

DOCTORAL THESIS

Crossing the Chasm: embodied empathy in medical interpreter assessment

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Abstract

Research on medical interpreters (MIs) in recent years has informed us of the visible and active participating roles that MIs play in the doctor-interpreter-patient triadic encounter. The use of multi-faceted, authentic data has also allowed both verbal and nonverbal nuances to be studied. However, while empirical studies have shown that physician empathy in medical communication is beneficial to the patient's healthcare outcomes, empathy in medical interpreting, especially the one that is expressed nonverbally, is rarely examined in medical interpreting research, even though MI is the key communication facilitator and in principle shares a communicative goal with the doctor. This study aims to acquire a deeper understanding of how an MI's empathy is constructed nonverbally and perceived by service users, and how it affects interlocutors and the communication process. This research argues that MI empathy in communication is desired and should be incorporated in the training, assessment, and most importantly, in the interpreting practice. Three sets of research questions are thus formed: 1) How do MIs communicate empathy, if any, for and to the patient? 2) How do the other medical interview participants (doctor and patient) and observers (video observers) perceive the empathic performance of the interpreters? Is there any discrepancy? Why? and 3) How do internal and external factors such as an MI's nonverbal sensitivity and personality traits influence empathic performance? The findings are expected to inform medical interpreting training and assessment and to enhance doctors' awareness of the roles of MIs so that a more patient-centred and empathic communication environment can be nurtured.

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