The incidence of empathy when interpreting in the field for vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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To cite this article:

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Abstract

This article describes the incidence of empathy in field interpreters who work with vulnerable populations in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Qualitative data was gathered via interviews conducted in 2018 with professional field interpreters working for international organizations (both freelancers and staffers), resulting in two paradigmatic narratives (one for each professional profile) aimed at preserving the participants' anonymity. The narratives reveal a significant incidence of empathy in certain communicative situations, and views of empathy as both a hindrance and a useful emotion for the task at hand. The article suggests that such conflicting perceptions may be addressed empowering field interpreters to reconcile themselves with their own positionality through psychological training.

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[1] This article is based on a PhD dissertation that was defended in 2021 at the University of Geneva entitled La interpretación en conflictos prolongados: el conflicto israeli-palestino (Barea Muñoz 2021a).

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to describe and explore the incidence of empathy in interpreters working with vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The research questions guiding this inquiry are: (1) what is the incidence of empathy in field interpreters when working with vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? and (2) how does empathy manifest within field interpreters' psychological and emotional sphere when engaging with vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? To address these questions, the article explores field interpreters' positionality and the psychological implications of their interactions with vulnerable populations in fragile contexts, with a specific focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The results of the study may inform the training of future interpreters to navigate such challenging environments.

The study is based on eleven semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 with local freelancers and staff interpreters who were currently working or had worked for international organizations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The participants were engaged in international field missions investigating alleged human rights violations perpetrated by Israeli authorities in the Occupied Territories, mainly in the West Bank. The interviews were transcribed, and then coded and categorized following the principles of constructivist grounded theory and phenomenology. This process yielded two paradigmatic narratives— one representing freelancers and one representing staff interpreters. These narratives were collated through comparative analysis and subsequently discussed in relation to existing literature on the matter.

This article first provides definitions for key concepts (Section 2), before exploring the notion of empathy in fragile contexts (Section 3). Subsequently, it describes the interview methodology employed to collect data (Section 4), followed by the presentation of results (Section 5) and their discussion (Section 6). The conclusions (Section 7) stress the complex relationship between the participants and the emergence of empathy during field interpreting. Furthermore, the study elicits relevant considerations regarding interpreters' positionality, both as members (or freelance employees) of a particular

international organization and as individuals who share certain identity traits and background with the stakeholders and beneficiaries of the interpreting service.

2. Definitions and contextualization

To properly contextualize this study and its theoretical background, the key concepts used will be initially defined. These include field interpreting for Palestinian victims, fragile contexts, vulnerable populations, the notion of empathy, and how these notions are interconnected with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the object of inquiry.

This study focuses on interpreters recruited to serve international organizations, specifically during field missions investigating alleged violations of human rights by Israeli authorities against Palestinian victims in the Occupied Territories (primarily in the West Bank) during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Termed *field interpreting*, this type of interpretation has been defined in contrast to conference interpreting as interpreting which is "conducted in myriad locations and rarely in a booth, e.g., a meeting room, a camp, a detention centre, a private house, an office, a hospital or a tent" (Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout & Martin 2021, 452). Centring the location in the understanding of field interpreting underscores the unique characteristics of such environments, many of which can be deemed *fragile*.

Fragile contexts encompass various adverse conditions individuals face, such as poverty; discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, or religion; denial of goods, resources, or employment (Fox et al. 2020); war and conflict; unaccountable police actions (Gallai 2019); forced migration; climate disasters; gender-based violence; and disease (Baker, Bellemore & Morgan 2023). Individuals in fragile contexts generally lack control over their lives and decision-making, often due to power imbalances stemming from governmental or coercive entities. These experiences can also induce trauma (Fox et al. 2020; Baker, Bellemore & Morgan 2023).

Similarly, vulnerable populations are defined as groups of individuals who endure hardship as a result of combined socioeconomic, political, and cultural

factors that can lead to discrimination and marginalization, poverty, and inequality in accessing social services (Nyamathi & Koniak-Griffin 2007; Lewis, Martin & Guzman 2022). Among the most vulnerable are women, children, people with disabilities or illness, the very old and the very young, refugees, and racial, ethnic, and gender minorities (Nyamathi & Koniak-Griffin 2007; Lewis, Martin & Guzman 2022; González Campanella 2023).

This study further explores the *positionality* of interpreters working with vulnerable populations in fragile contexts. Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud (2019, 476–477) define positionality as "the perspective shaped by a person's class, race, gender, nationality, political and religious affiliations, sense of place in power hierarchies, and status," all of which ultimately influence how reality is perceived and transmitted. Traditional views of interpreters as mere conduits of information, as articulated by Roy (1993) and Wadensjö (1993), frame the interpreter as a channel or conduit, and this stereotype influences the interpreter's self-perception and the user's preconceptions, prejudices, and expectations towards them. The concept of positionality acknowledges the interpreter as part of the communicative act. Scholarship in the area of fragile contexts (Metzger 1999; Merlini & Favaron 2007; Hoedemaekers & Soeters 2009; Takimoto 2009) has described the interpreter as an active and adaptable participant, interlocutor, and author: they intervene to clarify aspects of the message or comply with requests for repetition (which has been proven to be highly recommendable in the field, see Jones & Askew 2014), add information (in the form of clarifications), or make selections (including both deliberate and unintended omissions, selecting information, or summarising it, see Hoedemaekers & Soeters 2009; Takimoto 2009).

In the context of field interpreting for Palestinian victims, the study examines how the positionality of the interpreter interacts with that of the stakeholders and members of the mission when emotions like *empathy* arise. Empathy, characterized as a vicarious emotion (Batson, Fultz & Schoenrade 1987) rooted in shared experiences and traits with other human beings (Valero-Garcés 2006), plays a role in field interpreting. Empathy is commonly understood as the ability to relate to another person, their feelings, situation, perception, and mindset, typically entailing a certain degree of emotional understanding

(Jeffrey & Downie 2016; Rosler, Cohen-Chen & Halperin 2017; Ballesteros Sanjorge 2018; Borrell Carrió 2018). Also of interest to this article is the concept of compassion, which is usually described as stemming from empathy. Whereas empathy is limited to a feeling of sensitivity in the face of another individual's suffering, *compassion* extends beyond empathy, encompassing a commitment to alleviating that suffering (Gilbert 2014).

The Palestinian population under examination in this research is arguably undergoing a form of historical trauma resulting from the conflict. Historical trauma refers to the collective trauma suffered by a social group with a common identity, with this trauma being passed down to future generations. In turn, the trauma engenders a collective psychosocial and emotional response to that situation, which is cohesive to the group (Borda Bohigas et al. 2015). The ongoing conflict creates a psychosocial and cultural reality and status quo that is reinforced by psychosocial and cultural structures. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stretching back several decades, these structures have become ingrained within successive generations, shaping the collective experience of the population. Empathy can serve as an entry point into this collective trauma for those who operate from an external perspective: those who hear the stories of victims of a conflict also become exposed to a story of the conflict itself (Bar-Tal 2007). Thus, bearing witness to the story of a conflict also entails experiencing the collective emotional response generated by its existence.

Given the aforementioned considerations, this article posits that field interpreting for Palestinian victims constitutes interpreting in a fragile context. Interpreters in this context work for victims of trauma and conflict-related experiences who live in an environment of oppression, aggression, systemic violence, and death, and are often deprived of resources (like their homes or financial means), needing humanitarian aid to survive. These victims feel a lack of control over their own lives, as a result of their trauma as well as the adverse physical conditions and socio-political and economic situation in the Occupied Territories.

The context of this study can also be described as involving vulnerable populations, since the stakeholders and beneficiaries of the international

missions, and hence the interpreting services, are often children, women, political prisoners, or injured people in hospitals. Typically, these beneficiaries live in poverty or face hardship: it is worth noting that "poverty . . . increased in the West Bank and Gaza from 25.8 to 29.2 percent between 2011 and 2016/2017" (World Bank 2020, 1).

For all these reasons, interpreting in field missions to the Occupied Territories presents a number of challenges that extend beyond linguistic and cultural barriers or inherent interpreting techniques. Of particular significance, are the ethical and psychological challenges that are related to the interpreter's positionality. The next section specifically reviews scholarship examining the deontological notion of neutrality juxtaposed with the experience of empathy in field interpreters in fragile contexts.

3. Neutrality, empathy, and the field interpreting practice in fragile contexts

Field interpreting for Palestinian victims, as discussed in this article, shows similarities with interpreting in humanitarian settings (i.e., refugee camps or asylum hearings preparation). However, unlike interpreters working directly for humanitarian organizations (e.g., NGOs), field interpreters are not bound by international humanitarian law. Nevertheless, concerning the interpreter's positionality, the ethical implications of their work, and the psychological impact of their involvement in fragile contexts, field interpreting for Palestinian victims bears resemblance to interpreting in humanitarian contexts: in both instances, the stakeholders and beneficiaries of the interpreting practice are often vulnerable populations. As acknowledged in literature on humanitarian contexts (Sande 1998; Kherbiche 2009; Moser-Mercer, Kherbiche & Class 2014; Todorova 2017; Moreno-Rivero 2018; Todorova 2019), the ethical implications of interpreting in such complex environments stand in contrast to the deontological standards typically associated with conference interpreting, which serve as the ethical benchmark for most interpreting practices, with community interpreting being the primary exception (Viezzi 2020). Consequently, any examination of field interpreting for Palestinian victims

must account for the distinct ethical implications and the interpreter's positionality.

Interpreting in the humanitarian field implies challenges that may cause deontological aspects of (traditional conference) interpreting practice to be overridden by the imperative of providing effective humanitarian assistance. For instance, the expectation of interpreter neutrality may sometimes be compromised to uphold the humanitarian principles of respect and humanity (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2019).

It is worth recognizing that there is lack of clarity as to what it really means to remain neutral in fragile contexts: does neutrality entail operating on the side-lines, independently from the members of a given mission or international delegation, investigators, or humanitarian workers? In actual practice, remaining neutral may sometimes hinder the interpreter's work, especially in situations requiring intercultural mediation. This hindrance often arises from a disconnect with the reality of the fragile context, preventing the interpreter from establishing connections with individuals (victims), events, and environments necessary for effective communication. Consequently, because of both the nature of the fieldwork and the interpreter's personal and professional background, it might be unfeasible for the interpreter to behave neutrally, as they would aspire to in conference interpreting (Rok & Valero-Garcés 2014), particularly when the interpreter is part of the local community (e.g., through cultural heritage) and feels personally invested in the context.

Empathy constitutes an affective component of the interpreter's work in fragile contexts and is based on the interpreter's ability to identify with the user (Valero-Garcés 2006; Ballesteros Sanjorge 2018). Indeed, in field interpreting in fragile contexts, empathy permeates the interpreter's performance, behaviour, mindset, decision-making, and self-image, largely influenced by the psychological and physical responses associated with empathising with trauma survivors (vulnerable populations in a conflict zone) (Hsieh & Nicodemus 2015; Rosler, Cohen-Chen & Halperin 2017). This influence is heightened when there is a shared identity, culture, and psychosocial background between the interpreter and the beneficiaries. Research on interpreting in conflict zones highlights the psychological toll of bearing

witness to stories of destruction and annihilation on interpreters (Spahić 2011; Ndongo Keller 2015). In missions and investigations into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is unsurprising for interpreters to find themselves unable to continue interpreting the testimonies of children and women who are victims of human rights violations due to the psychological and emotional impact of their accounts (Barea Muñoz 2021a).

Additionally, empathy plays a pivotal role in the intercultural mediation skills of interpreters working in fragile contexts (Radicioni 2020; Radicioni & Rosendo 2022). Intercultural mediation involves the interpreter's action to mediate between individuals belonging to different cultures (Guerrero Romera 2012), demanding specific skills, such as capacity for integration, flexibility, openness, respect for diversity, negotiation prowess, and sensitivity, among others (Beltrán Aniento 2013).

Beltrán Aniento (2013) further adds that, ideally, field interpreters in fragile contexts should possess a capacity for empathy; patience; improvisational skills to adapt to the changeable nature of communicative situations on the ground; a predisposition to fostering human connections; openness; and resilience to withstand high levels of stress. The need for such skills becomes evident when considering the prevalent sources of psychological stress among interpreters working in conflict-related contexts and scenarios: interacting in difficult situations with users with whom they share traits and can identify; engaging with victims of psychological trauma, explicit violence, or both; and facing powerlessness to act and help in an active way (Valero Garcés 2005).

Accordingly, when interpreting in fragile contexts, empathy is considered a positive emotion (Batson, Fultz & Schoenrade 1987). However, it can also give rise to negative emotions, such as frustration, helplessness, or stress, all of which are present in the case of interpreting in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Barea Muñoz 2021a). While these negative emotions stem from humanitarian, positive, empathetic feelings (including compassion), they arise due to the interpreter's self-perceived inability to offer active assistance to beneficiaries or stakeholders (Valero-Garcés 2006; Lor 2012). Additionally, the stress experienced by interpreters is not always the result of a physical threat, but rather a psychological (and physical) response to emotional disarrangements

driven by their relationship with the environment and the participants in the communicative process (Bierman & Kelty 2018).

Furthermore, field interpreters tend to find an empathetic attitude necessary to build rapport with the victim. This rapport is conducive to the victim sharing sensitive information that may otherwise remain undisclosed. By forging an emotional connection and understanding, interpreters cultivate mutual trust with victims (Hsieh & Nicodemus 2015). Nevertheless, interpreters frequently grapple with their positionality in such cases, pondering whether to adhere strictly to their theoretically neutral role or to adopt a more proactive approach to establish trust with stakeholders (Lor 2012).

Empathy (or the lack thereof) is closely intertwined with vicarious trauma, an inherent response to interacting with trauma survivors (Madrid & Schacher 2006), traditionally associated with burnout syndrome or compassion fatigue, both prevalent among community workers (Valero Garcés 2005; Valero-Garcés 2006). Interpreters' continued vicarious exposure to traumatic events often yields effects similar or equivalent to direct exposure (Bride 2004).

To sum up, the presence of empathy may pose ethical dilemmas for field interpreters (particularly regarding their neutrality) and challenges to their performance in fragile contexts. Nonetheless, it can also serve as a valuable tool when interpreting for vulnerable populations.

4. Methodology

The study presented in this article was conducted as part of a PhD thesis undertaken at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva (Barea Muñoz 2021a).

The primary data collection method employed semi-structured interviews with professional interpreters who, at the time of the interviews in 2018, were working or had worked in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the past 20 years. A total of eleven interviews were conducted (along with a pilot phase involving two preliminary interviews). Among these, five interviews were conducted with staff interpreters employed by an international organization,

while six interviews involved local freelance interpreters who frequently work for international organisations. All interpreters were women, predominantly Palestinian and some were Arab. For security reasons, additional personal and professional details of the interpreters must remain confidential.

All interpreters had received training in conference interpreting and possessed professional experience on the ground, particularly in human rights missions, such as fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry regarding Israeli practices and human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, mainly in the West Bank. These missions typically involve interviews conducted by international delegates with victims of alleged human rights violations, often children and women, torture victims, and people in prison and hospitals (Barea Muñoz 2021a).

The research method employed is inductive and iterative (Babbie 2001), following the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). It was designed as a case study, supplemented methodologically with elements of the phenomenological approach (Yin 2009; Zahavi 2019; Barea Muñoz 2021b). The interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized by the author until saturation was reached. These interviews are presented in the form of two paradigmatic narratives, crafted to obscure sensitive details and safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the population under study (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2018). One narrative was devised for each professional profile: the paradigmatic local freelancer and the paradigmatic staffer.

One limitation of the study arose due to logistical constraints, making it unfeasible to conduct interviews with the users of interpreting on the ground, including both stakeholders and members of the missions (e.g., delegates and other staffers working for international organizations). Such interviews would have been beneficial for understanding how the interpreter's display of empathy is perceived and its impact on the way information is conveyed by users. Furthermore, since the participants of the study were exclusively women, future research may consider including male participants to establish a comparative framework for the emotional response of female and male field interpreters in these scenarios. Finally, in view of the inherent limitations of a study based

solely on interviews and firsthand testimonies, future studies may find value in complementing these methods with ethnographic research. However, conducting ethnography in the region would pose challenges considering the current status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

5. Results

The results, presented here through the aforementioned paradigmatic narratives,[2] illustrate the internal conflict experienced by many of these interpreters (8/11) between adhering to their professionalism, as dictated by the code of ethics inherent to conference interpreting, and feeling or displaying what they perceive as excessive empathy or compassion: "you have to learn to control your emotions, of course; you have to learn to manage them in order to act professionally and not get involved" (Paradigmatic Freelancer). The majority of participants (9/11) also emphasise the need to establish rapport and trust with the victim or beneficiary, often achieved through active empathy. However, they simultaneously underscore the existence of an ethical and professional code that prioritizes neutrality and impartiality:

> I am aware that to interpret correctly it is necessary to maintain a balance between acting in a professional manner and establishing a degree of rapport and trust with the interviewee, which inevitably implies a degree of empathy, and this affects the way you see these people, there is a human connection. (Paradigmatic Freelancer)

However, achieving this balance can often prove challenging, to the extent that some interpreters (6/11) do not perceive themselves as neutral: "I know I have to act in a neutral way, but the truth is that I don't see myself as neutral"

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[2] All the statements included hereinafter are taken from the paradigmatic narratives. Fractions in brackets indicate how many of the eleven interpreters expressed that view.

(Paradigmatic Freelancer). This sentiment arises, in part, from the interpreters' perception that one of the parties in the communicative exchange is their employer and colleague: frequently, interpreters feel that the field interview is the product of collaborative effort by both the mission delegate (interviewer) and themselves: "on many occasions the feeling I get is that the session is run by both the delegate and myself, as if it were a collaboration" (Paradigmatic Freelancer).

The challenge of maintaining neutrality also arises from the content of the communication itself. As interpreters of victims of human rights violations, they are exposed to firsthand testimonies and experiences, some recounted by young women and little children: "there is content that cannot be interpreted in the traditional way, sometimes you choke on words or have to pause for tears" (Paradigmatic Staffer). Interpreters assimilate and rephrase the accounts of victims of torture, political prisoners in gaol, injured people in hospitals, parents who have lost their children, and people who have lost their entire family—they bear witness to the helplessness of the victims they interpret, wishing suddenly to care for them and help them. The majority of the victims interviewed endure severe forms of trauma, both physical and psychological, especially after the Second Intifada and after the 2008 and 2014 Gaza wars (5/11):

> On too many occasions I have to make a great effort to control myself and to remain professional in my role as an interpreter, and I think this is really difficult, simply because there comes a point when everything you see, witness, and above all hear from those who have lived these testimonies and experiences first-hand is so terrible, that it is difficult to remain neutral in this type of work, especially in the field. (Paradigmatic Freelancer)

In the face of such emotive content, many interpreters (7/11) exert significant effort to manage their emotions: "the most complex part of field work is how to manage your emotions" (Paradigmatic Staffer). They recognize that interpreting "correctly" requires striking a balance between acting professionally (understood as remaining completely neutral) and establishing a degree of trust with the interviewee. This trust inevitably

implies a corresponding degree of empathy: "it is clear that there is some kind of human bond. . . This is logical: to gain the trust and respect of others, you must first behave in a decent and respectful manner" (Paradigmatic Staffer). The perceived human bond influences how interpreters perceive the individuals they interpret, often fostering a sense of connection reinforced by a shared sociocultural background (6/11): "such harsh testimonies, with such detailed descriptions, with such vivid images, it is difficult not to think that this is happening to your fellow citizens, to the people who live in your country, who may be your neighbours, or friends of friends, or simply acquaintances" (Paradigmatic Freelancer). Despite feeling compelled to form a human connection, many interpreters (8/11) acknowledge that their role requires them to detach themselves from the situation, the individuals, and the stories being told, and refrain from becoming involved: "we are there to facilitate communication, not to help beyond that; not to get involved, in the sense that you have to stay true to the communication process and its purpose, to get the message across effectively" (Paradigmatic Staffer).

All the same, some of them (4/11) recognise that each case is unique, and that some cases are difficult to cope with. Cases involving children are especially distressing because the children recount how they became orphans, how their homes was destroyed, how they were treated in prison, or how they were tortured: "you think about it all, about the children and the families, and often you can't help but feel it, you can't help but empathise, because they are human beings with lives and families, and after all I am a human being too" (Paradigmatic Freelancer). Most of the interpreters (10/11) agree that, ultimately, they are all human beings, making it difficult for them not to think about their own children and families; it is challenging to serve as a mediator for someone who shares such intimate information without displaying some degree of empathy:

> They are human beings, sometimes children, who tell you how they have been orphaned or how their homes have been destroyed, how they have been tortured . . . It's hard not to think about your own children, your own family; it's hard to listen to those stories and not show any kind of empathy. (Paradigmatic Freelancer)

In summary, concerning the emotional and psychological impacts of the work of these interpreters, it is common for them to respond empathetically and compassionately, particularly considering that the victims often include women, children, or entire families. For the interpreters, such empathetic approach proves beneficial, as it fosters a sense of comfort in the beneficiary, encouraging them to share their experiences and allowing for information to be extracted during the mission interview. These feelings of empathy and compassion, however, may not solely arise due to shared sociocultural and identity backgrounds between the interpreter and the victim, but also because of the unsettling and traumatic nature of the messages that the interpreter must convey.

6. Discussion

When analysing the findings of the study, it becomes apparent that a high degree of empathy is one of the most prominent emotional responses experienced by interpreters working in the field with Palestinian victims, as depicted in both the narrative of the Paradigmatic Freelancer and the narrative of the Paradigmatic Staffer. They concur that the testimonies they interpret are notably distressing, often recounted by victims who are children and women, or the sole survivors of their entire families, detailing the origins and onset of their trauma.

In such communicative scenarios, interpreters commonly experience empathy and internalize the narrated experiences, leading to a vicarious emotional response. As described by the Paradigmatic Freelancer, interpreters transition from seeing figures to recognizing the individuals behind those figures, implying that it is challenging not to feel emotionally impacted when confronted with victims of human rights violations. This obligation to empathize stems from the interpreters' direct reception of the victim's firsthand accounts, which they then rephrase using the first person (Ndongo Keller 2015).

In field interpreting for Palestinian victims, it is worth underscoring the link between the repetitive nature of the fieldwork and the traumatic content to be interpreted, and the potential development of vicarious trauma (Butler 2008).

Indeed, in this context, interpreters are repetitively tasked with assimilating and conveying victim narratives which share distressing elements and recollections, possibly reflecting a collective social trauma. Being obliged to repeat essentially the same testimonies over and over again throughout successive field missions may lead interpreters to internalize someone else's traumatic experiences while simultaneously becoming desensitized to this kind of information. Such detachment serves as a coping mechanism against the psychological symptoms of an extremely empathetic emotional response.

For the Paradigmatic Freelancer, however, the stories she hears and retells hit close to home; after all, they come from members of the community to which she belongs. Consequently, detachment, as practiced by her staff counterpart, is more of an ideal than a reality in her interpretation process. Unlike the Paradigmatic Staffer, the Paradigmatic Freelancer remains embedded in the conflict upon returning home, making detachment more challenging for her to achieve. Similarly, the Paradigmatic Freelancer exhibits a blend of (1) empathy and a certain degree of compassion, and (2) desensitization and detachment, both as a result of the constant repetition of the same traumatic content, and as a coping mechanism to continue with the interpreting assignment. As outlined in Section 3, empathy and compassion are favourable components of the interpreting practice in this context (mainly as a method to build rapport with the victim), as well as unavoidable human responses to the psychosocial dimension of the interpreted accounts and testimonies. They are, as well, a result of the communicative situation and the competences of the interpreting technique itself, such as using the first person in dialogic exchanges.

The case of the Paradigmatic Staffer highlights how field interpreters naturally empathise with the victim and their accounts, given the frequency with which traumatic experiences are shared in this context. Nevertheless, a powerful sense of inevitability can be read in the Paradigmatic Staffer's attempt to define the relationship between her performance and the feeling of empathy that arises when working with victims of trauma. Her struggle to balance professionalism and emotion suggests that, even in fragile contexts, empathy is an inescapable, less-than-ideal condition or alteration of the

optimal interpreting technique. In contrast, the Paradigmatic Freelancer does not seem to bear this sense of inevitability when experiencing empathy, but rather acknowledges and accepts that there is an emotional dimension of field interpreting in these types of contexts. Her acceptance of emotion is probably because she assumes that the conflict will affect her work and professional life in the same way that, being herself a Palestinian, it affects her personal life and that of her family.

However, the fact remains that complete emotional detachment is an idealistic, far-from-reality approach to field interpreting for Palestinian victims. It is, therefore, to be expected that the interpreter will feel a sense of involvement in what she is interpreting. Empathy is an inherent human quality (Madrid & Schacher 2006), and, in some cases, its absence may entail several psycho-emotional implications. The way in which both paradigmatic interpreters face fieldwork implies that field interpreting for Palestinian victims is a not only a professional endeavour, but also a human, context-oriented, and participant-oriented activity.

Whilst the psychological impact suffered by the interpreter in field situations will likely depend on her personality traits and psycho-emotional background, it also depends on whether she is a local freelancer or a staffer: whereas the former never really leaves the context of the conflict, the latter physically leaves the area and may stay thousands of kilometres away from the conflict for months or even years. Inter performing in the field during the mission itself, or once the mission has ended and, in the case of the Paradigmatic Staffer, she is back home. Then, with more time and opportunity to recall and go over her past experiences, the interpreter reflects on what she has seen and heard. Reliving these experiences can partly be explained not only in terms of the human quality or connection inherent to the professional activity of field interpreting for Palestinian victims, but also in terms of belonging and shared background: although the Paradigmatic Staffer is not local and resides in Europe, she is part of the Arab community and culture and may easily find a common psychosocial ground, even the same identity space, with the stakeholders and beneficiaries.

The emotional reactions shown by the interpreters in this study match up with the mechanics of intergroup emotions, as defined by Halperin and

Schwartz (2010): even though these interpreters belong to a well-defined group (professional interpreters who work in the field in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), they identify themselves with another group to which they do not belong (victims of human rights violations investigated within the framework of international missions in the Occupied Territories), as they are all human beings that can relate to each other's experiences in the face of violence and injustice. Such identification may additionally manifest itself as a long-term sustained emotional response: for the Paradigmatic Staffer, missions are periodic and reoccur over time; for the Paradigmatic Freelancer, the conflict holds a constant presence in her personal and professional life. Indeed, many conferences in Palestine are organized as a consequence of the existence of the conflict.

In the same manner, this identification with another group occurs not only as a result of purely emotional or affective factors, but also due to factors such as the personality of the interpreter, her scale of values, her prejudices, her socioeconomic status, her religion, or her moral balance (Halperin & Schwartz 2010). Moreover, another relevant factor in the development of the interpreter's highly empathetic response is the degree of sociocultural closeness between the interpreter and the stakeholder. In this study, since there is a high degree of closeness between the interpreter and the beneficiary, the attitude of both the Paradigmatic Freelancer and the Paradigmatic Staffer is the result of a considerable exercise of empathy.

It is important to highlight that belonging to the same community as the victim does not inevitably involve the creation of a feeling of empathy or compassion in the field interpreter (Wolf 2016). The issue is more complex than a mere question of national, racial, or religious identity and, in fact, the presence or lack of empathy is usually motivated by factors that go beyond sharing a passport or a neighbourhood. The interpreter's identity and positionality are complex and conditioned by the full range of their experiences past and present, worldview, mindset, education, scale of values, prejudices, ideology, and beliefs (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud 2019); empathy cannot, therefore, be attributed to just one factor in this matrix.

The interpreter's positionality is of great significance in these contexts and presents the field interpreter as an active actor in the development of each communicative situation, in particular, and the whole fieldwork (and thus the success and aftermath of the international mission as a whole) in general. As an active, living part of the cultural and linguistic exchange, the field interpreter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether local or not, assimilates the information uttered by the victim while recounting it (Cavanna 2020). In so doing, the interpreter not only perceives and transmits a particular testimony and narrative, but also an overall perspective of the conflict. Recounting these perspectives influences their psychosocial status, since a psychological impact is generated as a consequence of vicarious emotion. Despite the widespread trauma and emotive contexts that field interpreters encounter, not all communicative situations in which the study's participants partake are inevitably traumatic. It is plausible that there is a certain inclination on the part of the field interpreter to recall their most difficult and psychologically traumatic and exhausting memories because they represent their most extraordinary deeds, perhaps to the detriment of the accounts of more ordinary (and therefore emotionally flat) experiences.

In any case, both the Paradigmatic Freelancer and the Paradigmatic Staffer admit that reinforcing a feeling of empathy with the segments of the local population with whom they maintain on-the-ground contact facilitates the mission's investigative work during the interviews with victims of human rights violations, which in turn helps the beneficiary to report their situation. The decision to reinforce empathy is an example of the multipartiality and teleological ethics on the part of the field interpreter, as her decision-making pattern is based on a fluctuating partiality that bounces from one party and the other, depending on what the mission needs at that given moment in order to be successful (Barea Muñoz 2021a).

Just like the other members of an international delegation, the field interpreter working for Palestinian victims, whether local or not, must eventually position themselves on the stakeholder's side to create rapport—in order to benefit the interests of one party (the mission and the employer),

it is also necessary to benefit the interests of the other (the victims, who in theory are the beneficiaries of the mission). Building rapport is particularly relevant, as one of the main assets to obtain the information that drives the development of the field mission is to show a certain level of empathy towards those who possess and could share said information. As the results of this study indicate, in line with Krystallidou et al. (2018), the empathetic performance of the interpreter, together with that of the rest of the members of the mission, can help establish a human connection with the victim and generate a dynamic of mutual trust. In so doing, the odds of the victim sharing true information confidently and cooperatively increase, along with the quality of communication. To sum up, communication is the product of collaborative effort between all the parties in the communicative act (delegate, interpreter, and beneficiary). These parties bear the responsibility of creating an environment that allows the mission to make the most of an encounter of such a delicate nature.

A final aspect to consider is how field interpreters for Palestinian victims learn to cope with the context in which they work. In this context, both the Paradigmatic Freelancer and the Paradigmatic Staffer have had to fend for themselves and exercise a very particular type of self-learning that is not usually addressed in most interpreting courses: emotional training. For the participants in this study, this training takes place on the job, aligning with Engeström's (1987) theory of expansive learning, by which new knowledge is incorporated through experience and without prior training. At present, there is no preparatory framework covering field interpreting for vulnerable populations in fragile contexts, the prevalence of vicarious trauma (Butler 2008), and the complexities of benefitting from empathy as a work tool (Krystallidou et al. 2018). Consequently, the only way the field interpreter can learn to adapt emotionally and respond to the communicative situations in which they intervene is through repeated exposure to stimuli and events. This act of learning is often complemented by sharing knowledge with other professionals and by the interpreter's inclusion in communities of practice (see Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015).

7. Conclusion

The first goal of this article was to assess the incidence of empathy in the field interpreter when working with vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The results show that the incidence of empathy in the field interpreter working for Palestinian victims is quite significant. Field interpreters are human beings, not just mere linguistic mediators detached from the situations in which they intervene. Consequently, it is natural that they feel empathy as part of a wide range of emotions arising from sharing a psychosocial background with the beneficiary of the interpreting service. The field interpreter is not only affected by the conflict because they have a relationship to it; their psychology and the nature of their performance are also affected because they repeatedly assimilate and reproduce the traumatic content of the communicative exchange.

The article set out to further investigate how empathy manifests within the field interpreter's psychological and emotional sphere. In this sphere, empathy manifests itself both as a hindrance and as a useful tool for the purpose of communication, in particular, and, in general, the mission (i.e., investigating alleged Israeli human rights violations in the Occupied Territories and conducting interviews with the victims of said violations). According to the ethical principles that govern the practice of interpreting, empathy is not an emotion which can be explicitly shown. However, these principles are based on the deontological code of conference settings and, in many instances, are not applicable to field interpreting. In ethical terms, an empathetic response can lead to an internal conflict within the field interpreter, particularly around the issue of neutrality. Interpreters are torn between their self-perception, which is concerned with an arguably unattainable professional ideal, and their actual performance, which stems from a teleological ethical standpoint as a consequence of the needs of the situation and the objective of the mission as a whole.

Despite this ethical tension, empathy is a useful way to obtain vital information from the stakeholder or beneficiary of the mission. Since missions are usually based on interviews with victims, their success relies on that information being delivered. In such a context, the field interpreter can take advantage of

their feelings of empathy towards the victim in order to create rapport and an atmosphere of mutual trust, allowing the victim to feel comfortable and confident and, subsequently, more prone to sharing the kind of information that is, for most of the part, highly sensitive and traumatic.

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