

# A qualitative study exploring clinicians' perspectives on the use of interpreters in mental health assessment.



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## Introduction

Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census data 2016 revealed that approximately 360,000 non-Irish residents spoke a language other than English at home in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. CSO data has also demonstrated that only 44% of non-Irish individuals spoke English very well in their first year in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. Among arrivals into Ireland, asylum seekers and refugees are particularly marginalised groups, and have higher levels of psychopathology than the general population. The Irish Mental Health Commission (MHC) has indicated that for residents of inpatient approved centres for treatment of mental illness, it is necessary to identify their communication needs and provide for interpreter services where appropriate. Exploring clinicians' perceptions of using an interpreter in assessments is a first step in identifying how a mental health service can ensure that best practice is observed when using interpreters.

## Aims & Objectives

The aim of this study was to describe how clinicians experience and perceive the use of interpreters in mental health assessment of patients with whom they do not share a common language.

## Methods

The design was a descriptive qualitative study. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with clinicians in a community mental health service and in an inpatient setting regarding their respective experiences of using interpreters in mental health assessment. The responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis<sup>2</sup>.

## Results

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Variables	Total (Percentage)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	6 (50%)
Female	6 (50%)
<b>Clinical experience</b>	
Less than five years	2 (17%)
More than five years	10 (83%)
<b>Clinical role</b>	
Doctor	8 (67%)
Other clinical role	4 (33%)
<b>No. of occasions using an interpreter</b>	
Less than 10 times	4 (33%)
More than 10 times	8 (67%)

12 clinicians participated in our study, whose characteristics can be seen in Table 1. Three themes were identified and can be seen in Figure 1.

## Results

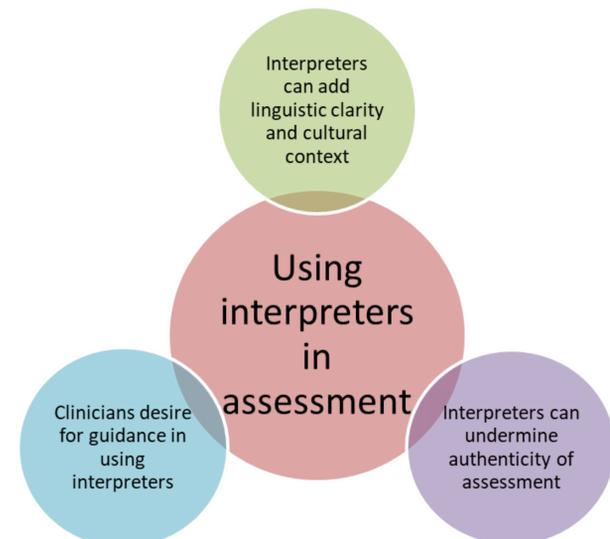


Figure 1: Shared meaning of interpreter use themes

### Theme 1: Interpreters can add linguistic clarity and cultural context:

Participants shared perspective was that the presence of an interpreter in assessment can provide meaning and context beyond direct translation of words uttered by those being assessed.

*I've had occasions as well where translators have provided culturally specific interpretations for me.... The idea of speaking to somebody from a non Western culture about a very sensitive topic...a lot of that is really dependent on native language skills and small talk and other kind of non clinical rapport.*

### Theme 2: Interpreters can undermine authenticity of patient assessment

Participants shared perspective was in the sense that they have observed in assessments that the presence of an interpreter can be intimidating for a person being assessed or can impact on the degree to which they feel comfortable about answering questions

### Theme 3: Clinicians desire for guidance in using an interpreter

Participants shared perspective was that the application of guidelines for interpreter use in assessment would instil greater confidence that interpreters are being utilised appropriately .

*I would value the most in seeing developed in a set of guidelines, is how to brief or debrief with the translator that you get, you know around an assessment, because that in my experience, has only happened informally.*

## Discussion

While clinicians in this study have identified that there is considerable value to using interpreters in mental health assessments, they have also highlighted the challenges that can arise. It is important that these are addressed so that a barrier does not exist to the acquisition of an authentic and complete patient assessment.

## References

References are available on request