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## Deaf academics' perceptions of 'trust' in relationships with signed language interpreters

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**Abstract:** The concept of 'trust' is frequently used when discussing the working relationship between deaf signers and signed language interpreters, with interpreters often claiming that trust is a prerequisite to a successful interaction. This paper presents original data from an in-depth research project which used collaborative autoethnography to gather the experiences of seven deaf academics who work regularly with British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, who interpret between BSL and spoken English, to analyse the concept of 'trust' in our working relations with BSL interpreters. We found that 'trust' is not a useful or productive concept for our interpersonal and professional aims. Instead, we outline multiple ways in which deaf academics can assess and evaluate interpreters' values, competencies, and performance without relying on 'trust'. Our findings provide an important, powerful and under-explored perspective on the working relations between deaf academics and interpreters. We suggest these findings can be applied by deaf BSL signers and interpreters in contexts beyond academia, and constitute an important contribution to the literature on interpreting.

**Keywords:** Deaf; signed languages; interpreting; signed language interpreting; trust

## 1. Introduction

The concept of ‘trust’ is frequently used when discussing the working relationship between deaf people and interpreters (Napier, 2011; Hetherington, 2011; Napier et al., 2017). The entry for ‘trust’ in the national BSL SignBank includes several English keywords indicating how this word and concept is commonly used by deaf BSL signers and hearing interpreters alike (BSL SignBank, n.d.). These include: ‘truth’, ‘fact’, ‘reality’, ‘trust’, ‘certain’, ‘honestly’, and many others. The use of this concept in both English and BSL attests to its important role as a working concept within community discourses about interpreting between deaf BSL signers and interpreters.

Despite its profligacy, this concept is rarely interrogated equitably (see Holcomb, 2018; Foster, 2018). Most literature exploring the relationships between sign language interpreters and deaf people explores ‘trust’ from the perspective of interpreters (e.g., Napier et al., 2019; Llewellyn-Jones & Lee 2013; Hetherington, 2012). These studies tend to conclude that deaf people should trust interpreters, indeed, even show “anticipatory trust”, meaning “trust as a prerequisite rather than... trust gained through experiences” (Napier et al., 2019, p.90). These studies also tend to conclude that this trust is essential for effective interpretation. In a recent exploration of deaf people’s experience of being interpreted, Young et al. (2019) mention ‘trust’ only in passing, as something that is needed to build working relationships (p. 360). The literature is therefore missing an in-depth exploration of deaf people’s perspectives on this concept. This paper begins to fill that gap by interrogating what it means for deaf academics to ‘trust’ signed language interpreters. In doing so, we find ourselves at odds with the dominant signed language interpreting discourse. We argue that the concept of ‘trust’ should be rejected and replaced with ‘proof of competence’ and ‘demonstrated skill’.

We, the authors, are seven deaf academics with experience of working in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. We represent different genders, sexualities, ethnicities and nationalities. We also have different language and education backgrounds, with varied ages of exposure to signed languages. Some of us were born into signing deaf families, and some into signing hearing families. Some have a signed L1, some have English as an L1 followed by a signed L2 learned in late childhood or early adulthood. Quite a few of us have worked with interpreters and participated in interpreted interactions since childhood, including with family members who worked as interpreters. Others only became aware of interpreting as a profession later on in life, when we entered higher education as young adults and students.

All the authors have been, or currently are, participants in the UK Government’s Access to Work (AtW) scheme, which in principle allows us to choose which interpreters we work with. This puts us in a privileged position in the workplace compared to deaf signers who do not receive AtW funding, or compared to deaf signers in countries where such schemes do not exist. As academics it could be argued we are privileged in the sense that our work is relatively high prestige, a quality which can make our work more attractive for interpreters. However, we often find that the opposite is true, whereby interpreters become intimidated by the thought of interpreting at conferences, lectures and other academic contexts, which can limit the choice we can actually exercise.

However, like many other deaf signers, we do not enjoy this privilege of choice in medical appointments or other contexts outside higher education, as these interpreters are usually booked without taking the deaf signer’s preferences into account. What privilege we have offers us an under-explored perspective on the relationships between deaf signers and interpreters, a

perspective which is too often ignored (Sheneman & Robinson, 2019). It enables us to explore what we value in these relationships, to question what the concept of ‘trust’ means, and to consider the extent to which ‘trust’ is a factor influencing how we choose the interpreters we work with.

## 2. Background

Discussions of trust in the relationship between signing deaf people and signed language interpreters in the UK are incomplete without a brief history of the profession. Prior to professionalism, interpreters were friends, family, teachers, clergy or people who otherwise had some knowledge of signed languages (see Stiles, 2019, for some examples from the 1800s onwards). They were not trained interpreters as we understand the term today, and were usually not paid for their work. This was known as the ‘helper’ model of interpreting (Lee, 1997). Due to the lack of qualifications or standardisation of the profession, ‘trust’ -- in the sense that the interpreter knew signed language, that they could understand the deaf person and convey their message -- was presumably an important factor in choosing interpreters. Notwithstanding the Deaf Welfare Examining Board qualification, which covered far more than just interpreting, the presence or absence of ‘trust’ in a person’s ability to interpret interactions was presumably valued.<sup>1</sup>

During the increasing professionalisation of interpreters in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK, including the foundation of a registering body in 1982, external markers of competence became available: proof that interpreters had the training and qualifications to perform their role. While many early interpreters were Children of Deaf Adults (CODA) or people who had extensive contact with deaf people prior to their qualification, this has changed over the years. Interpreters are now coming to the profession as late L2 acquirers of signed language with less contact with deaf communities prior to or after qualification.

This professionalism has limitations. The registration process to practise as a recognised BSL/English interpreter is still a dichotomous process: you are either registered or you are not. There is no official demarcation between interpreters based on skill, specialisation or experience, although some of these issues are now under consideration.<sup>2</sup> This means that there are no real career progression pathways for qualified interpreters once they have passed this assessment. While registration with the UK National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) requires a certain amount of Continuous Professional Development to be undertaken every year, this does not offer opportunities for higher qualifications or structured pay scales which recognise specialist skills and experience.<sup>3</sup> This is a disservice to both interpreters and the people (deaf and hearing) who engage them.

Some deaf signers in some contexts, such as ourselves as deaf academics, are experiencing increasing freedom of informed choice when booking interpreters. This places us in a position to develop ongoing relationships with

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.nrcpd.org.uk/history> for more information on the DWEB qualification and its links to current interpreting practices.

<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.nrcpd.org.uk/joining-a-register>

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.nrcpd.org.uk/continuous-professional-development> for more information about CPD in the NRCPD.

interpreters whom we work with on a regular basis. This paper investigates whether the prevailing concept of ‘trust’ still plays an important role in our choices. What do we mean when we talk about ‘trust’? How is ‘trust’ created? Do deaf academics feel that interpreters ‘trust’ us to an equal extent that we are expected to ‘trust’ interpreters? What alternatives are there to this concept as a working measure, and where should we focus in future to improve the relationships we build and the services that interpreters provide?

### 3. Literature review

Most publications discussing ‘trust’ in the signed language interpreting literature are written by hearing interpreter practitioner/researchers, and deaf signers are often framed as ‘vulnerable’ in discussions around the importance of ‘trust’. There is also little in-depth analysis of what ‘trust’ means, except that deaf people are expected to ‘trust’ the infrastructure (e.g., booking processes, agency selection of interpreters, interpreter self-selection processes) or individuals (e.g., agency booking officers, interpreters) that provide them with interpreter-mediated access. Very few publications covering this issue are written from the perspective of deaf signers, or indeed, written by deaf signers themselves.

At this point, we refrain from offering our own definition of ‘trust’, because it is not clear what role ‘trust’ plays in our interactions with interpreters. Rather, in the next sections we explore what others have said about ‘trust’. We then delineate our own processes for working with interpreters and what this might imply about the role of ‘trust’ in those relationships.

#### *3.1 Hearing interpreter perspectives on ‘trust’*

The literature on signed language interpreters mainly addresses interpreters who are hearing, unless the studies specifically discuss deaf interpreters. Research conducted by hearing interpreters rarely goes into detail defining what is meant by ‘trust’. For example, Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2013) discuss ‘trust’, but not where it comes from or why it is important. Some researchers assume that ‘trust’ is something that develops automatically over time, so long as an interpreter remains involved in a deaf community, without also considering that the nature and quality of involvement might also be relevant, and that individual deaf signers might have their own processes for evaluating interpreters,

As [the interpreter’s] interpreting skills build, and if she maintains her involvement in the Deaf community, her reputation will also build. Other members of the community too will naturally begin to trust her. (Janzen, 2005, 187)

Others presumably draw upon community discourses around certain sign ideologies to emphasise how ‘trust’ is considered important by deaf people, but do not actually define what is meant by this term. De Wit and Sluis (2012), two hearing interpreters who surveyed deaf signers in the Netherlands, use ‘trust’ to refer to two separate issues: (1) assuming an interpreter provides a faithful interpretation; and (2) assuming the interpreter will adhere to expectations of confidentiality. These two expectations are usually covered by interpreter organisations’ code of practice and are claimed to be fundamental professional requirements of the role. Similarly, Haug et al. (2017) explicitly mention ‘trust’ as something deaf individuals emphasised in their relationships with interpreters, but do not interrogate what was meant by the term.

Hetherington (2012, p. 51) states that interpreters aim to develop ‘trusting’ relationships with clients while “judging how much self-disclosure is appropriate” and continuing to maintain ethical boundaries. Similarly, Alley (2012, p.117) discusses how video remote interpreting is not suitable for mental health contexts because of the need for a “high degree of trust between interpreter and patient, and trust is more easily acquired in face-to-face settings”. This suggests that ‘trust’ is seen as something to be acquired from the deaf person, while the interpreter maintains a professional distance. In this model, we see that ‘trust’ is not seen as a two-way collaboration of equals.

Mapson and Major (2021) focused on interpreters’ “relational work”. This refers to interpreters’ ability to understand how deaf signers engage with deaf and hearing people in the workplace. Their aim was to highlight the importance of the interpreter being present in regular bookings, in order to understand the intricate dynamics which evolve in the workplace. However, this model does not seem to consider how the deaf signer might understand intimately the details of their own workplace relations and brief the interpreter appropriately. While it is of course vital to consider interpersonal and workplace relations, this suggests that deaf signers are more passive in interpreted interactions than might actually be the case.

Napier et al. (2017) discuss ‘trust’ in depth, but focus on hearing BSL interpreters’ feelings about ‘trust’ and whether they feel ‘trusted’ by deaf people (p.79). Indeed, Napier et al. state that deaf people must have “anticipatory trust” in interpreters: “trust as a prerequisite rather than trust enacted through interaction of trust gained through experiences” (p.79). This suggests a definition of ‘trust’ that has no grounds in proof of competency on the part of the interpreter.

The various perspectives on ‘trust’ summarised above point towards a non-reciprocal, unequal relationship between deaf people and interpreters, in which interpreters expect deaf signers to open up to them, while they themselves maintain a professional distance. We suggest that ‘trust’ may not be the best term to describe this type of relationship. McDermid summarises this point of view precisely: “Deaf individuals are being asked to give their trust to someone they have not met before, who has no prior or even current connection to their community, and who might not understand their values and culture” (McDermid, 2009, p. 111). In these cases, ‘trust’ is often a recipe for harm.

### ***3.2 Deaf scholars’ perspectives***

One notable exception in considering deaf signers’ perspectives in the hearing interpreter literature is Chua et al.’s (2022) survey of deaf leaders. While ‘trust’ was mentioned by deaf leaders as important for working successfully with interpreters, they also emphasised the importance of interpreters ‘trusting’ the deaf signer as well. This suggests that deaf leaders might have much stronger feelings about the necessity of a reciprocal relationship.

In Holcomb and Smith’s (2018) volume of essays written about interpreting by deaf academics, several touch on the topic of ‘trust’. Cagle et al. (2018) discussed how newer interpreters should find ‘trusted’ deaf signers, as well as ‘veteran’ interpreters for mentorship. Holcomb and Aguilar (2018) and Smith and Ogden (2018) both discussed ‘trust’ and a related concept, ‘allyship’. Suggs (2018, p.17) quoted a self-help book written by Brené Brown: “Trust is a product of vulnerability that grows over time and requires work, attention and full engagement”. However, Suggs did not examine the power dynamics or other factors that might lead to states of vulnerability in the first place. Sheneman (2018) also highlighted how establishing personal connection is important in initiating ‘trust’.

Overall, while there is some engagement with the topic of ‘trust’ in these chapters, this engagement is neither deep nor analytical. The strengths of these chapters lie elsewhere in their analysis of different aspects of the dynamics between deaf signer and interpreter. However, one chapter which does go into more depth about ‘trust’ is Holcomb’s own chapter on team interpreting. We discuss this approach below.

### **3.3 The team model**

Holcomb (2018) describes the team model as a way in which to conceptualise how “interpreters work closely with Deaf professionals to ensure the accuracy and success of the interpreted work” (p.166). He discusses ‘trust’ as having many components, including “interdependence and shared goals, which are made possible by qualities such as openness, authenticity, reliability, responsiveness, competence, vulnerability, benevolence, and honesty” (Holcomb, 2018, p.163) and as “a complicated, multidimensional concept that might be influenced both by social trust (e.g., trust in institutional regulations and normative expectations) and interpersonal trust (e.g., repeated interactions and existing identities) not easily achieved in interpreted situations” (Holcomb, 2018, p.164). Holcomb also suggests that deaf signers organise transliteration of the interaction. Rather than simply ‘trusting’ that the source and target messages matched, the process and output of interpreting becomes more transparent. Holcomb suggested that this approach be used because “deaf people deserve more than just being told to trust the interpreters” (ibid, p.29). Hauser, Finch and Hauser’s edited volume on deaf professionals and designated interpreters (2008) also has some discussion of ‘trust’ (e.g., Campbell et al., 2008; Earhart and Hauser, 2008; Oatman, 2008), but again ‘trust’ is not defined in any of these chapters.

In a 2018 autoethnographic study, De Meulder, who is a deaf academic, and Napier and Stone, who are hearing interpreters, wrote that hearing non-signers may not trust interpreters to accurately represent a deaf person’s voice. They also stated that working closely with one another in the designated interpreter model can build a “relationship of trust and mutual respect...” (pp. 8-9). However, the authors also problematize this concept of ‘trust’:

At the same time, however, trusting that an interpreter can produce an accurate and effective rendition can be a ‘leap in the dark’ since most deaf academics do not have a direct, real-time mechanism to monitor how they are being interpreted (De Meulder et al., 2018, p.10).

Yet the question must be asked: why should we need to take a “leap in the dark”? Wouldn’t doing this presume the deaf signer has done no evaluation of the interpreter’s skills to ensure that they can work to the required standard? Does not this deny the fact that we have agency and use it?

Both hearing interpreters in De Meulder et al. (2018) discussed ‘trust’ in a more intuitive sense, broadly aligning with the parameters described in Section 4.1. They state, “Trust is such an important part of the working relationship, and in this instance we trusted our familiarity with academic discourse...” (p.19). They also describe ‘trust’ in an interpersonal sense, in that “Maartje trusted us and that we trusted each other enabled us to have the privilege of representing Maartje’s argument...” (p. 20). However, neither interpreter talked of ‘trusting’ the deaf person in this interaction. Again, this is indicative of a somewhat one-sided understanding of both ‘trust’ and the relationships between deaf signers and hearing interpreters, one which does not acknowledge the deaf signers’ active role in the process.

## **4. Methodology**

### ***4.1 Collaborative autoethnography***

This project was undertaken using collaborative autoethnography (CAE). While there has been some engagement in the field of Deaf Studies and adjacent disciplines with autoethnography (e.g., O'Connell, 2016, 2014), CAE has been less widely used and when it has been used, it is sometimes not explicitly labelled as such. Some recent work which contains elements of engagement with CAE include (Chua et al., 2022) and (Crawley and O'Brien 2020).

According to Chang et al. (2016), CAE is a method that is "simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic" (p. 17). CAE is a way of utilising the study of self offered by autoethnographic methods, but with an addition of multiple perspectives and experiences which "lends itself to greater rigour" and contributes "multiple perspectives on the research" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 598). The collection of shared experiences on a topic strengthens the method by balancing the individual narratives with a shared collective perspective (Blalock and Akehi, 2018; Roy and Uekusa, 2020).

We use CAE to explore the commonalities of our collective experiences as deaf academics and to avoid foregrounding a single person's unique experience. As a group, we are relatively diverse, although bound by the fact that we are all deaf and that we all work in academia. Rather than link specific experiences with individuals, we have attempted to show a collective experience, highlighting those themes which have commonly arisen across our diverse experiences and backgrounds.

### ***4.2 Working collaboratively***

Chang et al. (2016) describe CAE as an iterative process which provides flexibility to data collection as ideas can be revisited and focus changed in light of emerging data and reflexive discussion. A list of questions to elicit initial feelings about or experiences of working with interpreters was uploaded to a shared online file which was accessible to all co-authors. Some examples of questions are: What processes do you use to evaluate an interpreter's competence? How did you develop these processes? What does the concept of 'trust' mean to you in this sort of context? The questions were written to begin conversations and reflections on working with interpreters and to investigate 'trust' from our different experiences and perspectives.

We responded individually to the questions in either BSL or written English. We were then paired up with at least one co-author to review these initial reflections. Further questions and comments were added by each reviewer on these initial texts, and responses from the original authors were collected. Discussion was also carried out via video calls and emails between all co-authors throughout the project. Discussion was therefore multilingual/modal, with contributions in BSL, written English, Auslan and International Sign, which allowed us to explore our thoughts and feelings thoroughly. This allowed us to build a supportive environment in which we knew these difficult and challenging experiences and feelings could be accepted and explored in safe, open and honest ways.

### ***4.3 Thematic analysis***

Once data collection was completed, all authors, in our pairs, used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data provided by ourselves and our reflection partner. When data was written in English, we analysed those written texts. When data was signed, we initially worked with the original signed texts, noting comments and codes using time stamps either in NVIVO



or ELAN (Crasborn and Sloetjes, 2008)<sup>4</sup>. For more detailed coding, signed data were transcribed into written English.

We took an inductive approach to the data, rooting our coding and themes in the data itself. Our coding was most certainly influenced by the discussions we had held throughout the duration of the project, but these discussions were themselves rooted in our data, so were part of our inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 83). We also tried to move beyond what was explicitly written or signed in our data, looking for latent themes rather than analysing the data on a semantic level (Braune and Clarke, 2022). This level of analysis was aided by the fact that we all have lived experience of being deaf and of working with signed language interpreters, so were able to go beyond the surface level of the data to look for deeper patterns and ideologies that had shaped our collective contributions (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

All data was initially coded individually and built up using our own, separately-identified themes. These themes were shared in an online folder, and then discussed as a group and merged into themes which were collectively identified and organised. Examples of themes identified included the risks to deaf people; balance of needs; and interpreter domains and competencies. This discussion allowed us to confront individual bias, by bringing a range of perspectives to the data (Atewologun et al., 2016). This also brought rigour to our analysis by allowing us to discuss, modify and synthesise individually developed codes and themes into a collectively developed analysis which had been jointly reviewed and revised multiple times. In the next section, we present key themes from this analysis relating to choice: choosing interpreters to work with, evaluating interpreters, and developing relationships with interpreters.

## 5. Data analysis

### 5.1 *Choosing interpreters*

Decisions about choosing interpreters for the first time, such as when starting a new job in a new area, were about trying to establish the competency of interpreters without having worked with them before.

One thing that we all agreed on was that the current qualification system is not sufficiently sensitive to interpreters' individual skills or abilities. The NRCPD badge is a 'one size fits all' qualification and does not provide a useful marker of skill or competence in different fields. For many of us, it is a minimum requirement in that we would not work with someone who is not qualified, but the qualification alone does not provide any useful additional information. One person mentioned that where the interpreters did their training was a useful measure of competence:

The Universities of Bristol or Durham, without hesitation...It's their "old school" values, which were so important; their strong allegiance with the community, placing it at the centre of everything. These are values I share.

If interpreters were trained in Bristol or Durham, i.e., "pre-2000 interpreters", it was noted that their values matched closely to the values of deaf communities. Such values included strong allegiance with deaf communities as opposed to working just for career progression and seeing interpreting as a business. Those behaviours are collectively seen as appearing more in "post-2000 interpreters".

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<sup>4</sup> <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>

Many signing communities have developed their own sophisticated vocabularies to identify the different skills, allegiances and attitudes of interpreters. For example, ‘hot’, ‘LAM’ and so on.<sup>5</sup> We also share different ideologies related to the personal background of interpreters, such as CODA (Child of Deaf Adult), SODA (Sibling of Deaf Adult), and NERD (Not Even Related to Deaf). A range of attitudes, values and community engagement and knowledge were key considerations for many when choosing interpreters. There was a strong consensus that an interpreter’s commitment to social justice was important. Being aware of their privileges and knowing how to leverage these privileges to further support deaf development and agency was valued, as was recognising the interpreting profession as a “by-product” of deaf people and sign language communities, and there therefore exists a “symbiotic relationship” between deaf people and interpreters. Some have described this as allyship (e.g., Baker-Shenk, 1991; Witter-Merithew, 1999). However, we collectively feel that what we discussed is more in line with Robinson et al.’s (2019) concept of ‘positive interdependence’, where each of us is recognised and respected in our own right.

Involvement in deaf communities was also identified as an important consideration when selecting interpreters:

Spending time in the deaf community is vital to developing personal relationships with many deaf and hearing people, as well as maintaining and improving their communication and interpreting skills.

Having seen them socially I will come to ‘know’ whether they match the type of person I want to interpret at a particular assignment and I profess that I like to see a human side of Interpreters.

However, involvement in deaf communities does not necessarily equate to interpreting skills. An understanding of the different domains and specific language used in our professional settings may not be retrievable from everyday conversations, and so observing interpreters socially may not provide accurate assessments of their interpreting abilities and quality:

The sort of conversations I would see in the deaf club and the sort of interpreting I would require in work... are completely different... so seeing an interpreter in their social mode wouldn’t necessarily give you an idea of their ability to work at that level?

Other considerations included whether the interpreter’s own political beliefs or values aligned with our own. This was not just about deaf politics, but also involvement in the wider political sphere. For some of us, particularly those who were more politically active, having interpreters who understood the wider political context and consequences of our actions and communications was essential. Interpreters who did not share the same political values were often avoided because we could not be sure that the interpreter had sufficient context and experience to be able to work safely and sensitively in delicate situations. We utilised recommendations from deaf colleagues, hearing colleagues who were fluent in BSL, and interpreters we had worked with previously when choosing which interpreters to work with. We also used recommendations or reputation within our local deaf communities and fields of work to book interpreters on a trial basis:

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Hot’ refers to someone who is exceptionally skilled in BSL. ‘LAM’ refers to a ‘Look at Me’ interpreter who hunts the limelight.

Word of hand<sup>6</sup>, and lack of negative comments about them or their specific qualities... Generally I would trial a person who has been spoken about well, with goodwill, and see where it goes from there.

Such feedback from colleagues or other professionals whose judgement we valued was not just concerned with the act of interpreting. It also considered the overall approach the interpreter takes to their profession. Many of us emphasised the value and importance of interpreters who continue to develop their communication practices and interpreting craft and expertise, including being receptive to both positive and negative feedback. Confidentiality and respect for professional boundaries is critical. The fees interpreters charged and whether these reflected the quality of their work in our specific contexts, their personal behaviour, and attitudes were also discussed. An example was given about interpreters bragging about who they get asked to work with – “elite deaf” – which conflicts with the importance we place on community mindedness and social justice values. All of these factors were identified as topics discussed with trusted colleagues, and which played a role in shaping our choices.

Sometimes social media and internet searches were useful in finding footage of interpreters in action. This provided opportunities to observe the way in which interpreters signed, how they participated in the interpreted interaction, and how they worked in different contexts.

Once an interpreter had been booked, the process of evaluating their competencies began immediately, with email communications being scrutinised to assess their professionalism and fluency in English. For many of us, one of the most important considerations in booking interpreters was whether they would be able to present us well in spoken English:

For me, as an academic, it is so, so important that I am reflected accurately.

For me, quality voice-over takes primacy.

I want to make sure I look good, that my information is presented clearly, accurately and in an engaging manner. That means I really need to know whether a particular person has good skill at interpreting into spoken English.

This demonstrates how proof of competencies in English – even if it was only what could be parsed from the initial written booking exchange – is so important for all deaf signers.

This initial correspondence about the booking was also important to judge what we could expect from the interpreter in addition to their interpreting performance:

Also someone who is excellent with admin, such as prep and being upfront with exactly how they will work in unusual situations, such as social/network interpreting, e.g., how much time they can offer, other constraints, etc.

Being highly prepared for a job as much as possible e.g., discussing and being open with client and co-worker about working practices, engaging and working WITH clients and co-worker and other participants.

We also discussed times when our choices of interpreters can be limited. There may be no option but to work with someone with no proof of competence,

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Word of hand’ is the signed language equivalent of ‘word of mouth’ for spoken languages.

such as when there are only a very few qualified interpreters in a given domain in a particular geographical region. However, this could be a positive in that it can provide interpreters opportunities to gain experience, develop their skills and become competent in working in a particular domain, even though this does come with risks.

The success (or otherwise) of a booking was also evaluated after the event, which influenced our decision on whether to work with that interpreter again or not:

I usually judge this by experience (whether a situation was successful or not) or whether I was able to achieve my goals in any given setting.

The next section explores our processes for evaluating interpreters in more depth.

### ***5.2 Evaluating interpreters***

After the initial bookings and first assignment evaluations (of success or otherwise) had taken place, the decision would be made whether to make the professional relationship with a particular interpreter an ongoing one.

Evaluating interpreters was an ongoing process, as we discovered more about how a particular interpreter worked and whether their ways of working were compatible with our own. At every stage, we made decisions about whether to continue investing (O'Brien, 2020) in this relationship or not. Overall, most of us agreed on three priorities: that the interpreters worked to the best of their ability in any booking, that they respected our separate roles, and that they respected and were bound by the need for confidentiality.

One of the primary, essential aspects of the interpreter's work which we all felt had to be monitored continuously was their ability to interpret our BSL into spoken English using the appropriate register, tone and content. We have discussed this above, but it is worth returning to here, to outline the way in which continuous monitoring was attempted.

There were several ways in which this was achieved in real-time, including pausing to lipread the interpreter as they caught up with the processing time lag, monitoring how other people in the interaction respond to the interpretation for example whether they laugh at jokes, or using technical terms or jargon and observing whether and how the interpreter incorporated those terms into their interpretation. One of us described their process as follows:

[I] produce very 'dense' BSL with lots of spatial, locational, hierarchical information etc. all crammed into a few signs, and look at the interpreter's process there. [I] check to see if they've caught all the information. If they have, then the good interpreters, the ones I find I can trust, will stop me and take the time to make sure that everything I signed is interpreted, even if it means taking their time, backtracking and rephrasing, etc. The 'bad' interpreters are the ones who don't take any extra time over that particular bit of BSL. If that happens, I know they're dropping things, and I can assume they're not doing a good job.

While the 'good' and 'bad' labels used in this quote are overly simple and do not reflect the nuance of this person's evaluation of interpreters, it is an interesting illustration of the sort of tactics we have developed to indirectly evaluate the target language production of interpreters, which remain essentially inaccessible for deaf people. This emphasis on how we are represented in spoken languages is particularly important in light of literature (Nicodemus and Emmorey, 2013) showing that interpreters prefer to interpret into their signed L2 rather than their spoken L1, in contrast to unimodal interpreters, who prefer to interpret into their L1. Their lack of confidence when interpreting into spoken

languages can have serious implications for our professional profile, particularly as sub-par interpreting or poor practice on the part of the interpreter is often invisible to the non-signing audience. We are particularly careful in this respect not to simply 'trust' that interpreters are representing us faithfully.

Of course, another way in which we evaluate whether we are a good fit is whether we can understand the interpreter or not when they sign (see Friedner, 2016 on the importance of 'understanding' for deaf people). We generally agreed that having a 'natural' signing style is easier to watch (see Green, 2014 on the importance of 'natural sign' ideologies and practices for deaf people). However, simple comprehension of the interpreter was not enough. If we felt we had to consistently behave as a co-interpreter, such as by initiating and responding to repairs and offering clarifications even when the interpreter was not aware they are needed, we experience a huge processing load and subsequent frustration and fatigue.

While some degree of repair and requests for clarifications are of course always necessary (Crawley, 2016), there is a point where this becomes excessive, thus distracting us from the broader communication goals of the interaction. Instead of communicating with the target audience via an interpreter, the deaf signer is forced to narrow their focus to solely communicating with the interpreter before they can even get to the audience. This can become an indicator of the interpreters' sign receptive skills simply not being up to scratch.

It is worth noting that some interpreters remain unaware of the strategies that some deaf signers use to bluff and pretend they understand, e.g., "the deaf nod" (Goss, 2003). Yet this leads to two harmful results: the deaf person does not understand, and the interpreter remains unaware their interpreting is not being understood; and the deaf person is fatigued and frustrated from trying to make the interpreter understand, while the interpreter remains unaware the deaf person is working hard to compensate for their lack of skills. When this occurs, deaf clients are forced to choose between a state of extreme frustration by remaining in the interaction or externally imposed ignorance by abandoning it. Other qualities we look for include the way interpreters approach their profession:

I pick interpreters not just based on their signing skills but their attitudes and their values. If interpreters have an open attitude, then they will be quick to learn, try alternative learning and be open to always reflecting and improving oneself.

This, of course, is not necessarily something that will be revealed in the first few bookings and may only become clearer after working with that interpreter multiple times. Similarly, professional values are something that we look for on an ongoing process of evaluation:

Professionals take responsibility for themselves, even if what they are doing comes from a place of generosity and/or obligation. The same as in any context: someone who works with me as an equal and doesn't let me down, either intentionally or accidentally. It works both ways though.

Openness about what interpreters are able to do and whether extra support is needed is very desirable. We are under no illusions: not all interpreters are equally strong in every area of their work. Indeed, most of us value the different skills and abilities different interpreters can bring to different contexts. But this is only possible if interpreters are open about their areas of weakness, as well as their areas of strength.

The way in which interpreters reveal their attitudes about these things go some way to shaping our relationships with them. If there is potential for a mutually respectful and productive outcome, then there is more chance of a longer-term professional relationship developing, even if the target skill set is not yet fully developed.

### ***5.3 Building up a relationship with interpreters***

Building up a relationship with regular interpreters is essential for removing a lot of the stress, anxiety and additional labour resulting from working with unknown interpreters. This relationship can ensure that the deaf person does not need to ‘check in’ or ‘accommodate’ for the interpreters constantly, and can be confident that they are being reflected accurately. Respect for each other’s role also means taking responsibility for making one’s own part of the interaction a success as far as possible:

The interpreters never raised the fact that they needed a break. It was up to me to finally say something to the [workshop] organiser (at the 2.5 hour mark) about the interpreters needing a break. This organiser was totally fine with that when I raised it, and we took the break. However, for quite some time prior to this I felt stressed and anxious for the interpreters, because I could see they were looking fatigued, but they never said anything. In effect, I became responsible for their wellbeing, and I think that is not right. If we are to work as a team, there needs to be courage and belief that it is perfectly acceptable to define one’s working conditions with all clients, even when the situation becomes “unbounded” or “undefined” as in this workshop example.

Relationships involve two or more people. Building up a good working relationship is not a one-way street. All parties must take responsibility for their own roles and their own wellbeing, rather than abdicating responsibility to the others.

Interestingly, several of us mentioned feedback from colleagues, friends and other interpreters, on the interpreters’ competence as an important part of the ongoing work of building successful working relationships. This feedback allows us to decide whether or not the relationship can be considered a successful one.

## **6. Discussion**

### ***6.1 Do these three elements combine to create ‘trust’?***

What is clear from the above is that when we talk about ‘trusting’ an interpreter, we are not talking about having unproven faith in their skills or performance. We are talking about building a concrete evidence base of competence. ‘Trust’ is an emotive and interpersonal concept. For many of us, the ideology of unproven ‘trust’ feels like a hangover from the ‘helper’ model of interpreting (Lee, 1997).

It is clear from the themes discussed that there are insufficient external markers of competence in the UK to differentiate between (a) interpreters who are merely competent, who have simply passed their assessments, and (b) interpreters who have spent time and effort honing their craft and developing productive working relationships with deaf signing people. Holding a badge, ticking off compulsory hours of CPD, claiming to specialise in one field; none of these are sufficient to prove competence, or to allow someone looking for an interpreter to make a choice based on measures of skill and ability. A one-size fits all qualification with no room for structured career progression or

specialisation is of no use to interpreters who want to work in more specialised domains, or for the deaf signers who wish to engage them.

Falling back on the prevailing and implicit ideology of 'trust', however, with all the individualistic and emotive connotations this term conveys, is no alternative. The worry is that focus on building 'trust' on an individual basis, on appearing 'trustworthy', turning up early, staying late and making sure you are 'seen' in deaf community events (Jansen, 2005), distracts from the need for systemic change in the way interpreters are qualified and regulated, something which would benefit all participants in every interpreted interaction, both deaf and hearing. To rely on such an emotive and subjective concept as 'anticipatory trust' (Napier et al., 2017, p.79) as the bedrock of the relationship between deaf people and interpreters is to do both parties a disservice, while ensuring the risks of paternalism and nepotism continue.

Deaf professionals have proven themselves to have sophisticated and sensitive systems for evaluating interpreters, both in this collaborative autoethnography and in wider informal conversations with our colleagues and peers. To reduce these highly developed systems to a sense of 'trust' is a disservice to the cognitive, physical and emotional labour, the time, and the collegiality that deaf professionals commit to making their interactions with and through interpreters a success.

Our own perceptions of this topic have changed through the course of the project. We have all become much more critical and aware of our own working practices with interpreters. We have all become much more aware of the inherent and often unintended power imbalances in interpreted interactions. We have become much more impatient with people, including other scholars and interpreters, who do not share our own understanding of the importance of taking a more critical approach to this topic, simply because it is so vital for the benefit of everyone involved.

It is also very important to again recognise our privilege in the fact that we, as deaf scholars with comparatively generous AtW funding, are in positions where we can actively choose which interpreters we work with. For most deaf people, and ourselves outside our workplaces, interpreting is not a service that we book for ourselves, rather it is something that is booked for us. In those situations, we must accept whichever interpreter turns up and make the best of what can often be a fraught situation. At work however, we have the autonomy and the power of making our own decisions in our professional lives about who we work with. This privilege is very important, because it shows what we value when we have the choice. We are in a situation in which we can exert some kind of market power through our choices. That gives some insight into what might be commercially desirable in the current interpreting market.

## **7. Conclusion**

To conclude this paper, we have one main suggestion and several smaller ones. Our main suggestion is that we no longer assume 'trust' when discussing interpreted interactions and instead recognize and value the sophisticated ways in which deaf people have developed their own processes of measuring and evaluating the competence of the interpreters with whom they work. Whether these processes contribute to the way in which interpreters are regulated in the UK is a separate, urgent issue. All of us feel that deaf perspectives are not taken seriously within UK interpreter training programmes or assessments, let alone in 'real world' interpreting assignments. Signed language interpreters are a by-product of deaf people and sign language communities, and it is vital that we

have professional and beneficial relations. Change is needed, and it takes desire both within and outside the profession to push for this change.

We would like to see more training for young deaf people to develop their awareness of their rights when working with interpreters, and also the role of interpreters in an interaction. In our experience, too many deaf people have an overly simple understanding that interpreters simply ‘say what I sign’ and vice versa, because they are not offered any access to information or training on how interpreting works. Interpreters train for years to learn how to play their role in interpreted interactions, whereas deaf people are expected to ‘just know’ what to do.

We would like to see more open conversations about what makes for a successful interaction which includes deaf perspectives seriously, something which is under-represented in the current signed language interpreting literature. This is not something that will come from research projects which are led by hearing interpreters or hearing academics, no matter how worthy their motives. Deaf people need to take the lead in this research, they need to be deferred to, supported to perform this work, and left to do it in a deaf space. This will undoubtedly enhance interpreting research and professional practices, while facilitating a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the current or potential working relationships in interpreted interactions.

We would like to end this paper with a thought experiment. The tweet below asks a question that many of us daydream about after a particularly hard day negotiating interpreted interactions in our working lives:

What would happen if, as a social experiment, I decided to no longer work with sign language interpreters in professional contexts for e.g. two weeks? Online meetings: use chat? Teaching: ? Presentations? How many meetings would still happen without me? #interpreterfatigue (De Meulder, 2021)

What would, or could, our work be like if we did not need to rely on interpreters every day of our lives? What could we achieve if the awkwardness and extra effort of our communication being mediated by someone else was removed? In our own imperfect worlds, how can deaf people and interpreters strive to achieve that dream together?

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## **Author contributions**

Dai O’Brien conceptualised the study and designed the methodology; contributed to data collection and analysed data; wrote the original manuscript; revised and edited later versions; and administered the project. Gabrielle Hodge contributed to data collection and analysed data, wrote the original manuscript, and revised and edited later versions. Sannah Gulamani contributed to data collection and analysed data, contributed to the original manuscript, and reviewed a later version. Katherine Rowley contributed to data collection and analysed data, contributed to the original manuscript, and reviewed a later version. Robert Adam contributed to data collection and analysed data; and



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