

# **Teleworking Translators during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Social and Personal Experiences from Iran**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The year 2020 witnessed the COVID-19 Pandemic, with consequences for translators who had no choice but to turn to teleworking. This study set out to explore the lived experiences of translators turning to teleworking during the Pandemic and is therefore indirectly relevant to translator training. The qualitative study involved 6 participants recruited through criterion sampling from a Telegram group of translators in Iran. Recorded voices were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by conventional content analysis. The results reflected the participants' social and personal experiences during the pandemic. A unified set of themes was framed into social and personal aspects, and compensatory strategies. In conclusion, we suggest that translator training must empower translators with the psychological capital required to face these challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19 pandemic; personal experience; qualitative research; social interaction; teleworking, translators.

## **1. Introduction**

The global COVID-19 outbreak and its impacts have been labeled as one of the most challenging problem for human beings. Apart from the impact of this pandemic on healthcare conditions, the global economy and job markets have suffered all around the world. Among various jobs, one, which has been affected by the pandemic is translation and/or interpretation (Ludvigsen, 2020). Similarly, many translators in Iran, a large Middle Eastern country with a remarkable market for translators, have suffered negative impacts from the COVID-19 outbreak since strict occupational regulations have been imposed on institutes and businesses due to a myriad of uncontrollable COVID-19 cases. This challenge will affect translator training in the future.

Stress can exert negative impacts on social life and on jobs (Sandi & Haller 2015). In this regard, translation and interpreting are inherently stressful jobs as practitioners face a great deal of pressure in their jobs (Korpala, 2016). A short scan of the literature showed that the relationship between translation/interpreting as occupations with stress, pressure and working conditions has been widely investigated (e.g. Dean and Pollard, 2001; McCartney, 2003; Schwenke et al., 2014). The findings of these studies stress the fact that stress and working conditions could negatively affect translators' performance and their working conditions (Baistow, 2000). The stresses and pressures on translators/interpreters seem to have been deteriorating throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, this critical condition has jeopardized their work as a result of the fear of losing or harming their occupation (Chaillou and Van Der Kallen, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic is creating novel experiences, not previously investigated in relation to translators' working environments, this area of research will deserve more attention from researchers. A cursory look at the related literature showed that there are no studies on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on translators' and interpreters' working conditions in Iran. Due to the fact that COVID-19 outbreak has cast uncertainty on the future job market for translation, this study was conducted to investigate the views of translators' teleworking in Iran due to the COVID-19 outbreak by addressing this question: how did the COVID-19 outbreak affect Iranian translators' working conditions?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### *2.1 Design*

The study intended to discover the mental experiences of translators who turned to teleworking following the COVID-19 pandemic through a qualitative approach to elicit and describe human experiences and summarize translators' teleworking experiences in Iran. This research method is mostly applied to discover themes and patterns in verbal responses. A qualitative approach is also an appropriate technique for achieving valid and dynamic results because it offers a deeper understanding of the respondents' experiences and shapes new lines of thought (Willig, 2008). This research letter accordingly focuses on the distinction between social and personal impacts of Covid 19 on translators' working conditions. It points towards the need for appropriate training, especially in developing adequate compensatory strategies.

## 2.2 Participants

The participants included 6 (3 male and 3 female) professional translators who were forced into teleworking with clients during the COVID-19 lockdown. They all had office-based experience before the pandemic and turned to teleworking after the lockdown. They worked in translation offices with 5 to 15 accredited translators. In terms of their means of transportation, they all used public transportation to get to their work. They used public transport, as the price is very reasonable in Iran (50 cent per day). In terms of educational background and translation experience, they had BA and MA Translation Studies degrees with translating experience ranging between 5 - 14 years. After the fifth interview, the researchers felt that the participants had provided enough information and the study was reaching data saturation point. The six participants' ages ranged from 27 to 42 years. As this study dealt with their translation experience and works not their translation competence, age was not regarded as a relevant variable. Once the sixth interview was completed, we agreed that we were at the point of data saturation; terminating the interview process as more interviews would have resulted in data redundancy. (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2014).

Table 1: Participants in the study

Participant Codes	Pseudo-Names	Gender	Age	Degree	Expertise	Experience (years)	
						Total	Office-based
P1F	Arezoo	Female	34	MA	Translation Studies	8	2
P2F	Maryam	Female	42	MA	Translation Studies	10	3
P3F	Parisa	Female	27	BA	Translation Studies	5	2
P4M	Farhad	Male	35	MA	Translation Studies	11	6
P5M	Farzad	Male	42	BA	Translation Studies	14	14
P6M	Omid	Male	32	MA	Translation Studies	13	6

**Note:** Each participant's words are phrased to match the narrative results, and their codes (see below) are cited in parentheses.

## 2.3 Procedure

This study used a criterion sampling procedure for participant recruitment (Dornyei, 2007). The participants must have had some years of translation experience in translation offices, turned into teleworking due to COVID 19, have studied Translation Studies at University level, and still should be working as accredited translators from home. In December 2020, a message was sent to a Telegram (a popular messaging software and platform in Iran) group

of translators in Iran in order to recruit interviewees. The notice explicitly stated the aims of the study and requested volunteers to contact the authors in private. Out of 30 volunteers, 9 were found eligible for interview because they had office-based translation experience before the COVID-19 lockdown, while the rest were already teleworking even before the pandemic. Inclusion criteria were being a full-time translator in Iran, turning to teleworking only because of COVID-19 lockdown, and willingness to participate in the study.

## *2.4 Interviews*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews regarding the impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on teleworking translators' social and personal lives. Each interview lasted about 15-30 minutes using the Telegram application. The interviewees were requested to record their voice in a noise-free environment. The semi-structured one-off interview was selected as it allowed the "the elicitation of perceptions, beliefs, or motive" (Angelelli & Baer 2016:236). Before the interview started, they were informed of the aims and procedure of the interview. Regarding research ethics, informed consent was taken into consideration. The interviewees were given permission to leave the interview process at any stage. They were ensured that once the research process is finished, the audio files would be discarded. It is worth mentioning that the interview questions, developed by the researchers, were given to three experts for verification who suggested some modifications in terms of the length, format and types of questions. Their suggestions were all applied. In addition, the questions were simultaneously piloted to one person. After collecting the expert opinion and the pilot study results, modifications were made. The language of the interview was Persian as it is the native and formal language in Iran and the interviewees felt more comfortable to express their opinions in Persian. Before the interview process commenced, the interviewer explained the goals of the study at length and in detail and ensured the interviewees of data confidentiality.

This study focused on 6 questions for the interview process. The first question was introductory, to glean information about demographic information, work and the work place in terms of social interaction. The second question was about the time the translators turned to teleworking. The third question was on the impacts of teleworking on social work and work telecommunicating. The fourth was about the impacts of teleworking on mental well-being. The fifth question was about their satisfaction with the teleworking situation. The last question asked if the participants wanted to add anything.

The interview process therefore began by warm-up and preliminary questions on the participants' demographic characteristics such as age, educational background and job experiences. At the end, the interviewees were asked to make any additional points, if necessary. Each participant's recorded answers were investigated by both authors, and notes were taken for further analysis; if the answers were found to be clear and complete, the interview was terminated. If necessary, more questions that are exploratory were asked. All interviewees willingly cooperated if further queries were required.

## *2.5 Data Analysis*

The interviewees determined a convenient time for interviews. The audio files of the interviews were saved onto a computer; the authors listened to recorded interviews several times and noted significant points; they were summarized and analyzed by conventional content analysis, which relies on a subjective interpretation of the written text through regular categorization and coding of the themes. After reading the notes, the researchers came up with a provisional model; themes were extracted, key ideas were highlighted, and various codes were categorized based on their interrelationships. The validity of the data was confirmed by using various strategies, including peer-check techniques. In the peer-evaluation technique, the authors performed the coding and classifying stages separately, but a discussion was held to reach consensus and to resolve cases of digressions.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 Interview Analysis*

As stated earlier, the interviews began with an introduction, which provided information about the social and personal impact of COVID-19 on the work of a translator. Almost all participants mentioned an acceptable amount of social interaction in their workplace although several referred to minimum interactions rather than "deep sociability" as (Reich & Bearman, 2018). (P1F, P3F, P5M, P6M); for instance, they expressed that a normal office-based working day started with greetings, wishing a good day for co-workers, talking about the duties of the day and week with the boss, tea-time conversations, providing occupational advice, etc. (P1F, P2F, P3F, P5M). This distinction between normal and deep sociability has implications for translator training. Translator training needs to prepare translators to appreciate normal social interaction in the workplace as well as being prepared to find compensatory strategies if forced to work

from home. The respondents seemed to be quite aware of the nature of their job and its requirements. However, what changed their routine work was the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown of offices, which drove them to opt for teleworking because of the risks of COVID-19 infection (P3F); they expressed missing their office environment. The focus of the study was on their views and experiences of social and personal changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the interviews dwelled on two major points: social and personal concerns; accordingly, a detailed overview of their responses will be presented below.

### *3.2 The Social Aspect*

The interviewees stated that they were missing the minimum social interaction at the workplace and wished that public-health scientists would soon terminate the virus spread, so that they could resume office-work and social habits, such as birthday parties (P1F). Referring to disadvantages of the situation, they contended that the pandemic had deprived them of social interaction particularly after the lockdown of offices and businesses (P1F, P2F, P3F, P4M, P5M, and P6M). Opportunities for creativity, some interviewees believed, decrease if a translator is confined to the home environment (P3F, P4M). While two of them, particularly the interpreters (P1F and P4M), complained of this situation, some referred to advantages and explained that office lockdown had provided them with opportunities to work for longer hours at home and increase their income (P2F, P3F). They even talked about the ease and comfort for both translators and clients because of a flexible work schedule (P6F); they believed that they could adjust their work and rest patterns (P1F). Some of them stated that they had more free time for watching TV, surfing the web and social media (P2F, P4M). A major gain they referred to was that they had enough time to spend with family members, who were indeed ignored during normal working time (P6M). However, expectations to help with domestic duties had increased, which is incongruent with translators' unlimited working hours at home (P3F). Before the pandemic, fatigue due to office-work or public transport and family burden at the same time (P2F) had implications for family members because they were tired and needed rest at home; however, the current situation did not allow the translators this excuse (P2F).

### *3.3 The Personal Aspect*

As for the personal aspect, translators referred to both the advantages and disadvantages of the situation. For instance, they stated that life had lost its attractiveness (P1F), depression became dominant (P2F), and their optimal output declined after a while (P3F). Advantages were also mentioned as the reduced costs of transport (P2F, P4M, P6M), and more time for self-development (P4M). However, the participants were concerned about their mental balance during teleworking (P1F, P4M, and P6M). Some interviewees found the lockdown gave them an opportunity to plan for the future (P3F). As for their personal inclinations, none of the participants showed an interest in teleworking as a permanent occupational alternative; some however felt a partial teleworking schedule can complement office-based work (P4M). They referred to maximized productivity but endangered creativity if the lockdown was likely to continue such as translation office advertisements to attract more customers, which are going viral in Iran. (P2F, P5M).

### *3.4 Translators' Compensatory Strategies*

Participants in the study also mentioned their strategies for dealing with some of the undesirable effects of the lockdown of offices due to COVID-19 pandemic. They admitted that nothing can replace face-to-face interaction (P1F, P5M), particularly in resolving misunderstandings between a translator and a client (P4M). Therefore, they sought ways to compensate for minimized social interaction, such as calling the clients and colleagues, sending and requesting voice messages, making audio and video calls instead of relying on short messages (P1F, P2F, P3F, P4M, P5M, and P6M). To deal with problems threatening their mental health and personal wellbeing, they adopted the following as effective strategies: self-development strategies such as studying articles and books (P4M), skills development (P5M), attending online workshops (P2F), planning online teaching (P2F), adding leisure to their daily schedule, watching favorite movies and series, looking for new hobbies (P2F), doing simple exercises at home, and occasionally going to nature and nearby parks (P3F).

## **4. Conclusion**

The present study was conducted to explore translators' views on the experience of teleworking and the home office in Iran due to the COVID-19 outbreak by addressing this question: how did COVID-19 outbreak affect Iranian translators' working conditions? The qualitative

analysis of their interviews showed three dimensions: the social and personal advantages and disadvantages of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as compensatory strategies. The results are in line with those of a survey conducted by the European Writers Council (2020) which demonstrated the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the work of writers and translators. In addition, the results of this study were in line with those of Baker (2020) which attested the negative impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on translators. However, studies referring to strategies compensating for these negative effects or studies reporting translators' positive opinion of the lockdown to work more efficiently at home are not found.

Unlike quantitative studies, the present qualitative research generated ideas for further research and explored the lived experiences of the participants from their own perspectives in Iran. In this short research letter, we have tried to take the readers' attention towards the possible role of translators' workplace psychology and personality types in critical conditions such as COVID-19 pandemic; the importance of maintaining social interaction at work as part of the characteristics of the job of translators. Translator trainers and educators in translation studies may need to consider developing psychological capital and well-being in translators too. We suggest quantitative or qualitative studies on emerging issues such as translators' workplace interactions, family status, and psychological variables.

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