



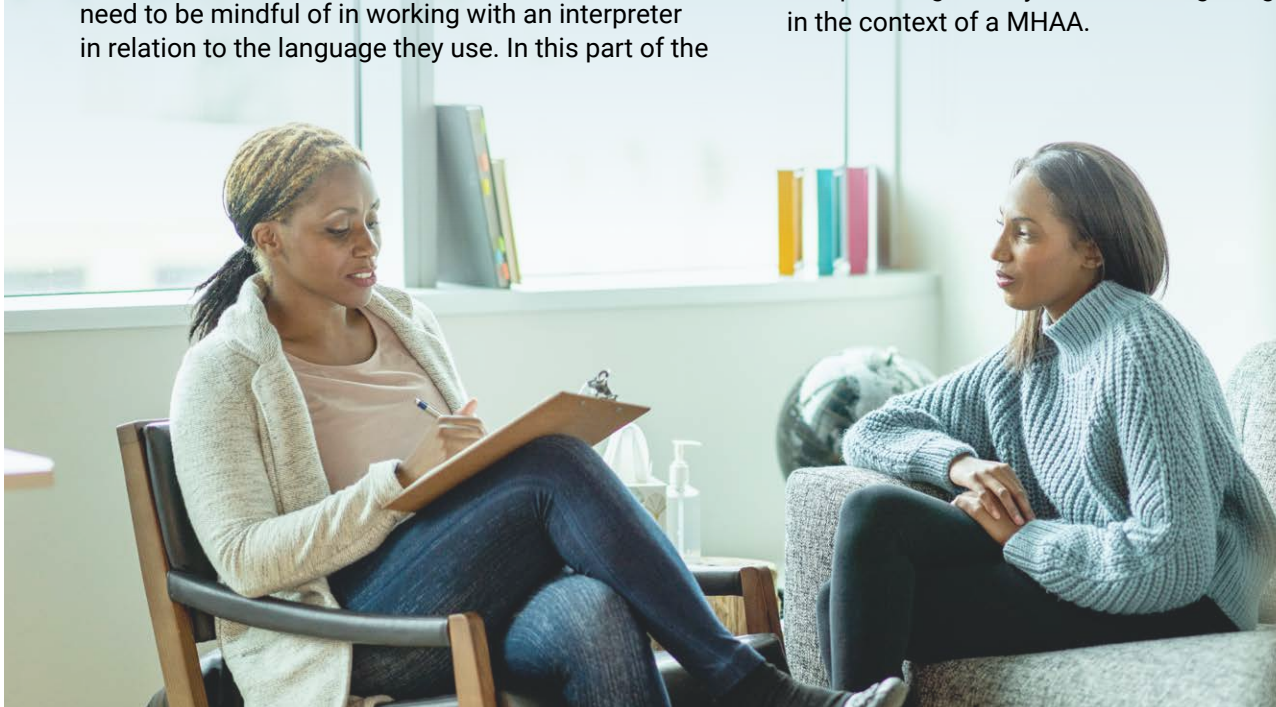
Part 9.

The role and responsibilities of interpreters: cultural sensitivities and cultural brokering

Introduction

Part 7 of this guidance on different types of interpreting focused on the technical aspects of interpreting in terms of how an interpreter does their job, and what AMHPs need to be mindful of in working with an interpreter in relation to the language they use. In this part of the

guidance, we consider the role and responsibilities of an interpreter with respect to the transmission of cultural information within the assessment process by unpacking what would typically be expected of interpreters generally and how things might be different in the context of a MHAA.



Para 4.4 and 4.6 page 36 of the Code of Practice (DoH 2015) specifies that due attention must be made to the culture of a person being assessed and the potential consequences of cultural identity and background for that assessment. This encompasses respect for cultural preferences and norms of interaction as well as a recognition of culturally embedded forms of understanding and expression. In the proposed revisions to the MHA, the role of the Independent Mental Health Advocate is being expanded to include specific provision for a cultural advocate who is involved in all stages of the MHAA and subsequent treatment and review. Interpreters would not typically see themselves as cultural advocates. In some instances, the roles may have to overlap if there is no one else available to provide cultural support, and this may make interpreters feel uncomfortable.

An interpreter's understanding of their role and responsibilities is informed by the nature of the training they have received, but there are core ethical principles that interpreters adhere to when mediating interactions. These principles are informed by professional interpreter association codes of conduct. Spoken and signed language interpreters are expected to adopt the same principles, regardless of their working language combination(s). Although the phrasing of the principles may vary slightly across different codes, the essential elements are the same.

Our research confirms previous research findings in other domains that AMHPs (alongside other professionals, in for example, healthcare and the legal system) have varied perspectives on the role of interpreters and may not be clear on how much they can ask the interpreter to do with respect to providing cultural explanation or context. Some have a very narrow focus on what an interpreter's role should be that might exclude all culturally explanatory information. Others see the cultural insights that an interpreter might bring as part of their role in ensuring full understanding of all parties. Likewise, our data and initial training reveals that interpreters themselves are also not sure about how much cultural information they should provide in MHAAs.

Core ethical principles of the role and responsibilities of an interpreter

- Professional judgement
- Linguistic competence
- Subject competence
- Professional competence
- Responsibilities to professionals they work with or alongside
- Responsibilities to other interpreters
- Continuing Professional Development

Essentially this means that interpreters:

- Judge whether they have the appropriate and relevant skills and knowledge before they accept an assignment.
- Are there to interpret for both parties – it is not a one-sided transaction. They are neutral in terms of their role, but this does not mean they are merely a conduit. They need to work cooperatively with both parties to ensure the interaction flows both ways.
- Transfer message from one person to another across two different languages to the best of their ability.
- Seek to be as accurate as possible in the message transfer.
- Take into account not only linguistic differences, but also cultural differences in order to convey equivalent meaning in the message transfer.
- Remain impartial in the interaction, not inserting their own opinion or guiding the discussion in any way.
- Retain confidentiality of content of discussion and do not disclose to anyone outside the interaction.
- Behave professionally and respectfully towards other interpreters and other professionals that they are working with.
- Behave with professional integrity to uphold ethical practices in representing their profession.
- Commit to maintaining and developing their professional skills on an on-going basis.

Examples of Interpreter Codes of Conduct

- [National Registers for Communication Professionals working with Deaf & Deafblind People](#)
- [National Register of Public Service Interpreters](#)
- [Chartered Institute of Linguists](#)

Nuances to these principles: Interpreter as cultural and linguistic expert

Interpreters are typically perceived as bilingual or multilingual linguistic experts. But they are also bi- or multi-cultural experts. The above core principles that are considered essential as part of the interpreter role and responsibilities focus primarily on message transfer and the role of the interpreter to remain impartial as a linguistic expert. However, there may be times – especially in MHAAs – when the interpreter can be asked their opinion with respect to any cultural sensitivities, and anything in particular that the AMHP feels they need to know. The interpreter may also feel that they need to offer information to the AMHP based on something they observe that they feel the AMHP needs to know. There is a fine line, however, for interpreters to tread in relation to providing information and advocating for the person being assessed. The nuance comes from not only the professional responsibility that interpreters have, but also their moral responsibility in potentially being the only person in the room that understands both languages and cultures and where there may be a mismatch, and the potential risks – especially in a MHAA.

Interpreters are responsible for mediating communication, but they also have a responsibility to make interpreting decisions according to what feels right as a linguistic and cultural expert. In the context of MHAAs, this requires interpreters to work collaboratively with AMHPs to ensure that the assessment is delivered in a suitable manner (see Part 2 Context and key roles and Part 4 When and why interpreters are booked) and the safety of the person being assessed is assured (see Part 13 Governance, accountability and safeguarding). Interpreters have a responsibility to the message, but as noted earlier under the requirements of the MHA,

they also have a responsibility to the cultural aspects of identity that might be relevant to the outcome of a MHAA. Thus, interpreters and AMHPs need to work together as allied practice professionals.

Good practice for AMHPs

- Talk to the interpreter before the interview to prepare them (see Part 5 Briefing).
- Ask the interpreter if there are any cultural sensitivities that they should be aware of – for example in terms of religious practices, or what would be considered ‘typical’ behaviour in some cultures. This could include the way honorifics are used, or whether it is appropriate to make direct eye contact.
- Check if the interpreter notices anything unusual in the way the patient is speaking/signing (see Part 7 on Types of interpreting) that might impact on how they are able to assess them.
- Check with the interpreter if the phrasing of particular questions will make sense culturally or how best to rephrase. For example, asking if a deaf person can hear voices in their head.
- Do not ask the interpreter what they think the outcome of the assessment should be – but do ask them if there is anything about their language use or cultural background that might contribute to the AMHP’s decision making.
- Do not ask the interpreter to contribute to discussion about decisions to be made as a consequence of the assessment (see Part 3 Legal decision making). The interpreter should not offer an opinion on the mental health of the patient. They should only offer opinion on linguistic/cultural issues that may influence the assessment decision/outcome. If you would like the interpreter to comment on any language or cultural issues, be specific in your question.

Good practice for interpreters

- Talk to the AMHP about their expectations of the MHAA prior to the interview (see Part 5 Briefing).
- If possible before the interview, offer a brief explanation of any cultural sensitivities that the AMHP should be aware of.
- If you notice anything unusual about the way the patient is talking, let the AMHP know so that they can take it into account in their assessment.
- Let the AMHP know if you have any doubts that the person being assessed understands what is going on. Especially if it is because of any cultural mismatch between British and other cultural expectations.
- Do not offer an opinion on the person's mental health status or contribute to the discussion about outcomes of a MHAA. But do offer advice on any specific language or cultural issues that the AMHP should be aware of that might influence the assessment.
- Discuss with the AMHP when it might be better to proceed with a cultural advocate, legal intermediary or deaf (relay) interpreter present.

INforMHAA: Interpreter-mediated Mental Health Act Assessments

Best practices for Approved Mental Health Professionals and Interpreters working together

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