

Au-delà des mots : l’alliance nécessaire entre travailleur social et interprète

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Résumé

Nous traiterons ici de l’alliance professionnelle entre travailleur social et interprète pour intervenir au niveau de « l’intimité blessée » de personnes en situation d’extrême détresse et en perte complète de leurs repères habituels. Quelles sont les barrières à franchir pour rejoindre ces personnes dans ce qu’elles sont et dans leur souffrance ? Comment peut-on parvenir à créer un climat de confiance malgré les obstacles d’ordre linguistique, ethnoculturel, sexuel, socio-politique, psychologique ? Comment, dans de telles situations de vulnérabilité, de méfiance, de chocs culturels, de peur, est-il possible pour un travailleur social et un interprète de s’associer pour aider ces personnes à reprendre le contrôle de leur vie ? A partir de suivis psychosociaux, nous illustrerons le processus qui se met à l’œuvre lors d’entrevues et qui permet de tisser des liens de support thérapeutique pour arriver « à saisir l’autre de l’intérieur », créant ainsi des « espaces de sens », sortes de moments magiques où le client peut s’exprimer librement et petit à petit reprendre sa vie en main.

Beyond words: the bond between social worker and interpreter

Summary

We will be dealing with the professional relationship between a social worker and an interpreter and their interactions with people who are emotionally scarred, extremely distressed, and have completely lost their bearings. What are the barriers to overcome in order to reach out to these people and join them in their suffering? How can we create a feeling of trust despite the linguistic, ethnocultural, gender, sociopolitical, and psychological obstacles? How is it possible for a social worker and an interpreter to join together to help these people take control of their lives despite the vulnerability, culture shock, and fear that they are experiencing? Through psychosocial interventions, we will demonstrate the process used during interviews, which enables us to establish the bond to support them and grasp their innermost feelings. While capturing their spirits, we are able to create some “magical moments” where the client feels free to express himself and gradually regain control over his life.

Beyond words: the bond between social worker and interpreter

This text comprises a reflection on a more and more frequently encountered mode of psychosocial intervention, namely the presence of an interpreter during interviews to translate the words and realities of each party in order to establish a world of meaning between a social worker and a client, who otherwise would not understand each other. Our perspective is that of “thinking in action”, in other words attempting to understand what is masked behind professional actions and emerges through reflection (Schön, 1994). What does it take to make sure the results of interventions with refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress are positive?

In order to grasp what transpires during a typical intervention, we try to think about what the action means as we go through the different stages of the various psychosocial approaches used. Thus we can identify the emergence of a sort of “experiential knowledge” from the dynamic collaboration between the social worker and the interpreter.

The reflection here is based on a rather special type of approach, one developed specifically for victims of post-traumatic stress, which results from war experiences, organized violence, genocide massacres and other unmentionable acts of violence. The aim of this article is mainly to acknowledge some of the variables that foster the close rapport that has to be created between the professional and the interpreter in order to help these people deal with human ugliness and channel their suffering.

After briefly defining post-traumatic stress, we will outline the approach adopted by the social worker and go on to see how the interpreter works closely with the interpreter in order to transmit the message. The interpreter becomes an indispensable link, a bridge of meaning, an active contributor to the task of resolving the problematic issues presented.

Post-traumatic stress

The title of this paper contains the expression “beyond words”, which is paradoxical in a way because we also need words to do our work. What we mean is that dehumanization, absurd suffering, unprovoked wickedness, state violence, all ravages caused by acts of torture, rape, unjustified incarceration, defy expression in any language. More and more frequently nowadays, social workers find themselves having to deal with people who have witnessed all kinds of horror and inhumanity. No wonder that post traumatic stress constitutes the basic argument for many a claimant’s application for refugee status.

Although traumatism, painful experiences and suffering have always existed and form the raw material of all social workers; what is new is the classification that health professionals, in particular physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, have been using for the last few years to identify the victims and their troubles. Another new feature is the social worker’s obligation to work with interpreters, as often as possible from the same country of origin as clients. The reason for this is that the kind of post-traumatic stress referred to in this paper, is associated with situations experienced in countries in the throes of war or undergoing social upheaval, countries where the language and cultural codes differ from ours. Without interpreters, social workers would find difficult, or even impossible, to make a valid evaluation of the client’s situation.

The refugee file handed to the intervenant will often be labelled with one of the following abbreviations: PTS (post-traumatic stress); PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder); PTSS (post-

traumatic stress syndrome). These terms are generally used for what, in principle, is the state of post-traumatic stress (SPTS) which according to the DSM IV is a form of anxiety frequently observed in the wake of exceptional events. In social terms, a person who is a victim of post-traumatic stress is first and foremost a “wounded individual”, a human being extremely distressed, not someone who is sick. It is a person who has experienced an extreme situation that he certainly did not choose to live through. According to Fischer (1994), the notion of extreme situation designates a set of events that plunges individuals into conditions that are radically different from their customary way of life. He categorizes these situations by their unbearable, overwhelming intensity and their reference to experiences that have taken them to the remotest limits of what is considered humanly acceptable and liveable.

Everyone reacts differently in a difficult situation. People are not all affected in the same way. (Sydor, Philippot, 1996). With regard to the population we are talking about, however, we may see fairly similar symptomatic responses, namely certain categories of reactions: emotional (fear, terror, guilt, anxiety, sadness, disgust, distrust, etc.); cognitive (concentration difficulties, confusion, disorientation, loss of self esteem, memory problems, recurrent dreams, etc.); physical (fatigue, insomnia, nightmares, allergies, headaches, somatic complaints, etc.); behavioural (social withdrawal, lack of energy, loss of appetite, phobias, etc.).

This, then, is the context in which the intervention takes place: a client (man, woman, adolescent, child), whose ethnocultural background is completely different from that of the social worker facing him; someone recently arrived in Canada and claiming refugee status; speaking neither English nor French; wrested from all familiar points of reference; psychologically and physically devastated by the awful way they were treated and all the humiliations suffered before coming here (Roy and Shermarke, 1997). Refugees presenting with one or several of the characteristics related to post-traumatic stress are referred to SARIMM (Service d'aide aux réfugiés et aux immigrants du Montréal Métropolitain) of the Côte-des-Neiges CLSC for therapeutic support and multidimensional assistance. It is at this point that the social worker and the interpreter can begin to dovetail their efforts.

Approach developed: hearing the suffering

The approach developed with PTS victims is based on acknowledging the suffering, confirming the individual's human dignity, participating in a transformation of the trauma. As educator Judith Black underlines constantly in her sessions dealing with post-traumatic stress (1999), social workers are free to draw upon their own personal life experience in addition to their professional skills to intervene in the specific area of PTS. Black (1999) suggests they establish a solidarity with their client and recommends that they never lose sight of the basic principles of counselling, namely respect, empathy, authenticity and congruence that underlie the professional skills.

This is also what Meichenbaum (1994) proposes in warning social workers to avoid using any techniques too early in the therapeutic process but to first “hear the suffering”. It is the interpreter who, with choice of words and empathy, can make this suffering “heard”. Any of the elements belonging to the different approaches used in psychosocial intervention, namely systemic, intercultural, ecological, etc., may be employed, provided they have a high content of humanity and empathy.

The whole purpose of psychosocial intervention is to try to identify, with clients, an outward sign of what Fischer (1994) calls their “invisible spring” in order to confront the trauma, redefine themselves to cope with new realities, take control (according to their own cultural codes) of their lives, and invent their personal form of resistance. The role of the interpreter in this type of intervention, it goes without saying, is invaluable, especially in view of all the obstacles involved: the socio-political context of the country of origin, the cultural barriers, total ignorance of the values in the new country, absence of a support network on which the individual can rely, and, last but not least, the person himself in his peculiarity and with his infinite pain. It is at this point in the interview that the term “beyond words” takes on its full meaning: there is no need for words to create human reciprocity, to recognize the other the other as one’s alter ego, a victim of human cruelty. No need for words because, as Marotte (1996:38) says, “no linguistic equivalence seems to contain this type of horror, which makes us think that torture actually generates a hiatus, a silent space”. We could say, therefore, that the first contact between social worker, interpreter and client takes place in silence, in the exchange of glances, in the creation of a suitable atmosphere for the eventual sharing of ideas and feelings. Then, gradually, once the right climate has been established, words can begin to play their role as a means of verbal communication. We will see a little further on how the interpreter manages to translate words that do not even exist in his own language and gets through to the person, deep down, down in the unutterable suffering itself.

From our psychosocial experience accumulated in the last few years, we have developed a sort of standard intervention process. It comprises three main stages involving both the social worker and the interpreter, which are easy to distinguish after a dozen or so interviews but which do not necessarily follow the same linear sequence.

Psychosocial Intervention Process with Post-Traumatic Stress Victims

1-Validation of perception of the client and offer of support

- Identification of support mechanisms and research for stability factors
- Explanation of possible help offered by a social worker and collaboration in the search for solutions
- Illustration of normal stages of the grief process and loss of familiar points of reference
- Validation of the person’s own perception of reality

2- Search for personal responses and strategies

- Exploration of the migration experience and life prior to migration
- Identification of the responses and strategies developed by the client and by his own culture to cope with organized violence
- Mediation and advocacy at different institutions and community organizations

3- Stirrings of a transformation: awareness of the basic symbolic structure of an identity crisis

- Learning to redefine one’s life in terms of new priorities
- Integration of different aspects of life in the search for some sort of balance.

Despite all the ups and downs, it is this process that generally is seen to develop. The common feature that persists throughout this kind of social intervention, at both the physical level (sleeping difficulties, loss of appetite) and the psychological (tears, sadness), is the distress that is expressed. Regardless of the approach used, suffering takes a long time to dissipate. Memories linger on. The path leading to self and restored inner strength, is long but it is possible to find one's feet again if social worker and interpreter successfully dovetail their professional and human skills to create the appropriate climate and expertise.

The challenging work of an interpreter

The primary role of an interpreter is to facilitate communication between the client and the professional. If a language barrier separates them, not only is direct verbal communication impossible but the interviewer remains unfamiliar with the cultural values and background of the client. This is of particular importance when the two professionals are dealing with cases involving PTS as a result of organized violence.

There are many different types of interpretation.(Lochmicht, 1995). In *simultaneous interpretation*, the speaker and the interpreter both speak at the same time, the interpreter following with the translation just a few words behind the speaker. This type of interpretation is used mainly for conferences. There is also *sight interpretation*, which means that the interpreter translates documents from written to spoken language. *Sign language* is very well known by all of course. Less familiar is *relay interpretation* where two interpreters are needed, as in passing from French to English, then English to Punjabi, for instance. Finally, in *consecutive interpretation*, one person speaks at a time in short concise sentences and the interpreter subsequently translates into the target language, which is the client's language (in the present case, Punjabi). Because this technique is less confusing and more accurate, it is the one most used in the domain of health and social services. It is also the technique used in the intervention process described here. Two elements are essential for an interpretation to be a successful: building trust and conveying the cultural concept.

Building trust

Major problems can arise if the client distrusts the people around him. The refugee, especially if he is a survivor of torture, may fear more than others that we are government agents or that we may not keep the interview confidential. They might also be worried about the personal judgments of the interpreter. Thus there is an initial barrier that can often make the client less receptive to the support given to him but, through good verbal and non-verbal communication, this barrier can be removed. When the interpreter shares the same culture, his presence should make the client less intimidated in his new surroundings. It is important to establish a degree of trust during the initial contact with the person and, if all proceeds well, this relationship of trust builds up throughout the interview and progresses during the follow-up sessions.

Verbal communication is as important for building trust as non-verbal. Professional and client can build up a firm relationship, despite the fact that they do not speak the same language, but it is only possible if the interpreter transmits the message faithfully in its entirety, giving due consideration to linguistic variations in both languages.

The interpreter's challenge, therefore, is to convert one language into another capturing not only the literal meaning of the words but also the nuances and feelings of both the interviewer and the client. He has to convey the tone and spirit of the message rather than interpreting word for word, which may not convey the intended idea. It is important to determine the relevant concept of the message and transmit it in words that are culturally appropriate and easily understood. Furthermore, since we never deal with an actual culture but rather a person born into a culture, who takes upon himself the cultural codes he chooses to appropriate in his own way (Cohen-Emérique, 2000), the interpreter must take into account the specific context of a person, age, gender, education level, social status and personal life experience. All of these aspects affect the professional's interaction with the client.

The approach used in this type of intervention is aimed at helping the victim put his life into perspective in order to regain control.(Cyrulnik, 1999). During this process, we use many different steps, depending on where we are in the intervention with the client. We use many metaphors at each step of the procedure to reflect the person's situation and validate his perceptions. Among others, we talk of a "boat capsizing", a "raft careering madly down the rapids of a river" or a "train that has derailed". We also have recourse to visualization, imagery such as that of the "athlete who needs training before the competition", the "alpinist who has to climb over or round the obstacle ahead", or a person's "life-line", etc. to explain that the problem is indeed a real one and the suffering inescapable; but that the person must be able to bear it, not allow himself to be demolished by it.

Each of these metaphors comprises a set of cultural references, the purpose of which is to create meaning, to provide safe footholds so that he can take his initial steps into the reality confronting him in this new country. The same adaptation process should be adopted when translating proverbs, excerpts of books, or references to spirituality. The use of metaphors, or any other similar tools, is essential in order to emphasize the depth of the message, idea or thought. Each image, excerpt or proverb has to be interpreted to ensure the client gets the intended message. Any support used should be relevant to the particular experience and client's universe of meaning.

Non-verbal communication is as important as the verbal message. If the client and the interpreter do not have a shared culture, the meaning of a message can sometimes be lost. The non-verbal cues of a client, his body language, such as his sitting position, facial expression, eye contact, passivity or hyperactivity, reaction to touch, are significant within the context of cultural norms and the specific client's history in relation to his post traumatic stress. The interpreter, too, may be sending non-verbal messages as he transmits information from one person to the other. The non-verbal cues of the interpreter are expressed according to the client's cultural codes. Although most of the time the interpreter and the client share the same cultural background, they do not necessarily share the same feelings. The interpreter may get close to the client or distance himself, depending on the message he is getting, and his non-verbal messages can give a distressed client comfort and strength. The interpreter acts as a two-sided mirror, reflecting the joys, sorrows, worries and fears of the client and the interviewer's concern and willingness to help.

Understanding the non-verbal behaviour of a client requires familiarity with his culture. By explaining this behaviour to the social worker, the interpreter helps him to understand the client and assess whether the behaviour is attributable to the culture or an expression of dysfunction.

However, since culture is not static and represents just one of many aspects to be considered in a case, it should not serve as the only filter in the interview (Roy, 1993; Maalouf, 1998).

Conveying the cultural concept and sensing the atmosphere

The interpreter is not only a language broker but also a culture broker. He must know the meaning not only of the words but also of the concepts in both languages and cultures. For example, in the Punjabi culture, the job of a social worker is not very well known so that, by explaining this profession, he can clarify the situation for the already confused client. Words like “trauma”, “stress” and “depression” have no linguistic equivalence in Punjabi, for instance, so it is important to reconceptualize these words to fit a mode and a context of understanding before translating them.

An interpreter needs to be able to identify and interact comfortably with at least two different sets of cultural norms, values and languages without losing the uniqueness of his own. Many times, the interpreter has a session with the worker or the client before or after the interview in order to bridge cultures, visions, expectations, representations and thus facilitate information that is travelling in both directions. It is impossible to separate language from culture since culture is a dynamic codified into a language in such a way as to convey meaning, and it is this meaning that the interpreter is passing back and forth (Mackinnon and Michels, 1971).

Sensing the atmosphere, translating what lies between the words

We talk about “reading between the lines” but we could just as easily say “translating what is between the words”. What we are referring to here is an area that plays a preponderant role in the joint task of social worker and interpreter, namely the area of intuition, awareness of the atmosphere, sensitivity to the type of relationship involved. Whatever the technique used, however skilled the social worker may be, and however good the interpreter, no interview can ever be effective if the two do not have both feet rooted in this area. This exercise of relational creation cannot be invented, is not picked up from books; it comes from human experience, human beings dealing with other human beings. At this stage in the process, it is more important for the counsellor and the interpreter to focus on what is revealed of the uniqueness of the client and reflect on how this could help resolve the problems at hand, rather than bear in mind and apply the standard practices and tools of social intervention.”

Just as the social worker does never actually deals with a culture per se, the interpreter does not work with a language in the abstract. Each participant at the interview faces a whole human being, a human being who has been deeply wounded. As Brunel (1989:85) puts it, we have to take account of all that each client brings along by way of culture and personal life experiences histories when it comes to building an empathetic message and an effective therapeutic relationship. Creating an empathetic relationship means trusting that the client can take what he feels appropriate for him and, also, that the interpreter will choose the words that correspond. It’s a question of giving each person the space in which to express himself and, especially, believing (and getting the other to believe) that, despite all the suffering, life can go on.

When language is no longer an obstacle

How often do we hear social workers complaining about what a drag it is to work with an interpreter, how it slows them down, how uncomfortable it is to always be working under the eye of the other, or how difficult it is to establish a position in the process because of the close relationship that the interpreter creates with the client. Each one of these aspects, namely time, heaviness, presence of a third party, and allegiances between clients really does exist and must be openly admitted and dealt with. However, many strategies exist that could help to by-pass these difficulties. Among those strategies are the specific abilities of the professional and the interpreter and, most of all, their intricate collaboration and complicity. The social worker has to trust his ability to handle the domain so that he will steer his way successfully through the interviews; the interpreter, on the other hand, has to have a good memory, especially for consecutive interpretation, as well as excellent concentration, emotional awareness, an ability to create a warm relationship with the client and the possibility of referring to his own life experience, if relevant.

All this helps to build up a relationship between social worker and interpreter that is based on complicity and mutual respect. Obviously the relationship is optimized if each, outside the framework of the intervention process, undertakes his own personal research in this area. There is abundant reading material for this purpose as well as conferences, workshops, peer groups and other opportunities for personal growth and further intellectual understanding.

In summary, the relationship between the two main parties involved is the result of empathy and good communication skills. According to Brunel (1989:87), this dynamic includes such components as flexibility and the capacity to bond, to handle the interaction adroitly, to take care and to relax socially. Good communication skills develop gradually and help to establish an easy, comfortable, non-stressful atmosphere. They can range from offering compassion to offering practical support, depending on the client's cultural and personal background.

Social worker and interpreter: super-experts?

The social worker and interpreter do not need to be super-experts in order to conduct intercultural interviews with PTS victims but they do need to prove that they are super-humans in addition to being professionals. The essence of any professional helping or supportive relationship must surely include the ability to foster suffering, to not be afraid of tears or human distress, to maintain a certain equanimity when faced with expressions of despair, to be open to the various cultural manifestations of suffering. The challenge of the social worker and her partner, the interpreter, is to keep alive the small flame kindled during the meetings and use it to accompany the client as he moves towards another phase of the life.

Working in close collaboration temporarily to help a fellow human being cope with unbearable suffering, trying together to help him find some meaning in it, proposing different ways of living his life, offering symbolic perspectives and a choice of positive things to hold on to, these are the daily reality forming part and parcel of the professional approach used to deal with refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress.

Each participant, social worker, interpreter and client, in his own way and according to his own role, contributes to the emergence of a sort of verbal alchemy, which goes beyond the spoken

word, far away from strict technique, to produce a bond steeped in humanity and awareness of the symbolic content of social links.

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