

No judgement

ITI 2020 award winner Lauren Shadi describes the interpreting assignment for which she won ‘best performance’

For this assignment, I interpreted between a woman asylum seeker, who was being held in custody on a charge of attempted murder, and a psychiatrist (instructed by her solicitor), who was conducting an assessment to decide whether or not she had committed the offence as a result of behavioural problems or mental health issues. The psychiatric report would constitute a crucial piece of evidence in the case and could reduce the potential sentence. I had already interpreted for this prisoner on four occasions, starting on the day of her arrest, so I had built up a rapport with her and knew the background details. There were other details, though, that nobody knew because the solicitor had not yet obtained the file from her unsuccessful immigration application.

There were a number of challenges. For one thing, the client was very reluctant to talk. She had refused to engage at the previous appointment (with a psychologist), and that appointment had had to be rearranged. It wasn't my job to make her talk. I had to respect her silences, as these are particularly important in



Lauren Shadi is a Manchester-based interpreter

the context of a mental health assessment. When she did speak, I needed to ensure that I interpreted everything accurately, to give the psychiatrist as much material to work with as possible. She broke into tears a great deal, which interrupted the flow of the conversation and also made it difficult to understand what she was saying at times. (It was also upsetting for me.) What was more, we were working in an open room. It was not easy repeating ‘I was raped’ when there were other people, with no right to such private information, within a couple of metres.

I've spent years interpreting for mental health services in different contexts, so I am also used to interpreting some of the non-verbal elements that form a key part of a mental health assessment. I mirrored her intonation, gestures and hesitation, and even found a way of conveying her sobs in a non-disrespectful manner. When she became distressed, I lowered my head slightly, to give her some privacy. I also maintained a neutral expression throughout the appointment, despite the sometimes explicit and shocking content of the conversation. I was not there to judge in any capacity.

I carried out the assignment successfully, for the client opened up and answered the psychiatrist's questions. The latter told me he

could begin his report and would rebook me to attend with him again. He later emailed me thanking me, stating that I was ‘very good’ with the client.

The interpreter continuity element added value for both parties. Having met the prisoner previously, I had earned her trust. I am sure she was grateful not to have to repeat details of her past to a different interpreter. For the psychiatrist, I was able to clarify an essential point. When she was asked if she had lodged an asylum case, she simply answered ‘yes’. I was able to clarify, with her permission, that asylum had been refused. This added value, for the refusal could be linked to why she might have committed the alleged offence. Before she arrived at the appointment, I also mentioned to the psychiatrist, who had never met her, that she had refused to answer questions previously. He was therefore able to ensure that this did not happen again.

My extralinguistic knowledge added value too. Having interpreted for immigration solicitors for 10 years, I often hear asylum seekers' accounts of torture. Nobody knows what they've been through, and there's often far more to the case than initially appears. People also feel judged by everyone they come across. However, if there's one person who isn't judging, it's me.

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