
EMPATHY IN PSI: WHERE WE STAND AND WHERE TO GO FROM HERE / LA EMPATÍA EN LA ISP: ESTADO ACTUAL Y DIRECCIONES FUTURAS

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Abstract: The influence of emotions is very significant in PSIT, since these professionals usually find themselves interpreting in communicative situations in which the people that they provide a service to suffer some kind of emotional distress. This can be particularly challenging for interpreters, since many codes of conduct on the ethics of the profession highlight neutrality as one of the main features that they must respect. In the case of empathy, a value expected to be offered by public workers, many studies have highlighted the importance it has to improve interactions. However, this topic has not been developed in depth in many research studies up to date. Therefore, the aim of this article is to conduct a systematic review of the studies published in the field of PSIT with relation to empathy and how it affects the profession. We will limit the review to studies published from 2000 to 2020. In the conclusions we will reflect on the importance of conducting this kind of studies to review current research needs and establish future directions.

Keywords: communicative situations, emotions, empathy, PSIT, systematic review.

Resumen: La influencia de las emociones es muy significativa en la TISP, ya que estos profesionales suelen encontrarse interpretando en situaciones comunicativas en las que las personas a las que prestan un servicio sufren algún tipo de estrés emocional. Esto puede ser problemático para los intérpretes, ya que los códigos éticos de la profesión destacan la neutralidad como una de las principales características que deben respetar. En el caso de la empatía, valor que se espera que ofrezcan los trabajadores públicos, numerosos estudios han destacado la importancia que tiene para mejorar las interacciones. Sin embargo, este tema no ha sido desarrollado en profundidad en los estudios de investigación publicados hasta la fecha. Por tanto, el objetivo de este artículo es llevar a cabo una revisión sistemática de los estudios publicados en el campo de la TISP en relación con la empatía y cómo afecta a la profesión. Limitaremos la revisión a los estudios publicados entre 2000 y 2020. En las conclusiones reflexionaremos sobre la importancia de realizar este tipo de estudios para revisar las necesidades de investigación actuales y establecer direcciones futuras.

Palabras clave: emociones, empatía, revisión sistemática, situación comunicativa, TISP

1. Introduction

Research in human emotions can be considered a challenging task, especially because of the questionable validity of results obtained from different types of empirical measures used for these purposes (Korpál & Jasielska, 2018). In the case of Public Service Interpreting and Translation (PSIT), the influence of the emotional and psychological impact is specifically important. This is because, as stated in previous studies (Valero Garcés, 2002, 2003), what is required from interpreters in this field usually goes beyond a simple transfer of information from one language to another, since they frequently find themselves in situations in which they are going to be interpreting for people who are emotionally distressed (Roberts, 2015). Among these situations we can refer to those in which bad news need to be communicated to relatives or friends such as in healthcare settings or in a court cases in which a traumatic event needs to be described to the judge. In this sense, as stated by Furmanek (2006, p. 60), “the interpreted encounter overflows with emotions, both at the level of the parties’ interest and the feelings rising in the interpreter who strives to reconcile and select the meaning to be conveyed”. However, according to many codes of conduct, in this profession neutrality should always be maintained and interpreters shall not intervene or express an opinion or feelings in a communicative act (ATA, 2010, NRPSI, 2016). In this sense, “interpreters are seen to challenge affective neutrality through affiliative responses which treat the patient’s manifestation of feelings and worries as conversationally relevant, and, in some cases, further reinforce the healthcare practitioner’s empathic model of communication” (Merlini, 2019, p. 222). More specifically regarding the topic of empathy, which can be defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to the feelings of another (Edlins & Dolamore, 2018), very few studies focus on how it affects PSIT. Indeed, empathy offers a way to improve interactions and it is a value that is expected to be offered by workers in public services (Marks, 2020). Even though it would seem as if there exist irreconcilable differences between professional conduct and empathic behaviors, thanks to initiatives such as Critical Link or projects such as INTERACT, coordinated by Sharon O’Brien and Federico Federici, practitioners and researchers have been exploring the implications of this and more attention has been paid to this topic (Merlini & Gatti, 2015, O’Brien 2019).

Nonetheless, despite the importance that this topic has in PSIT, not many studies have been devoted to it in Translation and Interpreting Studies outside the specific field compared to other domains related to interpreting, on which this study particularly focuses. Therefore, in this paper we aim to provide a systematic review of the studies that have been published from 2000 to 2020 that relate the practice of PSI with the importance of empathy and how to process it, so as to reflect on the current state of the field and establish future research lines that need to be further explored. In order to conduct the search, we have used the following sources (Table 1), based on the methodology used by Gallego Hernández (2020) for his bibliometric study. A general search on Google was also conducted and some interesting results that had not been retrieved in these databases were also found. The keywords that we introduced for the bibliographic search were interpreting, public services, emotions, and empathy (both in English and in Spanish) and we selected those findings that we considered relevant for the purposes of this study.

Source	Website
BITRA	https://dti.ua.es/en/bitra/introduction.html
Translation Studies Bibliography	https://www.benjamins.com/cgi-bin/bbr_tsb.cgi?cmd=search

Google Scholar	https://scholar.google.es/schhp?hl=es&as_sdt=0,5
Web of Science	https://www.recursoscientificos.fecyt.es/

Table 1. Sources used to retrieve bibliographical information.

2. Empathy in PSI: a review of the literature published from 2000 to 2020

2.1 Academic studies related to empathy

The topic of empathy is present in most of the academic studies that have been published to date on PSI. Valero Garcés (2005) mentions in the study in which she analysis the emotional and psychological effects on interpreters in public services that practicing with empathy and self-esteem is very helpful for the profession and that training should be considered in this regard. In her doctoral dissertation, Abril Martí (2006) describes that although a civil servant is usually prepared not to be emotionally involved with the people that they provide services to, this is not the case of the interpreter. To justify this statement she cites Cambridge (2002, p. 124) who narrates his personal experience as an interpreter and describes the lack of mechanisms for personal protection and mutual support that can be found in other professions in which they also deal with dramatic situations. This allows them to distance themselves from what they are doing and not carry the burden of the empathy developed with the client. Abril Martí (2006) also states that this empathy is one of the features of PSI that she believes that go against its professionalization, since as stated above it can be considered that it violates the neutrality that interpreters are supposed to respect above all. She also considers it part of the mediating competence that interpreters develop when providing their services. Valero Garcés (2006) defends in her study the need to provide training in PSI with strategies to deal with situations of distress and that allow interpreters to develop empathy and self-esteem, which is very much needed to continue working in the different kind of contexts in which they can do their work. Jiménez Salcedo (2010) also highlights the need for interpreters to have empathy, who must know how to listen to both the user as well as the provider of information.

From the perspective of emotional intelligence, Hubscher-Davidson (2013) argues that the practice of interpreting and translation require interpersonal features such as self-esteem, stress management, perception of emotions and expression, empathy, social awareness, assertiveness, adaptability and self-motivation. Regarding the impact that this can have in the profession, Ruiz Mezcuca (2014) argues in her study that in healthcare settings an excessive involvement from the part of the interpreter with patients and their problems can have detrimental consequences which can result in “burnout” or “compassion fatigue”. From a didactic perspective, Lázaro Gutiérrez & Sánchez Ramos (2015) mention in their study that corpora can be very useful for interpreter training to examine specific features of the discourse used in contexts of gender violence such as empathy. Burdeus Domingo (2015) also mentions in her doctoral dissertation that empathy is part of the interpersonal competence that is required to be developed in PSI training. Çoban & Albiz Telci (2016) also highlight the need to study all the personal skills needed in the profession, in which empathy is included, since they consider that a low level of development of these competencies will result in worse production from the part of the interpreter, something that is also supported by Voze based on all the professional experiences of the company in this field (2017).

In 2018, Parrilla Gómez and Postigo Pinazo analyzed intercultural communication and the interpreter’s roles when it came to effective interaction within the healthcare context. The authors provide different examples of how interpreters show empathy towards the patient, for example, by using the patient’s first name, something that was not done by the provider. Although the authors defend the comforting effect this has in the patient, they warn about not

deviating the main aim of the interpreting service, which is accuracy in communication. Another study published in 2020 by Parrilla Gómez and Gutiérrez Solís revealed the results from a survey distributed among professional interpreters to find out the level of stress they suffered based on the different situations they had been exposed to. The authors created a protocol with strategies to help trainers in the field in order to avoid or minimize this problem, and empathy was highlighted as one of the features needed to be developed.

Table 2 provides an overview of the studies analyzed in this section categorized according to the topics covered in them:

Author and year
Category: Competences for the profession
Abril Martí (2006)
Valero Garcés (2006)
Jiménez Salcedo (2010)
Hubscher-Davidson (2013)
Burdeus Domingo (2015)
Çoban & Albiz Telci (2016)
Voze (2017)
Category: Training
Valero Garcés (2005)
Valero Garcés (2006)
Lázaro Gutiérrez & Sánchez Ramos (2015)
Parrilla Gómez & Gutiérrez Solís (2020)
Category: Emotional impact for the interpreter
Ruiz Mezcua (2014)
Category: Strategies used by the interpreter
Parrilla Gómez and Postigo Pinazo (2018)

Table 2. Studies that refer to empathy but that do not focus on it.

2.2 Studies on empathy with a specific focus on interpreters' practice

Besides the numerous mentions to empathy in the previously cited literature, when it comes to further analyzing how it is involved in contexts in which professional interpreters are required, some more studies can be found. The first study that we retrieved based on the established chronological order for this literature review is the one published by Merlini and Favaron (2003), in which they show strategies used by an interpreter. Results show how this professional added expressions of empathy such as “Don’t worry” or adopting a much simpler registry to get closer to the user and to talk to them in a more friendly way.

Pugh and Vetere (2010) aimed to provide in their study an exploration of mental health professionals' experiences of empathy in clinical work with an interpreter. They used a qualitative methodology to provide an understanding of participants' experiences in work with an interpreter. These showed concerns that interpreters may subtly alter messages during interpretation, which may lead to qualitative changes in their content. Some participants felt that the emotive qualities that they were trying to convey, as well as their clients' were lost in the interpreting process, thus affecting the empathy showed to the client. This was illustrated with the following statement: "Your empathy ... in terms of going through another channel and then through another person, may not have the same emotive quality that you're maybe putting into it." They also felt that the mediation with an interpreter had an impact in the overall empathic feature of the communicative act, which they also illustrated with the following example: "If the only communication you've ever had with that person is through an interpreter, it just makes it so much more difficult to build the empathy up in the first place."

In 2015 Merlini and Gatti conducted research on empathy in healthcare interpreting. They reflected on its concept which they summarized in three main points (p. 140):

1. Empathy entails awareness of another's experience.
2. It is an interpersonal activity, where the empathizer shows and communicates in an empathic way with the receiver.
3. It has beneficial effects for the receiver, since people are more likely to help others when they show empathy towards them.

Based on the results of their study, the authors concluded that empathy is considered beneficial for professional relations in healthcare settings, since it contributes to the well-being of the patient. Another paper from Merlini in the same year (2015) aimed to investigate empathic behaviour in mediated healthcare communication. To do this she conducted a qualitative analysis in which results showed that empathy can lead to a more successful and functional completion of the institutional task.

In the blog of Claudia Brauer (2018), in which she describes professional experiences as an interpreter, she defends that in the 21st century interpreters need empathy more than ever, especially since the profession is increasingly being conducted remotely. She believes that interpreters are "conduits" for the expression of another's words and feelings and that if they are required to convey the meaning of words in total accuracy they must also convey the thoughts and feelings attached to them, which can be done if empathy is developed. She defines three types of empathy according to psychologists. First cognitive empathy, which is the ability to understand someone's thoughts and emotions in a rational way. Emotional empathy would be understanding someone's feelings and feeling them too. Finally, compassionate empathy would be understanding someone's feelings and taking action to help.

A different study conducted by Korpál and Jasielska (2019) in the language combination Polish-English aimed to examine whether simultaneous interpreters were affected by speakers' emotions with a specific focus on empathy. To this end, the researchers used a neutral speech and an emotional speech. Results revealed that interpreters are indeed affected by emotions, which highlighted the importance of emotion processing, specifically empathy, in simultaneous interpreting. In this same line of research, Medina Escajadillo (2019) highlights that a successful communicative act between two or more people requires empathy and that interpreters must not only provide a linguistic link but also a cognitive one. Therefore, they must develop as part of their professional competences social ones that will allow them to understand the people they work with and the different communicative situations that they will have to deal with. Thus, she defines empathy as an intrapersonal feature of the person who feels and expresses empathy towards someone and also receives it. However, she also defends

the need to develop self-control combined with empathy to succeed in the different challenges of this profession.

Another study conducted by Gutierrez et al. (2019) aimed to describe how linguistic tools used by interpreters during genomic sequencing results may have impacted communication with Spanish-speaking families. Results showed that interpreters adapted clinicians’ statements with different empathic linguistic tools such as contextualization, encouragement, checking comprehension, endearment or softening. The definition of these tools can be found in Table 3:

Empathic linguistic tools	Definition
Contextualization	Addition of phrases that reiterate or clarify clinicians’ statements.
Encouragement	Addition of reassuring or supportive phrases.
Checking Comprehension	Insertion of questions inquiring about parents’ understanding.
Endearment	Use of terms of endearment to refer to the child/patient.
Softening	Adaptation of clinicians’ statements to be less direct and more polite.

Table 3. Definitions of empathic linguistic tools. Source: Gutierrez et al. (2019).

According to these authors, these tools are considered “empathic” because they belong to one or more dimensions of clinical empathy as defined in the literature (Mercer et al., 2002) such as building interpersonal relationships, promoting mutual patient-physician understanding or personalizing communication.

A study by Krystallidou et al. (2018) showed that in 44 of the 70 empathic opportunities analyzed, there was a match between the empathic opportunities expressed by the patients and the way they were rendered by the interpreters. However, in 26 occasions there was a change when transmitting the information, which involved reduced or omitted emotion or emotion transformed into challenge. The researchers concluded that this had an impact on the patients’ empathic opportunities and on the doctor’s empathic responses in one third of the interactions.

A recent study published by Krystallidou et al. (2020) with similar aims to the previously cited one from 2018 from this and other authors, investigated how empathic communication is expressed in interpreter-mediated consultations and the interpreter’s effect on it. According to these authors, doctors and interpreters require skills to detect patient cues, assess and render them correctly and appropriately, and display communicative behaviors that consider the implications of interpreter-mediated clinical situations and facilitate each other’s communicative goals.

In the blog of Lexgo Translations (s.f.), they narrate their experience working in PSI, particularly with refugees, and they describe that showing empathy, kindness and understanding was in this context even more important than the mere act of interpreting.

Table 4 provides an overview of the studies analyzed in this section categorized according to the topics covered in them:

Author and year
Category: Strategies used by the interpreter

Merlini & Favaron (2003)
Krystallidou et al. (2018)
Gutierrez et al. (2019)
Category: Empathy in healthcare settings
Pugh & Vertere (2010)
Merlini & Gatti (2015)
Merlini (2015)
Category: Concept of empathy in the profession
Brauer (2018)
Category: The effect of empathy in the profession
Korpala and Jasielska (2019)
Medina Escajadillo (2019)
Lexgo Translations (s.f.)

Table 4. Studies with a specific focus on empathy.

3. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to conduct a systematic review that allowed us to have an overview of the current research state on the topic of empathy in PSI. To do this, a systematic review was conducted based on a methodology used in a bibliometric study previously conducted by Gallego Hernández (2020). Thus, different databases such as BITRA, Translation Studies Bibliography, Google Scholar and Web of Science were used to retrieve findings that were related to our object of study. All the findings from these studies shed light on the importance that emotions and particularly empathy, as reviewed in this paper, have in PSI.

This review of research studies on empathy in PSI has also revealed the variety of contexts and situations in which its practice occurs and the different profile of its practitioners such as the coexistence of professional and sometimes unorthodox practices and attitudes (children as interpreters, family members who barely know the language, husbands as interpreters of wives that are victims of gender violence), the different roles that interpreters can play or the codes of conduct that are applied.

Studies also show that, although the codes of ethics used by each group of professionals converge on fundamental principles, there are certain disparities that can give rise to conflicts or inconsistent judgments regarding compliance with ethical principles when two professions work together. (for example, police and PSI). Thus, when public service interpreters are asked to define their role, there is no unanimous consensus beyond the transmission of information between languages and they frequently admit that their role is not limited to the mere act of communicating information in another language. The role(s) that the interpreter assumes are determined by the rules that have been adopted over the years, both consciously and unconsciously, as well as by the realities and demands of the field in which they have acquired their professional experience. There are discrepancies between the standards stated by the interpreters and what they actually do in practice. These discrepancies have been the subject of

numerous studies, articles and seminars related not only to interpreters, but also to the perception that providers and clients have regarding their ethics.

Ultimately, the principles that guide action in PSI may be influenced by various factors, such as society itself, the scope of action, the culture(s) with which it is in contact, and even personal ethics and the ethics of the other professions with which collaboration is needed (institutions, social services, health care). Practice shows that when two different professions with their respective codes coexist in the same context, overlaps, disagreements or mismatches can occur when it comes to achieving or carrying out the ethical principles that guide each respective profession, which gives rise to conflicts. ethics or more than one solution to the same problem. Such reality indicates that there is no common ethic. From philosophical positions (Cortina, 2021), it is advocated that in this 21st century, and after the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have the need to move towards a humanitarian moral that transcends the limits of the states.

The pandemic has once again exposed the fragility and vulnerability of human beings in the midst of globalization. Human beings are vulnerable and dependent or rather interdependent. Authorized voices nowadays denounce that Western ethics has tried to obviate vulnerability, instead of assuming it as an unavoidable part of any good project, and this is reflected in that absence of emotions, and particularly empathy, in codes of conduct. Cortina (2021) recalls that this was not always the case and proposes to look at Aristotle: man is not only reason, but the conjunction of wishful intelligence and intelligent desire. Both have to concentrate to achieve a good life, which is achieved by cultivating the virtues within the community, and these virtues include not only reason, but also passions and emotions.

In the systematic review that precedes this conclusion, we have seen how there are studies that contradict some of the basic principles that are included in the codes of conduct. Practice suggests the inclusion of emotions. For this, it would be necessary to modify the attitude towards different ethical models that should be less restrictive and more descriptive in order to seek the benefit of all active agents. Including empathy and emotion is an added value and not a contradiction. This is a trend that is getting increasing attention and thus we should reexamine the PSI theories and guidelines set out in codes by analyzing the perceptions of interpreters and interpretation users as discussions continue in media encounters to explain the political, ethical, social and psychological motivations behind these discourses, while continuing to unravel the limitations of PSI. This is why incorporating empathy in PSI training and practice is of great importance so that from a very early stage PSI trainees know how to deal with it in situations of distress without this affecting the service provided.

We are aware of the limitations that this study may have since the period of analysis covered could be extended provide a wider perspective of the research state of the topic of empathy in the field of PSI. However, we believe that this can be taken as starting point to get a notion on the studies related to it and those that specifically focus on it to know where we stand right now and reflect on where to go from now on to continue contributing to this field from an academic as well as professional perspective.

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