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## Ethical Stress in the Translation and Interpreting Professions

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## **Ethical Stress in the Translation and Interpreting Professions**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Translators and interpreters suffer from an onslaught of job stressors. In a working context where time pressures, technology, and competition are increasingly threatening professional linguists, and where translation and interpreting can be transitory, low-status, and poorly-paid occupations (e.g. Dam and Zethsen 2016), it is not difficult to conceive that stressors can impact the productivity and well-being of translators and interpreters. But while a certain amount of stress can be healthy and enhance translation performance, occupational stress that results from disparities between one's ethical values and expected behaviours—known as ethical stress—can have nefarious consequences for individuals and even lead to burnout.

Ethical issues can occur in any translation or interpreting situation where profound moral questions of what is 'right' or 'wrong' underlie professional decision-making. For example, Hermans (2009, 93) recounts the case of the interpreter Günter Deckert who was convicted for interpreting a lecture in which the American Frederic Leuchter denied the existence of gas chambers in Auschwitz, something which is forbidden by law in Germany. Although in this instance the interpreter agreed with Leuchter's claims, Hermans questions whether the conviction was morally justified and whether interpreters assume responsibility for the speeches they interpret. Should they faithfully interpret a speech they consider morally dubious? Interpreters are likely to ask themselves this very question when they are sent out on challenging assignments that conflict with their personal goals, values, or beliefs (Bontempo and Malcolm 2012). Similarly, translators can find themselves in situations where they have to translate texts whose ideological content is offensive to them or situations where they have to compromise their professional ethics (Abdallah 2010). Otherwise they may face loss of employment, disgrace, or worse. Making ethical decisions in these contexts can be

particularly challenging, and this is exacerbated by the fact that ‘it is not always possible for the translator to know to just what ends their translation will ultimately be put’ (McAlester 2003, 226). Translators and interpreters are part of a complex network of people (or ‘agents’) who can be affected by the ethical decisions they make. As a result, ethical decision-making can be stressful, mentally draining, and even impair our progress to becoming human beings in an existential sense.

## **HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY AND CORE ISSUES**

### **Interpreting and translating as stressful professions**

When translators and interpreters experience stress, this means that they are experiencing a state whereby the demands being placed upon them exceed the internal or external supports and coping resources that they are able to mobilize (Bontempo and Malcolm 2012). Research on the stresses that translators can experience in the course of their work is fragmentary, and has usually been limited to accounts of the efforts required to deliver work of high quality within time constraints (e.g. Eszenyi 2016), or to the stressful and ethically challenging situations that translators can find themselves entangled in, for example when translating for politicians in times of war (e.g. Apter 2007). However, empirical work on these pragmatic aspects of professional translation is still relatively limited. In contrast, interpreting has often been conceptualised as an inherently stressful occupation, and it has been empirically tested as such (Heller et al. 1986; Moser-Mercer, Künzli, and Korac 1998; Kurz 2002, 2003; Kállay 2011; Korpál 2016). As Bontempo and Malcolm (2012, 107) observe: ‘interpreters often lack the contextual information to make sense of an interaction; they have limited control over the workload and the pace of information delivery. Assignments that conflict with personal goals, values, or beliefs can cause intense stress, and the management of complex message transfer

among parties can often be challenging.’ Over the years, several experimental studies have investigated the notion of stress as experienced by conference interpreters in particular. For example, as early as 1982 the Research Committee of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) conducted a landmark study on stress in conference interpreting (Cooper, Davies, and Tung 1982); Klonowicz (1994) analysed interpreters’ physiological stress responses and management of energy resources during information processing; Moser-Mercer, Künzli and Korac (1998) investigated the effect of prolonged turns on interpreters’ stress and the quality of interpretation; and, more recently, Roziner and Shlesinger (2010) conducted a large-scale experimental study designed to evaluate the implications of the use of remote interpreting (RI) in large multilingual conferences which included measures of stress. While the majority of these studies have been concerned with physiological responses to stress (e.g. heart rate, blood pressure), a few also tackled self-reported stress and anxiety with the help of psychometric instruments (e.g. Chiang 2009, 2010; Kao and Craigie 2013). The stress suffered by translators and interpreters in community settings (criminal justice, health, social work, etc.) has also attracted increasing attention in recent years (e.g. Bontempo and Malcolm 2012; Ndongo-Keller 2015; Valero-Garcés 2015). Despite this growing interest in the pressures that professional linguists experience however, stress studies have predominantly revolved around skill inadequacies or performance expectations (Schwenke, Ashby, and Gnilka 2014, 212). Very little research has been carried out on the psychological repercussions for translators and interpreters of being enmeshed in ethical dilemmas, and no study has yet investigated the impact of ethical stress specifically on translator or interpreter performance.

### **Defining ethical stress**

Much of the work on ethical stress has occurred in the nursing and social work literature, presumably due to the frequency and manifest nature of ethical issues and moral quandaries occurring in welfare-related work. The core ideas of existential theory—a branch of philosophy that deals with existential questions—provide the philosophical background for the conceptualisation of ethical stress, as existential psychology emphasises the need to be true to oneself and to take responsibility for decisions made (Taylor 2007, 91).

Ethics-related stress has been formally defined as an occupational stress ‘resulting from disparities in the ethical values and expected behaviour of employees’ (DeTienne et al. 2012, 377-78). Put simply, when one’s values and actions are at odds, this creates a specific kind of stress which can lead to dissatisfaction or even to leaving one’s employment. Ethical stress is thought to encompass two key components: disjuncture and ontological guilt (Fenton 2015). While disjuncture (also known as dissonance) relates to the painful feelings of inauthenticity that individuals experience when their values and feelings do not align with their actions (e.g. value/practice congruence), ontological guilt refers more specifically to the associated *guilt* that one experiences when it is not possible to act in accordance with one’s values (Taylor 2007). It is worth noting that ontological guilt differs from the concept of ontological anxiety, which is ‘the healthy anxiety experienced when a person does what they believe is the “right thing” and feels a consequential anxiety because of the element of risk involved’ (Fenton 2015, 1417). We will return to the concept of risk-taking in the next section.

Together, disjuncture/dissonance and ontological guilt can cause moral distress, a term often used interchangeably with ethical stress in the wider (psychological) literature (DeTienne et al. 2012, 378). Moral distress is accompanied by feelings of powerlessness and lack of control over a situation, and this lack of control regarding ethical behaviour—combined with other factors such as minimal social support—has a number of implications

for both the individual and the workplace (Ulrich et al. 2010; DeTienne et al. 2012; Davis et al. 2018).

It is worth bearing in mind that, although ethics can be equated with morality, the two concepts have sometimes been differentiated in the Translation Studies literature. Koskinen (2000, 11) for instance has defined morality as a characteristic of individuals, and ethics as a community's collective effort to devise codes of practice in relation to accepted moral behaviour. Regardless of the terminology employed, this chapter will focus on the former concept as the aim is to shed light on translators' experience(s) of moral dilemmas and on the personal consequences for the individual of making certain moral choices.

According to O'Donnell et al. (2008, 32), three specific factors determine the nature of ethical issues in organisational settings and the ways in which these are perceived and addressed: (1) the person's position or role in the organisation, (2) the resources or support available to address ethical dilemmas, and (3) the sources of (dis)satisfaction within the work environment. Indeed, the person's role dictates the degree to which s/he is involved in ethical decision-making and moral action; the availability of peers and ethics committees (also known as the 'ethical climate') enables important consultations and discussions to take place; and individual factors such as self-motivation, self-efficacy, or strong working relationships are powerful sources of job satisfaction. These factors are linked and, together, they can be said to predict ethical stress (see Figure 1). For example, if there is a positive ethical climate within an institution and individuals have access to mentors to discuss ethical issues, it is likely that they will feel involved in the decision-making process and be in a better position to take moral action. In turn, this may impact positively on their self-confidence and career satisfaction. Conversely, a negative ethical climate will engender ethical stress, make it less likely that moral action is taken, and lead to frustration and potential intention to leave the workplace (e.g. O'Donnell et al. 2008, 43).



Figure 1. Factors influencing ethical stress

While the focus in this chapter is on the consequences for the individual translator/interpreter of ethical stress suffered when there is no alignment between their values and their actions, it is nevertheless important to understand the conditions that lead to a state of ethical stress. In her research, Abdallah (2010, 41) pointed out three factors that discourage translators from exercising agency: lack of trust between involved parties, lack of support for the translator, and lack of necessary information. These issues mirror those identified above, and were also shown to lead to ethical stress, to certain unethical behaviours, and to moral hazard which results from relevant information being withheld from translators, leading to unscrupulous or opportunistic behaviour (op cit). Similarly, in a study of signed language interpreters' experience of occupational stress, Hetherington (2011) indicated that occupational stress is compounded when interpreters lack recognition for their work and do not have recourse to organizational support structures or established frameworks for reflective practice, as these would provide support for interpreters to work both safely and ethically.

Professional bodies, educational institutions, and others involved in the professionalisation of the discipline undoubtedly have an important role to play in engaging translators and interpreters in difficult ethical conversations and empowering them to make ethical decisions

confidently. It is important to recognise that ethical issues evolve from the social, cultural, and organisational environment in which one is embedded (Ulrich et al. 2010).

## **NEW DEBATES AND EMERGING ISSUES**

The remainder of this chapter focuses on emerging issues and debates that have begun to attract attention in the translation and interpreting literature, namely professional dissonance, moral injury, vicarious trauma and burnout.

### **Professional dissonance**

The disjuncture and associated guilt that provoke ethical stress have recently been discussed under the label of professional dissonance, that is, ‘a feeling of discomfort arising from the conflict between professional values and job tasks’ (Taylor 2007, 90). Professional dissonance has its roots in cognitive dissonance theory and relates to the burnout literature as it attempts to understand the inner lives of individuals and how their thoughts and actions may contribute to burnout (Taylor 2007, 95). While dissonance can eventually lead to greater professional and personal growth, value collisions can also be a source of great psychological pain. Professional translator and scholar Francis Jones provides a good example of dissonance where ethical considerations come into play. In an article written in 2004, Jones discusses the socio-ethical dilemmas and decisions he faced while translating Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian literature into English during the 1990s. Viewing translation as both a textual and an extra-textual action, Jones highlights that the translator can struggle to take into account the interests and wishes of all of the different parties involved, and that translation decisions do not always prevent a ‘sense of inner conflict’ (Jones 2004, 721). This cognitive dissonance is also apparent in the stories of the professional translators interviewed by Abdallah, as their desire to produce quality work for readers in line with their professional



ethics often conflicts with an agency's goal to keep costs to a minimum: 'conflicts of quality arise [...] when the translator as the agent tries to satisfy the unaligned demands of [...] the reader and the translation company. [This] causes translators much consternation, in some cases even ethical stress' (Abdallah 2010, 24). In fact, I would wager that, more than ethical stress, working in these sub-optimal conditions where they have to compromise their ethical or moral convictions could provoke what Fenton and Kelly call 'moral injury' which results from 'sustained managerial, formulaic and procedural expectations that constrain or inhibit value-based, responsive practice' (2017, 463). Indeed, Abdallah (2010, 37) argues that capitalist institutions and global companies do not value experience, craftsmanship or accomplishment, and have very hierarchical and rigid structures which create unbearable working conditions for professional translators, and engender feelings of powerlessness.

It would seem that translators and interpreters are more likely to experience ethical stress and moral injury when they work in a rigid system where there is little opportunity to voice concerns or to discuss ethical decisions with agencies, clients and other involved parties. When there are few opportunities to communicate with clients or to discuss risky translation decisions and there is a perceived or real emphasis on making justifiable decisions, this creates a risk-averse climate where individuals are encouraged to look after their own interests. As Fenton and Kelly (2017) argue, ethical impulses and value-based practice are undermined in risk-averse environments, where it becomes more important to show that you 'have done things right' rather than that you 'have done the right thing.'

Doing the right thing, however, is a risky business. According to Pym (2004) 'risk' in translation is the probability of an undesired outcome in a communication situation, such as the risk of not getting paid, or of losing a client. There is risk involved in solving specific translation problems too, with some problems involving low risks (limited possibility of an undesired outcome) and others involving greater risks. To manage these risks, Pym (2015)

explains that there should exist a kind of mutual trust between the translator, the client, and the end-user. However, this trust carries its own risks and is threatened by possible misunderstandings, betrayals, and non-cooperation inherent in translation activities. As such, Pym (2015, 76-77) suggests that translators may be risk-averse, playing it safe—for instance, explicating and simplifying texts to make comprehension easier and reduce the risk of misunderstanding. The blame, however, does not lie solely with translators but with the translation industry more widely. Abdallah's work suggests that translators act in self-protecting ways when they do not receive support from others in translation production networks. For translators to be able to offer risky solutions or to exercise agency, they need to work with people and institutions who are not wholly preoccupied with risk or afraid of its complexity in case something goes awry. More than a question of providing rewards for risk-taking, as Pym suggests, translators and interpreters need to work in frameworks that value different perspectives, a flexible and positive view of risk-taking, and that enable relationship building with the different parties involved. Excessively bureaucratic, defensive, and procedural environments seem to be where ethical stress and moral injury thrive (Fenton and Kelly 2017).

A word of caution is therefore perhaps in order for those involved in the translation and interpreting industries. Encouraging a risk-averse and defensive culture of practice will constrain and inhibit ethical decision-making. Efforts to establish risk matrices and models of comprehensive risk management for translations (e.g. Canfora and Ottmann 2018) are valuable enterprises, but we must be careful that these structured processes aiming to identify, analyse and evaluate 'all the risks which are related to translations' (Canfora and Ottmann 2016, 3) do not end up being used as formulaic, procedural, managerial tools that contribute to further disassociating translators and interpreters from the affective experience of ethical decision-making. Fenton and Kelly highlight that '[breaking] processes down into

discreet tasks means that people become only interested in the completion of their task well, and feel dissociated from the eventual, actual outcome' (2017, 467). As Abdallah notes (2010, 43), translators need to be able to participate as legitimate experts in translation production networks in the interests of all parties, and not be made to solve morality conflicts on their own or to pass on this responsibility entirely on to someone else.

When translators and interpreters can act in line with their conscience or values, they will experience less ontological guilt (or ethical stress) but more ontological anxiety, a normal consequence of being able to make the best possible decision for the client, rather than the most easily defended one (Fenton 2015, 1421). Although one might question whether, in today's blame culture, taking risks and embracing anxiety is feasible, research carried out in other fields (e.g. Ulrich et al. 2010; McLennan, Ryan, and Randall 2018) has shown that workers are less ethically stressed and emotionally exhausted when they are trusted to make use of their own professional and moral judgements in line with their moral compass.

The links between ethical stress and emotions are, therefore, worthy of further research. It is noteworthy that emotional dissonance—a conceptual subset of cognitive dissonance—is well-known to be associated with employee psychological stress. Emotional dissonance refers to 'the psychological incongruence and conflict experienced by individuals who display emotions that differ from the emotions they are experiencing internally' (Kenworthy et al. 2014, 95). It is said to occur when an individual's expressed emotions are considered acceptable by their organisation/employer but do not represent their own true feelings (Karimi et al. 2014, 3). A typical scenario would be one whereby interpreters are faking emotional displays or expressions in an attempt to remain unemotional and neutral with their clients at work. The internal conflict generated entails emotional labour, as regulating emotions depletes the cognitive resources and energy of translators and interpreters, eventually resulting in poorer intellectual performance (e.g. Kenworthy et al. 2014). The

emotional dissonance literature suggests that this type of discrepancy between expressed and felt emotions can have a significant impact on ethical and moral behaviours, as well as general well-being (Nelson and Merighi 2002; Berger 2014; Grootegoed and Smith 2018). As such, the emotional component of ethical stress will be further explored in the next section.

### **Moral injury**

Paying attention to issues of ethical stress is germane to the T&I professions as it can be argued that translators and interpreters are especially vulnerable to its more distressing consequences, that is, moral injury and burnout. Indeed, the inauthentic feelings associated with the professional dissonance component of ethical stress are already integral to this type of intercultural mediation. Translators and interpreters are naturally wont to act and behave with a certain level of inauthenticity as their work involves ‘guises and masks’ (Allen and Bernofsky 2013, xix). Their views, values, objectives, and feelings rarely align fully with those of their clients, particularly when mediating between different stakeholders and cultures; yet, it is expected that they reformulate and reproduce these views, values, objectives, and feelings in another language as part of their everyday practice.

This regular exigence requires effortful self-control so as to prioritize work-related objectives (Gross and John 2003; Mikolajczak, Menil, and Luminet 2007; Beal et al. 2013). Translators and interpreters will have been trained to behave professionally and abide by codes of conduct, and it is likely that they employ a range of coping strategies to repress any dissonance, powerlessness, or guilt that may ensue from misalignments between their values and their tasks. As noted elsewhere, translators ‘need to create such an attitude toward their work so that they can tolerate the given conditions, retain their self-respect, and find their role somehow meaningful’ (Abdallah 2010, 30, citing Alasuutari). Nevertheless, the inauthentic nature of their roles requires them to work hard to stay ‘in control’, particularly if the work is

emotionally-laden. In Roberts's 2015 study of the emotional and psychological impact of interpreting within public service settings, participants reported being able to cope with the emotional impact of the conversations they were interpreting because of the technical and professional elements of the session which gave them focus. The intellectual input required helped interpreters to manage the emotional demands of the interaction. Similarly, interpreters employed at the International Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR) reported using a range of cognitive coping strategies in order to be able to reproduce harrowing testimonies, such as pretending the testimony was unreal or thinking about similar accounts read in books (Swain 2011).

Similarly, there is ample evidence in both spoken-language and sign-language interpreting that the demanding nature of their work often requires interpreters to carry out intense emotional labour (Hetherington 2011; Bontempo and Malcolm 2012; Mehus and Becher 2016; Valero-Garcés 2017). This cognitive and emotional work, as mentioned previously, strains their mental resources and results in a state of fatigue which provides fertile ground for stress to take root. When moral conflict is added to the mix, the psychological resources of translators and interpreters are likely to become overly-taxed and trigger a situation of distress.

Some vivid examples of this concurrence of circumstances can be found in community interpreting settings, and especially in trauma-informed interpreting which is a more intense and emotionally-demanding version of community interpreting. The requirement to continually balance competing and differing perspectives, manage complex interactions, and exercise controlled empathy while making important translation decisions has been found to create significant challenges for language professionals interpreting in public service settings. Bancroft (2017) reports that community interpreters can find it difficult to maintain professional and role boundaries and tend not to be prepared for their own emotional

involvement. Indeed, the author demonstrates that an important majority of interpreters for victims and refugees report being emotionally impacted by their work, something which affects their impartiality and can lead to situations of burnout and vicarious trauma. This situation is compounded when they have to work with stakeholders in adversarial situations where interests are in conflict. For instance, in Tryuk's (2017) research on refugee hearings in Warsaw, she learnt that a number of immigration officers believed that interpreters should take control and act without waiting for permission in situations of high tension and conflict with so-called aggressive foreigners. Immigration officers also asserted that they expected help from interpreters to conduct interviews and maintain order during hearings (sometimes by reprimanding foreigners or evaluating their credibility), and some officers even stated that 'interpreters should "get close" to the foreigner so that the officer can achieve his/her goal' (Tryuk 2017, 186).

These practices clearly show that interpreters—who will already be dedicating significant resources to the cognitive and affective demands of their task—can find themselves bearing witness to (or pressured to take part in) unethical behaviours that violate their ideals, moral values, and professional codes, and could thus easily trigger both ethical stress and moral injury. Indeed, in the psychological trauma literature, moral injury is defined as (1) a betrayal of what's right, (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority, (3) in a high-stakes situation (Shay 2014, 183). Interpreters and translators working in various public service settings are likely to be particularly vulnerable, due to repeated exposure to these problematic situations. The interpreters in refugee hearings in Poland, for instance, are regularly required to breach the principles of invisibility, impartiality, neutrality, and faithfulness (Tryuk 2017, 191) thus habituating them to experiences that fail to conform to their schematic beliefs about their role.

Taken to the extreme, this type of situation will result in altered beliefs about the world and the self, deteriorate character, and impair capacity for trust: ‘when social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by the settled expectancy of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others. With this expectancy, there are few options: strike first; withdraw and isolate oneself from others [...] or create deceptions, distractions, false identities, and narratives to spoil the aim of what is expected’ (Shay 2014, 186). A clear example of the distressing consequences that taking part in morally injurious acts can have is recounted in Lan’s 2016 research on Taiwanese individuals who performed interpreting in military operations during wartime. These interpreters were for the majority convicted as war criminals, and sentenced to death. Lan (2016) reports that the executions were due to ill-treatment, interrogations, and torture of local civilian residents, unethical actions which the interpreters were generally forced into and had little control over. Placed in a situation where trust had been destroyed and they were disempowered, the interpreters expected harm and would ‘strike first’, i.e. participate in killings, for fear of retaliation. Civilian interpreter Yoneda’s testimony illustrates how one such act of transgression unfolded: ‘I thought it was not my duty to kill [...] when I objected [...] Awano came very close to me and told me that [...] he would kill me [...] I thought he would carry out the threat’ (Lan 2016, 216). Taiwanese interpreters were clearly victims of moral injury but not all of their unethical actions were a result of coercion. Lan reports that some interpreters took it upon themselves to further chastise, threaten, and humiliate the local populations. Similarly, Takeda (2016, 231) reports that some Japanese interpreters and translators post-World War II were prosecuted for the torture, assault, and killing of civilians in Japanese-occupied regions. In clinical psychology, this type of harmful behaviour is considered a relatively common response to ethical stress and moral injury, whereby negative emotions such as guilt and shame can lead to harmful acts for the self and others, and shape ongoing moral behaviours. Litz et al. (2009, 697-98) underscore the importance of these

subjective responses to unethical behaviour which lead to lasting psychological and social impacts:

[...] moral injury involves an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness. How this dissonance or conflict is reconciled is one of the key determinants of injury. If individuals are unable to assimilate or accommodate (integrate) the event within existing self- and relational-schemas, they will experience guilt, shame, and anxiety about potential dire personal consequences. (Litz et al. 2009, 698)

Reconciling dissonance and repairing moral injury is extremely difficult, but possible. As Shay (2014, 189-91) indicates, the potential for successful recovery lies in recognizing moral injury, empowering individuals, and creating and supporting a safe environment with support and recognition by peers. The following example illustrates this process effectively.

Brander de la Iglesia (2017) recounts the experience of Camayd-Freixas who was summoned to interpret at the hearings of 306 illegal immigrant workers who had been arrested and accused of falsifying social security documents. A guilty plea would send them to prison for a month, but if they pleaded not guilty they would remain in prison for over a year pending trial. Camayd-Freixas witnessed a number of irregularities during the trial, such as the chaining of prisoners (unwarranted in the situation) and their lack of understanding of what they were accused of. This set of circumstances qualifies as morally injurious as it consists of a betrayal of what is right by an authority in a high-stakes situation. The interpreter witnessed an act that violated his moral values but could not speak of it to anyone, in part because doing so would have prolonged the trial and prevented the immigrants from returning home to their families. Nevertheless, he found a way to cope with this destruction



of social trust by publishing an article in the local press about his experience once the immigrants were home safely. Despite the debate that ensued in the interpreting community in relation to breaking the rule of confidentiality, Brander de la Iglesia highlights that Camayd-Freixas also gained support and recognition from his peers and was able to recover and grow from the experience. This situation is consonant with the psychological literature which suggests that social support and recognition from peers is ‘an essential ingredient of recovery from moral injury’ (Shay 2014, 189).

Interpreters and translators are therefore able to grow and learn from morally injurious experiences. However, the risks associated with maladaptive responses to ethical stress and moral injury include vicarious trauma and burnout. These are addressed in the next section.

### **Vicarious trauma and burnout**

In the psychological literature, ethical stress (or moral distress) has been associated with low job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, intention to quit, and compassion fatigue (O’Donnell et al. 2008; Mangoulia et al. 2015; Christodoulou-Fella et al. 2017). Compassion fatigue is also sometimes called secondary trauma syndrome or vicarious trauma (VC) and develops in individuals who experience emotional distress as a result of coming in close and continuous contact with victims of trauma (Figley 2002; Ledoux 2015; Gray 2017). It should be noted that, in spite of the many similarities between the two concepts, particularly in terms of symptoms, compassion fatigue is said to apply to a broad range of professionals whereas VC has been discussed in relation to trauma specialists more specifically (Gray 2017, 121). VC has received some attention in the T&I literature recently, and has been linked to ethically stressful situations and burnout. In the context of interviews with asylum seekers and the police in Finland, Määttä (2015) highlights that interpreters’ decisions to intervene, for example to correct an error in a transcript, may result in a conflict between the requirements

of professional ethics, general ethical responsibility towards a fellow human being, and the interpreter's own sense of professionalism. He reports that 'the consequences of the interpreter's decisions do not only affect the migrant but also the interpreter in the form of increased ethical stress, general work stress, and potential vicarious trauma' (Määttä 2015, 32). Similarly, scholars in the field of signed language interpreting have found that exposure to the distress of others and being powerless to prevent discrimination can have a marked impact on interpreters and provoke psychological distress and 'emotional drowning' (Dean and Pollard 2001; Hetherington 2010, 2011; Bontempo and Malcolm 2012).

In Figure 2, I have summarised the conditions that can lead to situations of VC and burnout. Unlike burnout which develops over a period of time, vicarious traumatisation is said to appear more rapidly, though its symptoms can be pervasive (Jordan 2010, 227). It has been shown to result in reduced respect and concern for others and to be associated with poor peer social support, doubting of one's professional competence, and alterations in self-image (Boscarino, Figley, and Adams 2004; Canfield 2005; Gray 2017). Prolonged exposure to situations of ethical stress is also said to decrease the plasticity of the brain and render individuals more susceptible to anxiety, depression, secondary traumatic stress symptoms, as well as burnout (Christodoulou-Fella et al. 2017). This is borne out in the context of trauma-informed interpreting, as Bancroft (2017, 209) describes the symptoms of VC in the following terms: 'interpreters reported getting dizzy, nauseated or fearful after sessions with survivors. They had nightmares or disturbed sleep. Their concentration was disrupted during interpreting. They had difficulty getting certain stories or images out of their head [...] they might shake or tremble. Most distressing of all was the degree to which a number of interpreters simply burned out.' Other common symptoms of VC can include social withdrawal, aggression, greater sensitivity to violence, cynicism, numbness, sexual difficulties, eating disorders, helplessness, difficulty in relationships, etc. The use of the first

person in interpreting can intensify the embodiment of emotions and enhance its traumatic impact. Ndongo-Keller (2015, 337) provides a clear description of this predicament when discussing the experience of interpreters of surviving witnesses at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda: ‘It is they who provided the first-person voices in these stories: “I killed,” “I raped,” “I was raped”, “I slaughtered”, “I beat”, “I was stabbed,” “I was abused,” “I was beaten”, “my child was hacked into pieces”, “my mother was buried alive”, “all my family members were killed”. Repeatedly, the interpreters listened, visualised, analysed, understood and re-expressed what they heard [...] She had become one of the victims, feeling everything they narrated.’

However, VC is not the sole prerogative of interpreters, and professional translators have also been shown to borrow others’ emotions through processes of emotional sharing when translating and are therefore also susceptible to emotional contagion and manifestation of VC (Maier 2002, 2006; Hubscher-Davidson 2017). One clear example is reported in Ndongo-Keller (2015) where the act of translating witness statements (or ‘gory narratives’) from interviews with genocide victims is described as traumatizing.

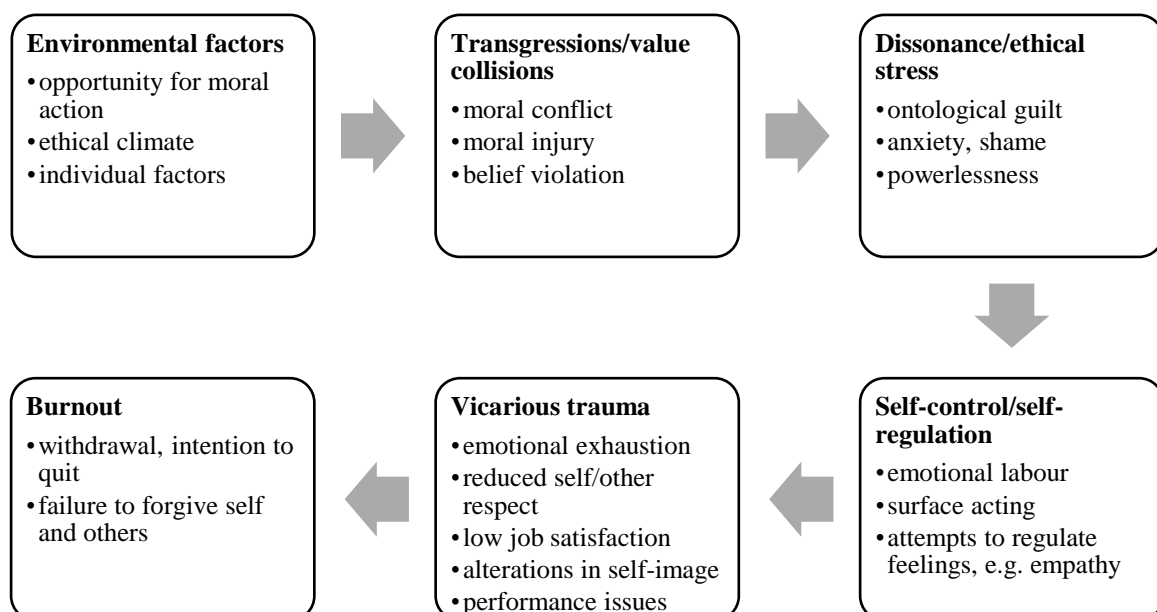


Figure 2. A process model of the conditions that can lead to vicarious trauma and burnout

It is important to note, however, that different factors can influence well-being outcomes (e.g. resilience, self-esteem, conscientiousness, life satisfaction, prior experience) and that situations of ethical stress and emotional labour do not always result in burnout. Those who have experienced VC can also eventually experience vicarious transformation, that is, renewed hope, spiritual growth, and a greater appreciation for life. There are also instances where dissonant cognitions will not produce dissonance effects, for example when there is sufficient justification for a particular behaviour (Pugh, Groth, and Hennig-Thurau 2011). Nevertheless, given certain conditions, it is clear that translators and interpreters can be particularly vulnerable to VC and to burnout, and there is currently a lack of information about the various ways in which they can be affected by situations of ethical stress.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, although there is an increasing body of literature describing ethical issues that translators and interpreters can experience in the course of their work, there remains a dearth of information when it comes to the moral conflict-tainted psychological repercussions on professional linguists of being enmeshed in ethical dilemmas. Translation scholars have paid little attention to the links between job stress and the body of research on cognitive dissonance, despite the fact that conflict between personal values and job demands often leads to undesirable consequences.

Translators' and interpreters' exposure to situations of ethical stress can exact a high personal cost, and they may find themselves 'making a trade-off between work they want to do and work they have to do' (Leiter and Maslach 2008, 501). The implication is that linguists who are unable to practice in accordance with their value base have a choice as to their level of engagement with tasks, with ethical issues, and with the profession as a whole.

Valero Garcés (2015, 95) provides a telling example of an interpreter who felt so uneasy when interpreting content that conflicted with her moral and religious beliefs that she refused subsequent work on these topics. Translators and interpreters do not always have this option, however, and unchecked ethical stress may cause irreparable damage to their mental health and wellbeing in the shape of moral injury, vicarious trauma, and burnout.

The focus on translator psychology that is promoted here is consistent with Pym's (2012) aim to focus on the human actor in complex situations of cultural mediation, and his argument that translator ethics needs to address translators 'in their inner core' (2012, 165). The idea that translators should demand reasonable working conditions and that, in some situations, it may be advantageous not to translate at all is also consonant with McAlester's (2003, 226) argument that 'ultimately, translators' responsibility is not to the author, or the reader, or the commissioner, or to the translating profession but to themselves'.

Nevertheless, one might argue that educators, employers, and professional associations also have a duty-of-care when it comes to supporting linguists. Translators and interpreters need to become self-aware and learn about adaptive responses and coping strategies when encountering ethically stressful situations; they need guidance when it comes to attending to their own emotional, spiritual, psychological and physical needs; they need to be taught preventive measures to manage their stress and solutions for processing challenging experiences. As Koskinen notes (2016, 176) 'when things become complicated, when the personal and the professional enter into conflict, and when there seems to be no right course of action, [...] one needs solid bearings.' These solid bearings can take many forms: social support networks of peers, role plays, counselling sessions, ethics consultations, open discussions with clients and managers etc. Above all, it is now clear that the provision of positive support for ethical reflection is an occupational health and safety issue for the translation and interpreting professions.

## **Related topics**

Translator ethics; professional translator; translating and interpreting in conflict; other guardians: editors, revisers, censors, publishing agents.

## **Further reading**

Valero-Garcés, Carmen, and Rebecca Tipton, eds. 2017. *Ideology, Ethics and Policy Development in Public Service Interpreting and Translation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

A collection of chapters that brings together new perspectives on responses to ethical imperatives, and highlights how issues of professionalisation and policymaking can impact on the health and well-being of translators and interpreters.

Abdallah, Kristiina. 2010. "Translators' Agency in Production Networks." In *Translators' Agency*, edited by Tuija Kinnunen and Kaisa Koskinen, 11-46. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

This chapter is rooted in the surrounding practices and professional environments of translators, and tackles concepts such as quality-related ethical stress, trust, and the role of agency in decision-making.

Takeda, Kayoko, and Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, eds. 2016. *New Insights in the History of Interpreting*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

A collection of essays which explore a variety of aspects linked to interpreting practice from fresh perspectives, such as the notions of guilt, ethical conduct, and risk analysis.

Hubscher-Davidson, Séverine. 2017. *Translation and Emotion – A Psychological Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.

A volume tackling professional translators' experiences of translating emotion-laden texts, and which addresses—amongst other issues—cognitive dissonance, burnout, and coping mechanisms.

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