

Interpreting, Trauma and Disaster in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand: A Decade of Learnings

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ABSTRACT

The city of Ōtautahi Christchurch in Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced a succession of disasters over the last decade. Two groups which have worked with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities before, during and after these disasters are the Community Languages Information Network Group (CLING) and Interpreting New Zealand. This paper sets out these groups' key learnings in regards to the complex issue of interpreting experiences of trauma and disaster. In particular, the paper highlights the risks of not engaging professional interpreters in such situations, and underscores the importance of providing interpreters with training that emphasises wellbeing and self-care alongside language skills and ethical considerations (Crezee et al. 2015:77; O'Brien et al. 2018:630; Jaeger et al. 2019:9; Labaf et al. 2019:4; Lai & Costello 2020:70-85;). The paper discusses implications from these learnings, both for language service providers (LSPs) and for agencies that engage their interpreters.

KEYWORDS: Christchurch, disaster, interpreting, trauma, wellbeing

Introduction

The city of Ōtautahi Christchurch in Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced a succession of disasters over the last decade, including major earthquakes in 2010-11, flooding and wildfires, terror attacks in two mosques in 2019, and COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions from 2020. These disasters have impacted the city's residents psychosocially and economically. These impacts may be exacerbated for people from non-dominant cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, who need to not only process the trauma of these events in the context of their own potentially traumatic histories, but also negotiate language barriers and service provision which may lack critical cultural competency (Bonar and Roberts 2006; Hale 2019; Kletečka-Pulker et al. 2019; Rajpoot et al. 2020). The role of effective professional interpretation is thus critical in such situations in order to avoid (re)traumatising affected individuals.

Two groups which have experience working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)¹ communities in Christchurch are the Community Languages Information Network Group (CLING) and Interpreting New Zealand (INZ). CLING was established after the especially devastating February 2011 earthquake to advocate for improved communication with and information for CALD communities, and has continued this work across the past decade. INZ, a national non-governmental organisation, provides interpreting services to agencies requiring language support. This paper draws on the groups' experience to outline practitioner/operational learnings in relation to interpreting trauma and disaster, both for language service providers (LSPs) and agencies which engage their interpreters.

Literature review

Communicating effectively with CALD communities before, during and after disaster is important for both LSPs and agencies which engage their interpreters. For LSP-engaging agencies, professional interpreters help ensure quality communication, avoid misunderstanding and counter bias (Karlner et al. 2007). LSPs bear responsibility for recognising the vulnerability of professional interpreters when working in traumatic settings or with traumatic material (Bontempo and Malcolm 2012), and for responding appropriately to preclude vicarious trauma—trauma which can result from indirect or 'second-hand'

¹ CALD groups include migrants and refugees from Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and African backgrounds. Many issues faced by these communities, including those in relation to communication, will also be experienced by Māori and Pasifika communities.

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exposure to an event —and maintain interpreters' wellbeing (Lai and Costello 2020). Professional interpreting can be an inherently stressful occupation involving linguistic demands, environmental demands based on the setting, interpersonal demands from the participants in the communication process, and physical and psychological intrapersonal demands (Kruz 2003; Dean and Pollard 2001).

Professional interpreters and members of CALD communities in disasters

Language plays a central role in helping people understand each other and meet their needs. Professional interpreters help clients and service providers communicate effectively (Rajpoot et al. 2020). After a disaster event, they help ensure accurate verbal communication between survivors and support staff, and relay culturally-specific information to facilitate the most appropriate response (Moser-Mercer et al. 2014; Salama-Carr 2018; Rajpoot et al. 2020).

Timely and effective communication between stakeholders is essential to disaster mitigation, preparedness and response (Lindell et al. 2007). Moreover, people from CALD communities may have an increased need to access information in order to reduce their vulnerability to disaster risk (Kelman 2018; O'Brien et al. 2018). A lack of language comprehension can result in critical post-disaster challenges for these communities, including not knowing how to access basic services or prevent health-related issues (Jaeger et al. 2019), or providing 'inaccurate' responses to questions (e.g., relating to medication or medical treatment) (Jacobs et al. 2001; Hampers and McNulty 2002; Flores 2005; Sultanic 2021). Further, an inability to communicate can exacerbate the disorientation, stress and panic of the post-disaster environment. This situation can make it difficult or impossible to understand information and alerts without a professional interpreter (Jacobs et al. 2001; Hampers and McNulty 2002; Flores 2005) and increases the risk of trauma both at the time and in the longer term (Gard 2009). Without trauma-informed interpreting, i.e., interpreting which acknowledges the effects of trauma, and empowers and gives autonomy to the client (Bancroft and Allen 2018; González Campanella 2022), people from CALD communities may be re-traumatised (Bamford 1991; Jacobs et al. 2001; Hampers and McNulty 2002; Flores 2005; Crezee et al. 2011).

These challenges show that limited language proficiency is directly associated with increased vulnerability, highlighting the need for communication and relational strategies that service the diverse groups across the population (Kreisberg et al. 2016).

Exposure to trauma and interpreter care/wellbeing

Interpreters can be exposed to emotionally demanding situations, including trauma and/or disaster scenarios, for example interpreting for a client who has experienced sexual harm or interpreting for an individual who has lost their family in a natural disaster. Interpreting in these settings presents many challenges, and the interpreter's status and background, history of trauma, training and professional standards and ethics can exacerbate distress (Crezee et al. 2011; Nilsen 2015). Other factors heighten the impact of interpreting under traumatic circumstances, including having to keep information confidential when other support is unavailable, not feeling valued in the workplace, and a lack of training to deal with emotional issues (Rajpoot et al. 2020).

Previous studies have demonstrated that professional interpreters experience some emotional and psychological impact, on a continuum from minimal distress lasting for a day or two, to long-term emotional distress, burnout, compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma —significant long-term costs to an interpreter's cognitive, physical, psychological, emotional and/or spiritual wellbeing (Baistow 1999; Muller et al. 2019; Rajpoot et al. 2020). According to Lai and Heydon (2015), the degree of distress depends upon the type of traumatic situation and the number of hours each week that the interpreters work in traumatic circumstances. This distress can affect both the professional and personal lives of interpreters (Doherty et al. 2010), including their ability to 'hear' the client (Tehrani 2007). Some studies, however, have reported positive impacts for interpreters working in these situations, including an increase in desire to help others, and understanding of self and others (Splevins et al. 2010; Green et al. 2012; Sultanic 2021).

The literature reports on numerous coping strategies (personal, cognitive, emotional, physical and interpersonal) used by professional interpreters to protect themselves from the negative effects of interpreting in traumatic circumstances and to maintain their composure and neutrality (Lai and Costello 2020). These strategies include self-regulation of behaviour and feelings; understanding the boundaries of one's role as specified in a code of ethics; using learned coping mechanisms such as spending time alone, meditation, physical exercise and turning to faith; self-medication; detachment from the issue; and, interpersonal support through friends, colleagues and therapists (Holmgren 2003; Butler 2008; Splevins et al. 2010; McDowell et al. 2011; Green et al. 2012; Lai and Heydon 2015; Sultanic 2021).

Many studies have discussed the lack of structural support for professional interpreters who work in traumatic circumstances, including a lack of peer support, debriefing sessions and professional supervision (Lipton et al. 2002; Miller et al. 2005; Doherty et al. 2010; Green et al. 2012; Prentice et al. 2014; Amato and Mack 2015). Moreover, these studies advocate for more training for professional interpreters focussing on: the emotional aspects of professional interpreting work; the signs of and possible responses to vicarious trauma; advice on how to support vulnerable people; and, ethical questions of quality and accuracy, neutrality and bias, fairness and marginalisation (Granger and Baker 2003; Holmgren et al. 2003; Butler 2008; Butow et al. 2010; McDowell et al. 2011; Bontempo and Malcolm 2012; McKee 2014; Moser-Mercer et al. 2014; Lai and Heydon 2015; Hansen-Easey et al. 2018; Sultanic 2021). Researchers have also advocated for self-care focused on all aspects of professional interpreters' wellbeing: physical, emotional, spiritual, financial and social (Bontempo and Malcolm 2012; Crezee et al. 2015).

Background

Context

Over the past decade, Christchurch has experienced a number of disasters. On 4 September 2010, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake triggered a seismic sequence which lasted more than two years. It also included a devastating aftershock on 22 February 2011, which killed 185 people, injured thousands of others, and caused widespread damage (Potter et al. 2015), as well as two other major aftershocks in June and December 2011. Other natural disasters included widespread flooding in 2014 and again in 2021, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in the seaside town of Kaikōura (200 km to the north of Christchurch) in November 2016, and wildfires in Christchurch's Port Hills in early 2017. In addition to these, terrorist attacks on two mosques in 2019 resulted in the death of 51 people and many more injured. Along with the rest of the world, Christchurch has experienced lockdowns and other restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. Thus, within a relatively short space of time, the city has gone through repeated upheaval encompassing extremely significant natural, manmade and health disasters.

CLING

Established in the aftermath of the February 2011 earthquake, the Community Language Information Network Group (CLING) is a network of central and local government, health

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and CALD service provision agencies. Its vision is that “All communities have equitable access to public information and services, and the ability to communicate and participate in society” (CLING n.d.). It advocates for accessible and comprehensible information for all, including through the use of professional interpreters, translated materials and ethnic media (media produced by and/or for CALD communities). CLING members have been involved in the response and recovery phases of the various disasters which have occurred in Christchurch. With the succession of disasters over the decade, this has often meant supporting CALD communities through ‘past’ disasters while simultaneously working through ‘present’ disasters.

The group’s *Best Practice Guidelines* (CLING 2012) reflect on its experiences and observations of communication with CALD communities over the earthquake period, and stress the importance of establishing relationships before disaster occurs. The 2021 updated *Guidelines* emphasise that best practice should reflect that the barriers to effective communication that CALD communities experience during times of disaster (and across different types of disaster) are very often the same as during times of normalcy (CLING 2021).

Interpreting New Zealand

Interpreting New Zealand (INZ) is a nationwide not-for-profit organisation that provides onsite and remote (telephone and video) interpreting services in the community sector. Incorporated in 1993, it employs some 300 INZ-trained interpreters, of which 70 are based in Christchurch. In 2021, it organised about 4,000 interpreting jobs in 48 different languages in the Canterbury region, with the highest numbers of requests for Farsi, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Korean. The large majority (approximately 78%) of these requests were in the medical setting, and the rest were provided to agencies like the New Zealand Police, the Ministry of Justice and other service providers.

Since its inception, INZ has been aware of the need to offer training and support to its staff so that they can manage the many challenges interpreters face in their work. Candidate interpreters must complete an in-house, 50-hour introductory course which covers interpreting techniques, aspects of cross-cultural communication, and ethics. All interpreting staff are offered free ongoing professional development seminars and workshops, as well as regular forums and supervision sessions, and can access free counselling through its Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

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INZ also delivers short trainings to agencies that regularly engage interpreter services (e.g., Red Cross, hospitals, Police) on how to best work with an interpreter and communicate with CALD community members with no or limited English proficiency. Emphasis is placed on why and when trained interpreters are needed, and how to best manage interpreter-mediated interactions.

Learnings

CLING and INZ have been working with CALD communities before, during and after the disasters in Christchurch. In this section, learnings in relation to interpreting are considered. We describe the risks that can occur when agencies either fail to provide interpreted (or translated) messaging, or engage ad hoc interpreters. We then outline INZ practices and training for professional interpreters, which focus not only on the development of language transfer skills but also self-care and peer support.

The importance of engaging professional interpreters in trauma and disaster situations

In its original *Best Practice Guidelines*, CLING (2012) identified a number of key barriers to effective communication during the 2010-11 earthquakes: emergency information was not always produced in plain English; one-size-fits-all messaging was not necessarily readily understood by groups from a diverse range of cultures and background experiences; very few key messages were being translated; and professional interpreters were not being used.

CLING believed that agencies needed to better connect with local CALD communities so they could build capability to appropriately tailor messages, distribute information and assist with the recovery efforts both within their own communities and the broader community.

These concerns have endured through the years, despite significant differences between the various disasters and their responses, increasing engagement of professional interpreters by service providers during times of ‘normalcy’, and relatively widespread dissemination of disaster ‘lessons learned’. Most critically, the interpretation (and translation) of key messaging is often very delayed (CLING 2020) or not noticeably factored in at all (e.g., INZ

records show no increase in interpreting requests in the three months following either the earthquakes, mosque attacks or 2020 lockdown).²

CLING has observed significant risks when information is not interpreted (or translated) into languages other than that of the dominant culture. One example relates to non-English speakers fishing off Christchurch's New Brighton Pier after the February 2011 earthquake, next to a sign (in English) warning of water contamination. English-language-only signage was again visible in 2021, after widespread flooding caused sewage to seep into Christchurch's waterways (Figure 1).

Figure 1: 2021 floods signage at the banks of the Ōpāwaho Heathcote River, Christchurch



Yet a lack or delay of information is not the only risk that can result from failing to engage professional interpreters after a disaster event. Across all disasters, CLING witnessed agencies reacting to the pressures and uncertainties of the moment by engaging family or community members as ad hoc interpreters. While engaging ‘citizen interpreters’ or ‘translators’ may have some benefit, particularly in terms of empowering bilingual locals, this practice should be used minimally and should include at least some rudimentary training (Federici and Cadwell 2018). The pressure and uncertainty of disaster render the use of professional interpreters especially imperative (Leanza 2010; Abbato et al. 2018; Saigal

² While INZ is not the only interpreting agency operating in Christchurch, we might have expected to see increased requests for interpreters, especially from mental health services or New Zealand Police, given the impact of these events.

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2021). Otherwise, agencies place the burden of passing on potentially critical, life-saving messages —or alternatively, upsetting messages, or key information about government entitlements, etc. —onto people untrained for such work. This practice introduces the risk that the message may not be adequately or wholly conveyed, or that the message may not remain confidential. The practice also places ad hoc interpreters at risk from: the possibility of loss of face and reprisal from their communities if they fail to convey the correct message; exposure to (vicarious) trauma; and the pressures associated with knowing (and potentially (un)consciously disclosing) private information about other community members.

There is also the risk that in engaging a community member as an ad hoc interpreter, agencies may inadvertently undermine community norms or exacerbate tensions within communities such as those based on gender, age, ethnic group or tribe. In engaging professional interpreters (i.e., individuals who have undergone formally recognised training to carry out such work), agencies can avoid this issue to a large degree. Similarly, engaging professional interpreters will likely ameliorate the cultural competency which agencies bring to their communication with CALD communities. This cultural competency is key to ensuring an effective and respectful relationship between agency and community. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the terror attacks, CLING witnessed how poor communication practices stemmed as much from a lack of understanding about Islam and Islamic practices as from language barriers. One example we noted was male staff members wanting to greet female Muslim victims with a handshake or console them by touching their arm, unaware that Islam prohibits this physical contact between sexes. Such situations bring their own risks. An inadvertent cultural *faux pas* could be construed by community members as a lack of sensitivity, which could in turn negatively impact the viability of the agency-community relationship and/or potentially re-traumatise victims.

This issue of trauma constitutes a final reason why agencies need to engage professional interpreters for disaster work: interpreting someone's disaster story can be difficult and upsetting, and can trigger emotional responses in the person doing the language transfer. Professional interpreters may identify with affected communities and likely feel the impacts of disaster as acutely as everyone else. However, unlike ad-hoc interpreters, they may be able to access support structures through their employment such as mentoring, peer-to-peer support and counselling if required. Further, some professional interpreters may have access to specialised training to help them deal with this trauma —although, in reality, there remains

a need for culturally appropriate, trauma-informed training across the interpreting sector in Aotearoa (González Campanella 2022).

The importance of training professional interpreters for trauma and disaster situations

Professional interpreters are expected to deliver accurate interpreting, remain impartial, and preserve the dignity and confidentiality of their clients (Karlner et al. 2007; Moser- Mercer et al. 2014; Salamar-Carr 2018; Rajpoot et al. 2020). To carry out this role, interpreters require a solid understanding of and adherence to ethical principles, which is why ethics are emphasised in the INZ introductory course. Equally, interpreters need to know how to manage the emotional burden that can result from relating violent or upsetting stories. We have noticed that interpreters can be differently affected by traumatic content: for example, jobs can be emotionally much harder for interpreters who share similar distressing or challenging circumstances as their clients, or are members of the same community. This issue was especially obvious following the mosque attacks, when ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities felt especially upset and fearful. Further, some interpreters appear to feel trauma more acutely when they relay their client's words in the first person (as is called for when delivering accurate interpreting) (Darroch & Demsey 2016; Bumgardner 2022; González Campanella 2022).

Given the potentially emotional nature of interpreting, INZ is aware of the need to offer self-care training and support to interpreters. Regular professional development meetings allow interpreters to reflect on their emotional and mental wellbeing, and discuss issues they encounter and how best to solve them. Further, supervision is available from INZ training staff whenever interpreters need support before or after a job. These forums proved especially valuable after the 2019 mosque attacks: some INZ interpreting staff lost friends and colleagues, and several worked for the Police and Courts on jobs that were technically and emotionally complex and challenging. After the attacks and again during the COVID-19 lockdowns, INZ contacted all its staff to encourage them to use the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counselling service (although there was minimal uptake).

We did find it discouraging after the mosque attacks that agencies that requested professional interpreter services offered little mental wellbeing support to the interpreters. This observation highlights that not only LSPs but also agencies that use their interpreters need to be aware of and look out for interpreters' wellbeing.

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Discussion

This paper has argued that recruiting ad hoc interpreters generates risk to those interpreting, to those whose stories are being interpreted, and to agencies using the interpreters (Jacobs et al. 2001; Hampers and McNulty 2002; Flores 2005). These risks are often exacerbated in situations of trauma and/or disaster, when messages need to be disseminated quickly and can encompass critical and/or sensitive information. For these reasons, we have advocated that agencies need to engage professional interpreters when working with CALD communities. Professional interpreters engaged through organisations such as Interpreting New Zealand (INZ) undergo pre-employment training in interpreting practices, cross-cultural communication and ethics. Further, they can access ongoing support in the form of mentors and counselling, and are encouraged to engage in self-care practices before and after distressing jobs. This training not only protects interpreters through promoting a healthy, safe working environment and enabling them to better handle (vicarious) trauma, but also protects clients by better supporting them through traumatic experiences, as well as guaranteeing confidentiality and accuracy (McDowell et al. 2011). We here discuss implications of these learnings.

Several key steps can be taken by groups and agencies wanting to disseminate information to, and work with, CALD communities at times of crisis. Firstly, establish meaningful and respectful relationships with CALD communities so that trusted lines of communication are in place *before* crisis occurs (CLING 2012; Shackelton 2018). Similarly, staff need to understand people's rights to use—and their obligations to provide—professional interpreters³, as well as practical considerations such as how to contact and work with professional interpreters (González Campanella 2022). This knowledge needs to be built up before a disaster occurs, highlighting the need both for regular training (to upskill staff in cultural competency and interpreting practices) and ongoing formalised relationships (to counter the effects of personnel turnover). Agencies also need to pre-emptively budget for professional interpretation services.

The learnings put forward in this paper also have implications for LSPs, most notably in terms of their role in supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing (Lipton et al. 2002; Miller et al. 2005; Doherty et al. 2010; Green et al. 2012; Prentice et al. 2014; Amato and Mack 2015).

³ This right to information is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act.

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Just as the disasters negatively affected some of the general population, so too were some interpreters, particularly by the mosque attacks in their deliberate targeting of a minority population. Professional interpreters can be doubly impacted by disaster, i.e., by the event itself and through interpreting others' experiences. This risk of (re)traumatisation highlights the need for a culture of wellbeing within both LSPs and agencies that engage their services (McDowell et al. 2011). LSPs can actively support interpreters' mental health needs by ensuring interpreters have knowledge about and are comfortable accessing free counselling services, implementing formal and informal 'check-in' practices, and encouraging self-care. LSPs also need to be responsive in their interpreter training, building in mechanisms to enable flexibility whereby new resources or techniques can be introduced to help interpreters adjust to changing circumstances and cope with unfolding crisis situations.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined key learnings of the Community Languages Information Network Group and Interpreting New Zealand, two groups that have worked with CALD communities in Ōtautahi Christchurch before, during and after the various disasters that have occurred over the past decade. The paper has focussed on the complex issue of interpreting experiences of trauma and disaster, pointing to the risks that can occur when professional interpreters are not engaged in these situations. The lessons learnt highlight the importance of providing interpreters with training that emphasises wellbeing and self-care alongside language skills and ethical considerations. We have underscored the implications of these learnings for LSPs and agencies that engage professional interpreters. This paper thus calls for measures including ongoing relationship-building with CALD communities, training to upskill staff, and foregrounding of self-care and wellbeing in workplace culture.

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