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Configuring public service interpreting in Finland as a sentient professional practice and affirmative social service work: emotion in the work of public service interpreters

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we build on an understanding of multilingual social service work as an existing and permanent, yet under-researched, professional landscape and an everyday reality in the contemporary Finnish context. We explore this landscape by focusing on the critical case of public service interpreting and adopt a critical stance towards the idea of public service interpreters as neutral and invisible by examining the role of emotions in public service interpreting in social services. Drawing from reflective diaries produced by 16 public service interpreters during spring 2022, we analyse the presence and significance of emotions in interpreter-mediated service encounters. The results challenge the idea of the role of public service interpreters as mechanical and invisible and instead present public service interpreting as a sentient professional practice and affirmative social service work.

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Introduction

In this article, we build on an understanding of multilingual welfare service work in Finland as an already existing and permanent, yet under-researched, professional landscape. In so doing, we view multilingualism as an everyday reality in the Finnish contemporary context, which, nevertheless, is challenged by monolingual language ideologies (e.g. Määttä, Puumala, and Ylikomi 2021, 47) and, subsequently, interpretations of linguistic diversity as a state of temporality and transience that should be surpassed and resolved (see also Nordberg and Kara 2022). We will focus on the critical case of public service interpreting, sometimes referred to as community interpreting, and examine the interpreter's role and position in institutional encounters taking place in social work, and more broadly in the professional field of welfare provision, by discussing the presence and significance of emotions in public service interpreting and interpreter-mediated service encounters.

Due to growth in the migrant population in Finland since the 1990s, the professional field of public service interpreting has slowly been strengthened (Koskinen, Vuori, and Leminen 2018). This has mainly been researched in translation and interpreting studies (e.g. Choroszewicz, Hildén, and Tsavro 2018; Koskinen 2018; Määttä 2017; Viljanmaa 2018; Vuori 2018). To date, social work research in Finland and beyond has rather sporadically explored the practices of interpreter-mediated social work (see however Baker 1981; Freed 1988; Glasser 1983; Kriz and Skivenes 2010; Tipton 2016; Westlake and Jones 2018). Language differences and multilingualism have

received some attention in social work research and education (see for example Engstrom, Won, and Gamble 2009; Hall and Valdiviezo 2020; Pohjola 2016).

The idea of interpreters acting merely as mechanical and invisible conduits persists despite it being effectively challenged by research (e.g. Angelelli 2015; Gustafsson 2022; Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013; Martin and Valero-Garcés 2008; Theys et al. 2023; Yuan 2022). During the past decade, public service interpreting has been further outsourced to private service providers and subject to constant tendering processes (Karinen et al. 2020; Koskinen, Vuori, and Leminen 2018). While this transformation in the organization of services is inherent to the contemporary neoliberal Nordic welfare state context (Kamali and Jönsson 2018), we maintain that this is also parallel to the idea of interpreters as invisible and replaceable. This effectively overlooks the emotional and relational nature of public service interpreting and dismisses it as an affirmative professional welfare practice.

We explore the interpreter-mediated encounters taking place in social services and the role of interpreters by analysing interpreters' accounts of emotions in their work. Interpreters must constantly solve how to react to and deal with emotions in the encounters, how to deal with their own emotions that the encounters and issues being discussed might evoke, and how to convey emotions through interpreting. While our interest lies in discussing social work settings in particular, social work is embedded in a wider structure of welfare service work that public service interpreters navigate and within which they perform their work. That way, social services in the accounts of the research participants may include a wide range of encounters.

In what follows, we will first look at previous research on interpreter-mediated encounters in welfare services, specifically social work, in the Finnish welfare state context and beyond, and consider the discussion on emotions in public service interpreting. Next, we will present our empirical data and analysis and our subsequent results. We will end with a concluding discussion.

Public service interpreting in social work and the role of emotions

Research in social work has provided some insight into interpreter-mediated social work. Themes have included communication via interpreters and the role of interpreting in service encounters (Berthold and Fischman 2014; Engstrom, Roth, and Hollis 2010; Kriz and Skivenes 2010; Sawrikar 2015; Westlake and Jones 2018), the working conditions of public service interpreters (Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson 2012), and occupational boundaries (Nordberg and Kara 2022). Research has also explored the use of children as interpreters or cultural brokers (Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund 2019; Lucas 2021). Tipton (2016) investigated occupational intercultural generated between public service interpreters and social workers and the impact of interpreter mediation on the nature of social work.

Previous research suggests that, although interpreters and social workers share some common goals and there is similarity between the ethical guidelines that both professions follow, social work practitioners often find the use of an interpreter challenging (Tipton 2016; Tribe and Thompson 2009; Westlake and Jones 2018). Sawrikar (2015), Berthold and Fischman (2014) and Engstrom, Roth, and Hollis (2010) stress the importance of training for interpreters dealing with sensitive matters and for welfare service practitioners on working with interpreters and call for more supervision and support for collaboration. Nordberg and Kara (2022) and Tipton (2016) highlight structural weaknesses shaping the constitution of public service interpreting. In a similar vein, Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson (2012) note a tension between a strong commitment to professionalism on behalf of trained interpreters and repeated experiences of deprofessionalising working conditions such as low pay, feelings of replaceability, and low social status.

The professional position and role of public service interpreters has been explored more extensively in translation and interpreting studies (e.g. Guéry 2014; Hlavac and Saunders 2021; Hsieh 2008; Martin and Valero-Garcés 2008; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008; Sela-Sheffy 2011). This research has highlighted that public service interpreters typically experience a lack of

respect and appreciation, proper remuneration and legal recognition of the profession (Salaets and Van Gucht 2008). Joint training of community interpreters and social workers is also portrayed as important (Hlavac and Saunders 2021; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008). In addition, research has raised questions concerning the prevailing ideas of professionalism in interpreter training and professional statements and documents in their emphasis of impartiality or neutrality, calling for a more nuanced understanding of competence and performance (Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič 2020).

Research on the topic of emotions in interpreting has generally taken place in the context of wider welfare services. Research has explored emotions in interpreting through concepts such as emotional intelligence (Hubscher-Davidson 2013), emotional contagion and empathy (Korpala and Jasielska 2019; Määttä 2018; Merlini and Gatti 2015; Theys et al. 2023), emotion management (Hsieh and Nicodemus 2015) and secondary trauma (Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019). Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne (2010) investigated the impact of mental health interpreting on interpreters' well-being, reporting a range of emotions in relation to the work, including anger, sadness, hopelessness and powerlessness, and indicating the emotionally demanding character of the occupation (see also Fennig and Denov 2021).

Tekgöl (2020) employed Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour while studying faith-related community interpreting. Tekgöl draws from Grandey, Diefendorff and Rupp (2013, 18) in defining emotional labour as involving emotional regulation or manipulation that is undertaken in response to job-based requirements to contribute to achieving organizational goals. Emotional labourers, therefore, mask, hide or suppress emotions they feel, or display emotions they do not feel (see also Ayan 2020). Viljanmaa (2018) studied emotions in public service interpreting through interviews with interpreters. Her results stress the active role of interpreters in emotionally preparing for the encounters, managing and conveying emotions during the encounters, and processing emotions afterwards. Her analysis reveals ambiguity concerning the traditional ideal of neutrality or impartiality and the overall stance of emotions in an interpreter's professional role (see also Nordberg and Kara 2022).

This article, therefore, departs from the existing discussion on ambiguity concerning the interpreter's professional role, varying definitions of competence and performance, and the lack of knowledge of the practices of interpreter-mediated social work. We align ourselves with previous studies highlighting work situations imbued with sensitive and emotional content and the simultaneously persistent ideal of interpreter's detachment and neutrality. Through our analysis of emotions, we seek to untangle different dynamics present in interpreter-mediated encounters and address public service interpreting as a sentient professional practice and affirmative social service work. We ask *how do interpreters describe, relate to, and make sense of the presence and significance of emotions in public service interpreting and interpreter-mediated service encounters?*

Data and methods

The data for this study was produced within a research project of 18 public service interpreters who kept reflective diaries during spring 2022. The data consists of written and audiotaped solicited diary entries from 16 participants (in total 250 entries) and individual interviews with two participants (in total four interviews) who preferred to share their reflections on everyday professional life this way. In their entries, and in the interviews, participants were asked to discuss the following general themes: professional status and identity, everyday work situations in social services, and interaction with social service practitioners and service users.

Research participants were of diverse professional and ethnic backgrounds and based in different urban and rural regions of Finland. They worked altogether in 13 languages and were from both native-Finnish and migrant backgrounds. Not all participants reported whether they had studied interpreting, but most had a bachelor's degree in public service interpreting or were enrolled in such a program. Some also had degrees in court interpreting, and many had additional professional or

university studies. While the group of research participants was varied in many respects, they were comparatively highly educated.

Potential participants were approached with an information letter about the research via personal contacts, immigrant associations, two interpreter Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL). We met the interpreters who responded to our announcement individually over Zoom. In these meetings, we discussed the research and the content and practicalities of data production as well as research ethics, including the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and data protection. Further communication and file exchanges for data production were conducted through a secure site provided by the Information and Communication Technology services at Åbo Akademi University. In accordance with the general guidelines of ethical review in human sciences in Finland, the study design was not submitted for a separate ethical board review (TENK 2019). The participants received monetary compensation for their time and participation.

Each participant produced, on average, 15 diary entries during approximately two months. Participants had the option to create their entries in written or audio format. The possible languages of the entries, as well as the interviews, were Finnish, Swedish, or English. During data production, participants were able to have Zoom meetings with the researchers if they wished to discuss some aspects of data production or if any problems occurred. After concluding the data production phase, the participants also had the opportunity for a feedback meeting. Some participants wished to have a meeting during or after the data production. The two participants who preferred to be interviewed shared their reflections on professional life over recorded phone interviews.

The work situations and experiences described in the entries and interviews occurred within social services understood rather broadly, including adult social work, child welfare services, the Social Insurance Institution, Unemployment Office, or reception centres. Some situations in the data took place in health services, schools, or daycare. A typical diary entry was half to one page of A4 in length. In these entries, participants reflected on collaboration with practitioners, collaboration with service users, emotions during interpreting in social services, professional identity and status, and interpreting as work and a career. Participants were encouraged to write more general reflections on these themes and/or consider them by focusing concretely on a specific workday or work encounter.

In previous research, diaries have been chosen as a method of data production for their ability to prompt reflective thinking, which may also provide fulfilment for participants (Hewitt 2017), and reduce the recall bias of other research methods, for example interviews (Bartlett and Milligan 2015). Diaries may contain both everyday activities as well as more challenging or personal questions, such as emotions, which research participants may be less inclined to share in a face-to-face interview situation (Linn 2021). Consequently, a diary method faces the ethical challenge of leading to emotional distress, as well as finding a balance between participant autonomy and researchers' instructions in guiding participants' responses and engagement in the diary process (Linn 2021).

In this study, the aim was, on one hand, to gather reflective diary records of events and encounters as they occurred during data production, and, on the other, to gather reflective diary records of the participants' overall experiences of public service interpreting in social services on a more general level (see also Alaszewski 2006). The combination of these two aspects offered, in our view, flexibility for the participants and allowed for more rich and nuanced experiences to become part of the data. Moreover, we wanted to offer an interview option to participants who were uncomfortable with the idea of producing diary entries.

We employed abductive analysis (e.g. Tavory and Timmermans 2014, 2, 115; Timmermans and Tavory 2012) which refers to dialogical reading between empirical material and previous research literature, with the latter forming the theoretical background against which surprising aspects in the data may be recognized and inferred. The process entails familiarisation and defamiliarisation in order to question the easily-taken-for-granted or official accounts and understandings. In practice,

we started by separating the segments of data in which the participants referred to emotions. In these segments, we recognized three different viewpoints (see also Viljanmaa 2018): emotions present in the meetings, interpreters conveying emotions, and emotions provoked in the interpreter. The segments were then organized accordingly. As a fourth dimension, we read the extracts from the point of view of processing emotions as part of an interpreter's professional practice in the context of welfare services. We continued by reading the segments alongside previous research in an abductive dialogue as described above.

In the following, we present our results using examples from the data on how participants discussed the presence and role of emotions in their work as public service interpreters. The original data is predominantly in Finnish, except for one participant who wrote in English. The extracts originally in Finnish have been translated into English by the authors. We have made some adjustments in the extracts, when considered necessary, to ensure anonymity and to increase readability. We refer to all public service practitioners as practitioners. We refer to all participants, practitioners, and service users as she/her.

Being in the presence of and conveying emotions

Our analysis suggests that emotions form an important part of the interpreter's work. According to the data, emotions surfaced concretely in the service meetings, for example, in the form of crying, yelling, swearing, repetition, or quietness (quiet voice or silence).

Almost every day a service user bursts into tears during the interpreting. (Participant 7, diary entry).

Some public service encounters can be demanding, for example in a crisis, family dispute, intimate partner violence and child protection situations. These are demanding because families are usually upset, agitated, and angry as something unexpected has happened. (–) The speech may be confused, fast-paced, making it difficult for the interpreter to keep up. (Participant 3, diary entry).

As in the above excerpt, emotions in interpreter-mediated encounters were generally described negatively, such as disappointment, nervousness, anxiety, anger, shock, sorrow, fear, and shame (see also Määttä 2018; Viljanmaa 2018). The impact of such emotions in the encounters can also be technical, as interpreting becomes more difficult when speech is intense and fast or the narrative does not proceed logically. An agitated nature in the encounter also poses challenges to turn-taking; an encounter relatively simple in terms of vocabulary becomes complicated to translate.

You may be interpreting many different things during the day, so you must go from one emotional state to another. (Participant 2, diary entry).

In the above extract, the participant explains that the scale of emotions in the work is wide, as she describes how interpreters 'must go from one emotional state to another'. The excerpt suggests that it is not just a case of being exposed to different emotions but that interpreters must tune into these emotions as they convey them when interpreting.

When a service user cries, I am usually touched, too. But normally, I can still act professionally and control my emotions. However, on a few occasions interpreting has become difficult because I have also been moved to tears. Maybe I wouldn't have cried had I just listened to the service user, but the tears have come when I have repeated the service user's words. You just identify with the client. However, I have been able to pull myself together quite quickly so that the interpretation has not suffered. (Participant 3, diary entry).

The above excerpt further highlights the impact of the service user's emotions on the interpreter, as the participant describes how the service user's words and tears have also provoked tears in her. The participant explains that merely listening to the situations described might not be so emotionally charged as when she processes and vocally repeats the content and words. Previous research has suggested that the emotional impact is intensified by the practice of interpreting in I-form (e.g. Fennig and Denov 2021; Koskinen 2018; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Valero Garcés 2015).

Yet, the participant stresses her ability to act professionally by controlling and suppressing her emotions in these situations. The excerpt therefore supports previous research accounts (e.g. Fennig and Denov 2021) in which interpreters have presented empathetic or emotional reactions as unprofessional.

The service user was upset and used words in a confused way and cursed all the Finnish authorities. To the interpreter, these things came as a surprise, because I didn't expect it to go this far. I needed many curse words in Finnish that are not often used when interpreting. (–) The interpreter was left with an overwhelmed feeling after the encounter, and I was relieved when the encounter was over. (Participant 12, diary entry).

In the above excerpt, the participant describes an encounter in which the service user is not willing to accept the decisions concerning their situation and shows explicit dissatisfaction over how things are turning out, at the social worker's work performance, and towards the whole system. The service user's speech becomes agitated and aggressive and contains strong and insulting vocabulary. The interpreter seems to have struggled to translate it all and been rather shocked by the situation. The participant writes that she was relieved when the meeting was over.

In contrast to interpreting in I-form when translating the words of the service user, interpreters are expected to refer to themselves as 'the interpreter' when working, and, interestingly, this practice was also apparent in many of the diary entries, as can be read in the excerpt above. This may be read as distancing oneself from the emotions of the service user and their verbal expressions, even when writing about the work event for the research. In a sense, the participants are maintaining and emphasizing their professional role in the entries in this way.

Emotions were not always negative but there were also positive situations, for example, after a successful family reunification. The participants described it as important for their role to share this joy and for their part to participate in creating these positive and trust-filled situations (see also Viljanmaa 2018). In so doing, they actively participate in building trust between service users and the practitioners and services. One important emotion present in the encounters was empathy, and many participants wrote that one of their tasks as interpreters is to find ways to convey the empathetic attitude of the practitioner (see also Theys et al. 2023). Yet, situations in which practitioners showed a strict and demanding attitude, or even disrespect, were also described in the data, as can be read in the following examples.

It was a challenging and unpleasant topic for the service user and the practitioner. The practitioner started to be demanding because the issue had already been discussed before. (–) As the interpreter, I sometimes found it challenging to say and translate things in the same strict tone that the practitioner used. (Participant 12, diary entry).

The social worker was not able to be neutral but raised her voice to the service user, which is disrespectful. As the interpreter, I was annoyed. It is the obligation of the social worker to know the culture of the migrant service user and understand how to speak to an adult. (Participant 10, diary entry).

Our data suggests that, instead of holding an impartial or neutral stance, the interpreters are often caught in between the parties (see also Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013) in these emotion-filled moments as they are left with feelings of being annoyed or apologetic, either because of the service user's agitation and strong vocabulary or the practitioner's lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity. The two extracts above speak of the interpreter becoming overburdened when she perceives that the practitioner lacks control over the situation or is not conducting herself properly (see also Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019). The first example refers to the practitioner taking a stern tone in her communication with the service user. In the second excerpt, the participant felt annoyed over what she understood as a lack of respect from the practitioner. The participant seems to have read this as indifference and ignorance towards the service user's cultural background.

I tend to identify and sympathize with the service users, their challenges, everyday issues, and problems. Service users may suffer from depression triggered by life-changing situations, e.g. migration from their

respective countries to Finland. 'Been there, done that'. I know first-hand what it feels like to leave my loved ones behind and to move to a foreign country. (Participant 1, diary entry).

It is especially emotional for me when I work with service users that have come from my home country. (Participant 2, diary entry).

In these extracts, the participants reflect upon the emotion-laden experiences and life situations present in the service encounters. Their accounts support previous research findings in that dealing with this type of content and the emotions attached to it becomes further exacerbated if they resemble the interpreter's or own background (Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne 2010; Fennig and Denov 2021; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Valero Garcés 2015).

Emotions provoked by the professional position of the interpreter

The data described interpreting work itself through different emotions, presenting it as pressured, tensed, and pushed.

I find this work very difficult in terms of dealing with emotions because of the constant pressure, tension, urgency. (Participant 2, diary entry).

Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala (2019) have pointed out that interpreting work requires rapid adaptation to changing situations (see also Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013; Valero Garcés 2015). There may also be telephone or video interpreting in which technical difficulties are commonplace (Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019). The variety of pay practices and uncertainty of the interpreting profession add to the stress of the work (Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Nordberg and Kara 2022; Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson 2012; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008).

It is interesting to note that I can sense when a practitioner is used to working with an interpreter and when they do not understand anything about the role of the interpreter. A practitioner who is used to working with an interpreter involves the interpreter even before the meeting: they trust me, that I am also bound by confidentiality, they give background information, because they understand that this assists me in choosing the right terms and responses when interpreting. (Participant 15, diary entry).

In the above extract, the participant details her experiences of facing trust as well as distrust from practitioners towards the role and commitment of interpreters. The excerpt describes certain insecurity before each interpreting assignment as to the level and quality of collaboration with the practitioner and how she will be approached and treated. This also supports previous research findings suggesting that practitioners often find working with an interpreter challenging (Hlavac and Saunders 2021; Tipton 2016; Tribe and Thompson 2009; Westlake and Jones 2018) and that inter-professional collaboration lacks training, supervision, and support (Berthold and Fischman 2014; Engstrom, Roth, and Hollis 2010; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008).

An important aspect raised in the extract is the interpreter's lack of prior information, which itself sparks feelings of unpredictability and disrespect (see also Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne 2010; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Nordberg and Kara 2022). Viljanmaa (2018) has further suggested that having some information and understanding beforehand about any emotionally-charged aspect of a future assignment would assist the interpreter in preparing and thus enhance collaboration and the overall outcome of the meeting.

The practitioners have a mixed understanding of the role of the interpreter. Some respect the interpreter, and thank the interpreter, while others act as if the interpreter does not exist, and I find this offensive. Some practitioners think that interpreters personally know all the service users (–) if the service user is late [the practitioner] asks the interpreter, does the interpreter know where the service user is. (Participant 12, diary entry).

The above extract is a further example of the discrepancies concerning the expectations and understanding of the interpreter's role and position. In terms of emotions, the excerpt speaks of feelings of being acknowledged, respected, and thanked – or dismissed, misunderstood and undervalued, with some attitudes and expectations experienced straightforwardly as offensive (see also Fennig and Denov 2021; Nordberg and Kara 2022; Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson 2012; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008). It also implies powerlessness over representation and positionality (Gustafsson, Norström, and Fioretos 2013).

The ambiguities of being neutral and processing emotions

The analysis of emotions revealed contradictory understandings of the interpreter's role in terms of neutrality, impartiality, and invisibility. Some parts of the data suggested that detachment and neutrality form an essential part of the interpreters' professionalism (see also Koskinen 2018; Merlini and Gatti 2015; Viljanmaa 2018). On the other hand, knowledge of experiencing and conveying emotions was presented as central to the interpreter's professional practice and highly rewarding (see also Viljanmaa 2018).

I am happy when I can be there in that moment to support people and use my empathy in the sense that even if I do not decide what is being said in the situation, I can with my tone and accentuation say a lot. (Participant 2, diary entry).

In the above account, the participant describes how an interpreter can convey and add empathy to situations with their tone of voice and accentuation (see also Theys et al. 2023). While interpreters cannot decide what is said in the encounters, they can affect the tone in which things are said.

There is the learned or spoken working language (–) then there is also this emotional language which is used in different cultures just as its own, for example, expressing some things, not directly in words but for example in proverbs, or there are different expressions that only people from that culture and language of the country understand. (Participant 6, diary entry).

Emotions in the data were mostly referred to in the form of specific words, gestures, behaviours, and tones of voice, but emotions can also be conveyed through specific refrains, expressions, or proverbs, which demands a great deal of cultural knowledge and sensitivity to interpret. The above excerpt therefore shows how interpreting and translating demand careful consideration of the affective dimensions of different linguistic choices (Koskinen 2018, 160; 2015, 179–180).

The interpreter should interpret even the insults (–) In the training, they guided us that one should interpret everything irrespective of the nature of the content to convey the right picture of the person. They might need different kinds of help. (Participant 7, diary entry).

If the interpreter sounds curious, this might have a purpose. (Participant 3, diary entry).

In the examples above, the participants elaborate on their practice and the meaning and aim of carefully conveying emotions while interpreting. In the first excerpt, the participant refers to the interpreter training she has received and stresses that emotions play an important part in drawing a meticulous picture of the service user's current situation (see also Chang et al. 2021). It is therefore important that these are not omitted. Tribe and Thompson (2009) have also pointed out that an inexperienced or untrained interpreter might feel tempted to mitigate the content of the discussion, potentially leading to an incorrect portrayal of the service user's situation and their needs. In turn, in the context of court interpreting, Carstensen and Dahlberg (2017) noted that interpreters may tone down emotions precisely as part of the emotional labour they perform.

Many participants stressed that interpreting requires stepping away from the emotions present in the assignments. They employed different ways to process and/or distance themselves from emotionally charged content and situations, such as deep breathing, visual exercises or asking for short breaks (see also Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne 2010; Vuori 2013). The analysis also revealed

an emotion expectation attached to the interpreter and the way they conduct themselves, in that they should remain calm and concentrated, thus potentially projecting this calmness to others in the encounter (see also Carstensen and Dahlberg 2017).

I have attempted to visualize a white circle around me to protect me from other people's emotions, so that they would not break me (–) The calmness and concentration of the interpreter help the service user. (Participant 2, diary entry).

When I get a strong emotion, I breathe deeply and try to do visual exercises. Often, I get relief from knowing that I am helping the person in the way I know how. If I feel that my capability to function as an interpreter is affected, I ask for a short break. (Participant 8, diary entry).

However, interpreters also shared difficult experiences of situations in which they have not been able to distance themselves emotionally. In the excerpt below, the participant reflects on a situation that had been very emotive and exceptional and had stayed with her for a long time.

The doctor alerted the other doctors there. It was the very last heartbeat, but the monitors still showed everything as normal. But the doctor said to me that, unfortunately I should tell you that the child has passed away. I started crying, I couldn't translate anything. Suddenly I was in a state of shock. (–) And I asked the doctor, how can I tell them? (–) I cried a lot with the family. And yes, after that for ten days I was really. ... and I couldn't tell anybody about it. But it was good, the doctor called me to their office, so we could sit and talk. (Participant 16, interview).

This example from an unexpected emergency at a hospital shows how the doctor took the role of a professional colleague, something that became important to the interpreter, rather than leave her on her own. Indeed, an important aspect of dealing with emotions is the possibility of doing so in collaboration with practitioners, an example of which can be read below.

As the service user talked about her feelings and anxiety, her emotions began to rise, and she started to cry. This resulted in a challenge for interpreting as I could not understand what she was saying. The interpreter did not want to be an obstacle to the outburst of emotions, but at the same time I found it difficult to translate. In this case, I informed the social worker of the challenge. The social worker understood and told the service user that it was okay to cry and that it is important to vent feelings and concerns. (–) The interpreter should be able to be a strong enough professional to be able to listen to what the service user is going through. (Participant 8, diary entry).

Here the participant describes a work situation in which she had voiced clearly that it had become difficult to interpret because the speech of the service user was affected by the emotionally charged situation. Again, the form 'the interpreter' is employed in the account when the participant refers to herself as she stresses that she should not be an obstacle to service users showing emotions in the encounters. The practitioner guides the encounter and calms the situation down by normalizing emotions and their expression. The participant concludes that it is an important part of interpreters' professionalism to be able to hear, receive, and convey whatever comes up in the encounters.

When the two calls are ended and I hang up, I feel totally overwhelmed. I am trembling slightly and must make a considerable effort to put this case behind me. Try to forget, wipe it out of my memory, delete completely. Well, easier said than done ... I cannot focus on anything else for quite a while. The content of the two calls keeps echoing in my mind. (Participant 1, diary entry).

The extract above exemplifies the overwhelming and even physical nature of emotions present in interpreting. Emotive issues will repeat in the participants' minds. Trying to process or erase them requires very conscious effort and is still not always possible.

A few times the service user has been so angry when they have not received some support that they have shouted at the worker and called them with rude names. (–) Of course, I have interpreted word for word without embellishment (–) After such interpretations I would have liked to have had a few words with the practitioner to say that I felt bad for saying rude things, but after an instant interpretation it is not customary for the interpreter and the practitioner to remain talking to each other. (Participant 3, diary entry).

In the above account, the participant writes about experiencing the presence of negative emotions, such as anger, disappointment, and discontent, in the meetings. While she describes conveying these as an unquestioned part of her work, she wishes to be able to debrief in some way with the practitioners after the meeting. Yet there does not seem to be time for this. The extract describes how after an on-demand interpreting assignment, it is not customary for the practitioner and interpreter to discuss with each other or debrief. Overall, the data suggests that interpreters are largely left alone with the sensitive and emotional aspects of their everyday work, as stated in the excerpt below.

Very few interpreters receive enough support to recover from their work. An independent interpreter is completely alone. (Participant 2, diary entry).

The content of the meetings can be complex and difficult to deal with, yet structures or time for processing this in the form of work counselling or collaboration with other interpreters or practitioners rarely exist. Previous research has pointed out that interpreters do not have an established work community or other structures within which stressful situations encountered at work can be discussed and shared (e.g. Fennig and Denov 2021; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Nordberg and Kara 2022). Viljanmaa (2018) has put forward interpreters' feelings of loneliness through descriptions of coming home after a full day of interpreting assignments and not actually having been talked to or encountered as a person by anyone. Our data similarly suggests that, while interpreting, as such, involves constant contact and communication with other people, interpreters may find their role isolated and lonely.

Concluding remarks

Our analysis shows that emotions are constantly present and form an important part of interpreter-mediated encounters in social work and welfare services more broadly. These emotions were often presented as negative. In addition to service users' emotions, practitioners' emotions were also present in the encounters and can provoke an emotional reaction from the interpreter, such as calmness and trust, or irritation if the interpreter considers the practitioner's attitude and conduct inappropriate. The data also included examples of meetings with positive emotions, as well as caring and empathy. As interpreters purposefully join in the creation of a happy, positive, and trust-filled situation (see also Viljanmaa 2018), they arguably participate in building trust between the service users and the practitioners and services.

The nature of the work itself was described through feelings of pressure, urgency, and tension. Our analysis revealed physical reactions to emotions present in the meetings and intense effort in trying to process emotions afterwards. Emotions were intensified by the fact that the interpreter vocally repeats the content and does this in I-form (see also Fennig and Denov 2021; Koskinen 2018; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Valero Garcés 2015). Sensitive and emotional content might be further exacerbated when it is close to the personal history of the interpreter (see also Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne 2010; Fennig and Denov 2021; Määttä, Ylikomi, and Puumala 2019; Valero Garcés 2015).

The analysis also looked at the ways participants elaborated on the role of emotions as part of their professional practice. This revealed somewhat contradictory understandings of the interpreter's role in terms of neutrality, impartiality, and invisibility. While interpreters were expected to convey emotions, their professional role entails an expectation of detachment and neutrality (see also Koskinen 2018; Merlini and Gatti 2015; Viljanmaa 2018). At the same time, the emotional dimension was understood as an essential part of professional practice and highly rewarding (see also Viljanmaa 2018). Participants also explained that the aim of carefully considering emotions is to assist in drawing a meticulous picture of the service user's situation (see also Chang et al. 2021; Tribe and Thompson 2009). On the other hand, another role of the interpreter is to project calmness in the encounter (see also Carstensen and Dahlberg 2017).

Our analysis points to the importance of understanding public service interpreting as a sentient and affirmative professional practice in which interpreters constantly reflect on and evaluate their own reactions, actions, and decision-making concerning emotions according, for example, to their training and to professional documents such as the code of conduct in public service interpreting (SKTL 2021).

Our study coincides with previous research in that the professional position of public service interpreters in the social service landscape was not perceived as straightforward and problem free. Participants noted distrust from practitioners towards the role and commitment of the interpreter and expressed a general sense of misrecognition (see also Fennig and Denov 2021; Nordberg and Kara 2022; Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson 2012; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008). The professional role presented itself as isolated and lonely (see also Nordberg and Kara 2022; Viljanmaa 2018). The possibility of dealing with emotions in collaboration with other interpreters or practitioners and access to work counselling would be important improvements in this respect.

Finally, the study raises broader questions related to the multi-professional and cross-sectoral field of welfare provision in general and social work in particular. While the analysis shows how both public service interpreting and social work constitute inherently 'relational' and 'emotional' labour, professional practices and codes of conduct are still defining what that means when sharing professional space in the context of institutional encounters. The tensions between, on one hand, the normative framework on neutrality, and, on the other, the quest for acknowledging public service interpreting as relational, embodied (e.g. Koskinen 2018) professional practice, call for a deeper conceptualization of public service interpreting as welfare service work in its own right. For such an endeavour to be successful, both educational and welfare service organizations must be open to stronger inter-professional collaboration and the recognition of a shared professional space.

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