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## WHOSE TRAUMA IS IT? Vicarious Trauma and its Impact on Court Interpreters

Sonali Rana, Purvi Shah, and Kajori Chaudhuri

For the numerous individuals with limited English capacity who find themselves grappling with the American legal system, court interpreters are often the only means of accessing justice. Court interpreters can have a permanent impact on the cases of limited English proficient (LEP) individuals — and their lives. With such high stakes, the interpreting profession clearly offers many satisfactions to its practitioners. On a daily basis, interpreters enable court users to access the vast, complex, and often intimidating court system by being their voice in a setting in which court users are generally quite vulnerable. As one interpreter attests, “The reason I love it is that we have a wonderful privilege that we are a bridge between people. And it’s very beautiful to be a bridge. Not everybody can do it.”

However, along with professional joys, court interpreters deal with long hours with few — if any — breaks, little or no support, emotionally trying content, and the exercise of intense concentration that leads to exhausting days. These conditions can give rise to negative feelings and symptoms, and may even manifest as vicarious trauma. One interpreter underscored the difficult context of court interpreting, observing,

“I also have a lot of cases that [when] I go home, I feel pretty sad about. But I can’t talk about it to anybody because lots of times it is personal and confidential. So I ended up having upset stomach... You know, the voice needs to be heard. And it’s wonderful to help the respondent in the courtroom to be heard...[by] the judges and attorney, and prosecutor, and so on... But sometimes I also kind of take it a little bit personally. I mean it’s hard to program yourself like a rock, a stone face in a courtroom and not worry about [it] going

home... We don’t have a support group where we can talk about [it]. [As] a freelance[r], we don’t have that.”

Sakhi for South Asian Women, a non-profit community group seeking to end violence against women, has conducted broad research, outreach, and policy advocacy to highlight the injustice and barriers that South Asian immigrant survivors of domestic violence face when trying to navigate the legal system. We found that interpreting services in the courts play a central role in the ability of survivors to access legal remedies in their journeys to safety. We there-

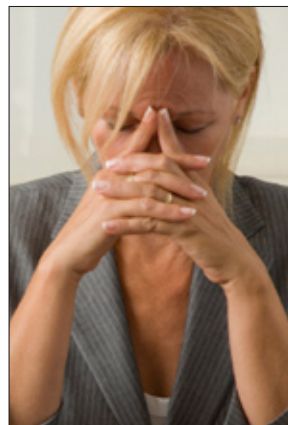
fore realized how important a court interpreter’s work is, and have begun to understand issues and hurdles interpreters encounter in their professional lives. As a result, we discovered that a vital connection exists between the well-being of survivors and the strength of the court interpretation profession.

In May of 2009, at the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) 30th anniversary conference, Sakhi aimed to raise awareness about this issue through a

presentation entitled, “Skills Building for Interpreters: Tools for Advocacy Change and Addressing Vicarious Trauma.” The presentation was received with great enthusiasm. One participant exclaimed, “What a magnificent insight. You have encountered something very important in the interpreter profession through your domestic violence advocacy. Having brought this issue to us in this forum is really a great contribution.”

Although vicarious trauma has been studied in other professions, there has been limited acknowledg-

*> continues on page 6*



**JAPAN'S NEW JURY SYSTEM** *continued from page 5*

The results of the very first jury trial under the new system (a case that did not require interpretation) were pessimistically received by the public. In the media, opinions were split. The defendant was given a near-maximum sentence by the jurors, while the judges favored something less. The system is in the process of working out how to balance the judges' verdict against the jurors' final decision. (The verdict is being appealed.) However, it is widely believed that on appeal, the verdict in this very first juror case will most likely be upheld to support this new system.

Currently, the general feeling in Japan is that if you are ever tried by jurors and convicted, you are likely to receive a harsher verdict than otherwise. Perhaps when jurors can interact with a defendant directly by asking questions, a more emotional bond to the tragedy (murder, for example) is created, and the likelihood of an emotionally-biased decision increases.

In place of an orientation session, a leaflet is given to the jurors, which only describes very generally what is expected from them as jurors. Japan seems satisfied with preparing the jurors rather minimally, even when the case involves substantial potential punishment such as in murder trials.

I look forward to seeing improvements in the Japanese jury system. Perhaps my colleague and I can suggest certain procedures that have been proven effective in U.S. courts, which are the ones most familiar to me. Fortunately, Japanese judges are rather amenable to suggestions by interpreters. In Japan interpreters are respected nearly as highly as doctors and lawyers. ▲

**VICARIOUS TRAUMA** *continued from page 1*

ment of this issue in the field of court interpreting. However, we at Sakhi recognize that without adequate training and supervisory support in dealing with vicarious trauma, interpretation work can take too heavy a toll — can even impede an interpreter's ability to continue performing an essential job.

To further our goal of raising awareness of vicarious trauma throughout the court interpreter community, this article will discuss exposure risks and the reasons why court interpreters may exhibit signs of vicarious trauma. Moreover, we will also examine ways of alleviating the problem. Based on our direct services experience, we will also provide tips and tools to lessen the impact of vicarious trauma.

**Vicarious Trauma**

Many court interpreters derive great fulfillment from their work giving a voice to people who otherwise would not be able to tell their stories. As one interpreter noted,

"I enjoy doing witness work. And whether I agree with the witness or not, [it's] the experience of being able to have someone feel like their voice is being heard... especially when it's been someone who has felt like their voice has not been heard for a long time — or never heard. Some of the people I've voiced I was vehemently opposed to what they did, but to know, to have the satisfaction that they get to say what they wanted to say and they felt like they had been heard the way they wanted to be heard, to me is the most pleasurable part."

Working to enable justice to be carried out also comes with risks. One such risk is vicarious trauma, defined as a "process through which the therapist's inner experience is negatively transformed through empathic engagement with the clients' trauma material, including graphic descriptions of traumatic events, descriptions of people's intentional cruelty to one another, and traumatic re-enactments."<sup>1</sup> In other words, vicarious trauma is the cumulative impact a professional experiences when being continuously exposed to another person's traumatic event(s).

At Sakhi's 2009 NAJIT focus group for court interpreters, participants discussed at length the issue of vicarious trauma. For example, one participant observed,

"As professionals... you don't get emotionally involved, because you have no vested interest in the outcome of a case. I remember a wrongful death case — it was a civil case... I believe it was the son who was testifying about the loss of his father and he was crying. And it just hit me — it's like... 'What if your dad died?' And I was about to go over. I was about to cross that line and start crying... And I reeled myself back in and was like, 'No, I can't cry.' This is not something we do, when you convey the emotion."

This first-hand account depicts how the nature of the work of court interpretation — the interaction with court users as well as the cumulative exposure to traumatic testimony — can take a toll on the mental and physical well-being of any person. Any given day for a court interpreter can consist of interpreting victim

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accounts—including minute details of sexual assault, child abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence, murder, or other violent acts. Additionally, interpreting calls for the information to be processed and conveyed to various parties at a high standard of accuracy and skill, thus requiring significant attention and energy.

An interpreter is the only one who initially understands the LEP individual. Moreover, the interpreter speaks in the first person, which sometimes can inadvertently create an emotional bond. This can make it more difficult to separate professional and personal feelings, and the outcome of a case can affect an interpreter long after the case is completed. This is particularly significant since empathy, or the ability to identify and understand another's emotions and situation, is a skill commonly utilized when performing interpreter services.

During one of Sakhi's August focus groups for court interpreters, an interpreter who interpreted for a sexual abuse case related the following:

"The other day I interpreted a forensic examination and it was a young man from the Dominican Republic and it was his story... It came out that he was sexually abused and physically abused. I mean, it was horrific... It took a lot—physically and emotionally for me, because I'm only human. And he's getting emotional. And of course interpreting is a fine line between interpreting and acting because we take on the spirit of the signer. So if he's standing there and he's talking about an abuse experience, I have to vocalize that, so there's some transference there and I don't have any outlet and the court doesn't provide that for me because they don't understand... They don't get it. And after interpreting that, it was a good hour, I had to walk around, I had to go out, I had no one really to talk to... So I called a former supervisor of mine and I was able to discuss this with her, and felt better afterwards."

In cases of domestic violence, survivors may receive help in dealing with trauma, but the interpreter must remain "invisible," at times resulting in trauma being internalized. Warning signs of vicarious trauma may then go unnoticed and untreated. Adding to this unseen "I" position of the interpreter are high workloads, infrequent breaks, public scrutiny, and regular exposure to trauma victims. Therefore, not surprisingly, interpreters can be vulnerable to vicarious trauma. As Blair and Ramones, cited in the *Translation Journal*, assert, "The endless stories of violence, cruelty, exploitation and atrocity; the emotional impact of experiencing another's terror, pain and anguish; and the continual exposure to the darkest aspects of the human condition can produce symptoms strikingly similar to the post-traumatic stress syndromes of their patients."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Challenges of Addressing Vicarious Trauma**

Addressing vicarious trauma may be a challenge to the individual or to the legal system itself. Although court interpreters may experience stress reactions from constant interaction with trauma victims, many do not connect these feelings with vicarious trauma. Some interpreters are completely unaware of the condition.

As one seasoned court interpreter stated, it is important to

teach others the value of refusing an assignment:

"I tell students and beginning interpreters you have to recuse yourself... Intellectually everybody's like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.' And inside everybody's going, 'If I ever do that, I'll die. They'll never call me again.'... No matter if you think you're right or wrong...you're always going like, 'What are they going to say? I'm not being a team player.'... We also hold ourselves up to a much higher standard so it's really hard to say, 'I can't do this—today.' And it's learning to say, 'It's just today. I may be able to do it 6 months down the road, a year down the road, or maybe never, who knows? But today I can't do this.'... and having the freedom to say that... for a lot of interpreters is very difficult and very hard to learn to do. And, first time I did it, it was terrifying."

Thus, there are conflicted feelings about the impact of vicarious trauma in this line of work. During one of our August focus groups, there was much debate on this topic. One interpreter noted that the traumatic content is not heard by interpreters alone, observing,

"In a sense, even though we're there interpreting, and interpreting every word, let's say in a horrific trial, then again, every other court personnel is in the same room that you are—listening to the same thing. So you can't say, 'Ok, I should be treated differently and receive some sort of... counseling.' Because everybody heard it. The judge heard it. The attorneys heard it... It's a matter of individually how you deal with it. I just am not sure that I would even know what to ask the state for."

Another interpreter argued that unlike others in the courtroom, interpreters are active participants who speak in the first person when narrating the story. She argued, "We hear it twice... Every single thing that [others] hear once, we hear twice. I don't know if it makes a difference. Maybe it does."

Given such differences of opinion in the court interpreting profession, education on and exposing vicarious trauma can be vexing. In addition to divergent opinions within the profession itself, court administrators may fail to acknowledge vicarious trauma as something that especially affects interpreters. The Vicarious Trauma Institute has stated that professionals often prefer to receive blame for stress responses, rather than acknowledge that these responses are natural and offer opportunities for exploration and dialogue.<sup>3</sup> An absence of training and support groups can impede progress in treating vicarious trauma in this field, as noted by an interpreter in the NAJIT focus group:

"We're trained so much on confidentiality... And it is important... But just like every other profession that hears the not pretty side of human life, everybody else is taught that they need to create a support group, either professionally or non-professionally and how to get that outside of you. Where a lot of interpreters are not taught that and so they struggle with keeping it all inside. And that's not good because that will affect your work. And I think that's a shortcoming in interpreter training—that we're not teaching future interpreters how to deal with fatigue, how to deal with the emotional wear

**VICARIOUS TRAUMA** *continued from page 7*

and tear ... how you can handle it and still remain within your ethics. I think that is a major issue for all interpreters, and unfortunately some of them have done what other professions have done ... they just die inside, and then become very distant, which is not good either, because it affects their interpreting.”

If left untreated, symptoms of vicarious trauma can interfere with interpreters’ ability to perform their duties to the fullest extent and may even have an impact on their lives outside of work. It is thus up to the profession to consider how to educate interpreters about vicarious trauma, and to develop strategies for response and support.

Outlined in the tables below are some of the personal and systemic challenges various professions have faced in dealing with vicarious trauma, as cited in wide-ranging material, including, but not limited to, *Journal of Counseling and Development*; *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*; *Journal of Traumatic Stress*; and *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization*.

**Tips and Tools for Dealing with Vicarious Trauma**

Since the challenges may manifest in personal or other arenas, coping mechanisms will also reflect different strategies in alleviating symptoms of vicarious trauma. Along with legal terminology, skills development, and sensitivity training, education for interpreters on vicarious trauma must be considered — especially as a precursor to developing tools to address vicarious trauma.

For individuals, one of the most important steps is being able to identify warning signs. Although reactions and symptoms from constant exposure to others’ trauma can vary from person to person, there are red flags that signal possible vicarious trauma. The table below outlines a range of symptoms:

These symptoms may occur in varying combinations. Further-

more, individuals may be more or less likely to suffer from vicarious trauma based on personal history such as past traumatic events, personality, coping strategies, current life context, as well as training and professional history.

One interpreter reflected on a colleague’s experience by observing,

“You have to have empathy for the person no matter how ugly what they’ve done is. If you isolate yourself and have no empathy, then you can’t do justice by them. And I think the hardest thing I’ve tried to ... get students to learn, is a) isolation doesn’t work, but you also have to learn what your limits are. And I think the perfect example’s a colleague of ours who had done, as a freelance, divorces her entire life. That was her bread and butter — that’s what she did. Never bothered her, nothing. Never even thought about the fact that she was going through a divorce, that it might affect her work. And she’s 6 months out of her divorce, she’s interpreting at the witness stand, and all of a sudden the testimony is so close to home that it hit. And she was ... totally unprepared because she’d done it so long that it never even ... would cross her mind — to give ourselves the freedom to say, ‘I can’t do this today’... and recuse yourself.”

Each person bears responsibility to recognize vicarious trauma symptoms, acknowledge one’s own response to trauma, and seek support if needed. Organizations must also play their part in easing court interpreters’ stress. As explored in the *Translation Journal*, a study by Karen Baistow, “The Psychological and Emotional Effects of Community Interpreting,” analyzed the amount, nature, causes and extent of emotional and psychological stress, coping strategies, supports in existence, and support needed for public service interpreters. The study emphasized that there was a need for a cultural shift which would enable the emotional

Table 1: Challenges to Addressing Vicarious Trauma

Personal Challenges	Organizational/Professional Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of losing job and/or respect of co-workers;</li> <li>• Feelings of shame and anxiety;</li> <li>• Feelings that symptoms are “normal” part of job so should not complain;</li> <li>• Inability to speak about feelings and stress associated with job due to fear of being deemed incompetent, weak, and/or unable to effectively perform duties; and,</li> <li>• Lack of awareness of symptoms associated with vicarious trauma.</li> </ul>	Inability or lack of capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge the severity or frequency of vicarious trauma;</li> <li>• Maintain reasonable workload;</li> <li>• Provide opportunity for continuing education or training on vicarious trauma;</li> <li>• Provide sufficient time off;</li> <li>• Provide qualified supervision;</li> <li>• Provide relief for staff; or,</li> <li>• Support personal psychotherapy for staff.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Some Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma<sup>4</sup>

Category	Symptoms
Affective	Anger, anxiety, avoidance, cynicism, emotional instability, hypersensitivity, irritability, mood swings, numbness, shock
Behavioral	Disconnection from loved ones, social withdrawal
Cognitive	Burnout, damage to sense of professionalism, difficulty in communicating thoughts, feelings of incompetence, lack of concentration, recurring thoughts, self-doubt
Physiological	Appetite changes, pain, somatic problems

Table 3: Personal and organizational Tools in Addressing Vicarious Trauma<sup>6</sup>

Personal Tools	Organizational Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy leisure activities;</li> <li>• Maintain healthy personal relationships;</li> <li>• Participate in therapy, if helpful;</li> <li>• Pay attention to your own well-being, physically, mentally, and spiritually; and,</li> <li>• Try your best to balance work, play, and rest.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequate supervision;</li> <li>• Continuing education and special training which includes information on vicarious trauma;</li> <li>• “Normalizing” the emotional effects of court interpreting;</li> <li>• Opportunities for interpreters to inform their supervisors about concerns and stresses without fear of repercussions;</li> <li>• Peer training and support so interpreters are aware they are not alone and can discuss fears and coping strategies openly and honestly; and,</li> <li>• Structured stress management.</li> </ul>

effects of community interpreting to be ‘normalized,’ that is, able to be accepted as part and parcel of everyday interpreting life. This shift, we believe would benefit both the well-being of interpreters and their work.”<sup>5</sup>

There are several other steps that individuals and court administrations can take to combat the emotional stress on interpreters caused by disturbing content. A variety of tools are listed in the table 3.

### Next Steps for the Field

In our work to promote access to justice for limited-English-proficient court participants, we will continue to air issues — such as vicarious trauma — that can affect the court interpreting profession. In their quests for justice, survivors depend on court interpreters, and court interpreters need to provide a clear line of communication between individuals and the courts. Just as we support survivors, we support comprehensive training, continuing education, and much-needed organizational assistance for court interpreters. Most importantly, we must remind ourselves that we are all human beings, and as humans we have the capacity to feel a whole array of emotions as a part of everyday life — even in the process of enabling justice. ▲

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