation perceive each other should not be underestimated. Barbour (2001), who has criticized the naive adoption of checklists in qualitative studies, has reminded researchers that none of their techniques will be of much avail without 'a broader understanding of the rationale and assumptions behind qualitative research' (Barbour, 2001: 1115).

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