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“I know – that’s the system. The system is wrong”: Allyship and social justice in community interpreting from a service-user perspective

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Abstract

Defined as the practice of gaining awareness and acting upon the oppression of marginalized groups, allyship can account for the power interpreters hold in systems of oppression and can contribute to social justice. This article reports on a study designed to explore allyship in spoken-language interpreting from the perspective of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) users of interpreting services. Involving CALD individuals – foreign-born people in English-speaking countries who do not speak English at home – from the Latin American community living in Aotearoa New Zealand, the study explored users’ perspectives on the role of interpreters, their perceptions of allyship and social justice, and the way these concepts inform interpreting practice. The study employed a culturally affirming horizontal methodology that relied on four one-on-one dialogues with users of Spanish-speaking interpreting services about their experiences in various community settings. This was followed by one group dialogue involving users, English–Spanish interpreters and a community representative. The findings suggest that users prefer humane and caring interpreters with a flexible understanding of their role. Aware that social marginalization is intrinsic to community interpreting, they highlighted the reality that mere message transfer and language proficiency are insufficient for CALD individuals to secure access to statutory services and that inadequate assistance can be (re-)traumatizing. The users’ perspective therefore conflicts with the prevailing rules-based approach to ethics in interpreting and its focus on accuracy in interpreting over social and relational skills. To overcome the disparity between users’ expectations and entrenched concepts of neutrality and non-intervention, allyship stands as a potential lens through which to develop a nuanced and flexible understanding of the community interpreter’s role, as well as culturally grounded redefinitions of ethicality and professionalism in the field.

Keywords: allyship, community interpreting, ethics, role, social justice, users

1. Introduction

Interpreters’ role boundaries and positionalities are highly contested issues in community interpreting, which aims to facilitate access to services typically provided by powerful states to minority groups that often face pervasive inequality, racism and discrimination (Boéri, 2023; Rudvin, 2005). Community interpreting takes place across a diverse range of settings, including medical, mental health, social and legal services (Bancroft, 2015). Interpreters navigate the complex power dynamics inherent in these settings in heterogenous ways because of the discrepancy between an idealized version of their role as detached facilitators of communication and the actual needs of the different parties involved (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2013; Major & Napier, 2019). After importing the tenets of objectivism and invisibility from the professionalization of conference interpreting (Springer, 2009), community interpreting has been constrained by restrictive codes of ethics and decontextualized conceptions of the role of the interpreter (Dean & Pollard, 2018; Drugan, 2017).

Despite these limitations, in practice, interpreters are the only party with the linguistic and cultural knowledge needed to understand the interaction. This grants them a unique power in interpreted events, where their decision-making has the capacity to affect both the communication process and its outcomes (Baker-Shenk, 1991; Mason & Ren, 2013). However, interpreters may not use such power to support historically and institutionally marginalized users because they are constrained by mainstream understandings of their role as neutral facilitators of communication. Primarily developed in professional and academic circles, these conceptions have received limited input from users’ preferences and expectations (Edwards et al., 2005; Hlavac, 2019; MacFarlane et al., 2009; Vuori & Hokkanen, 2020) – particularly from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) users. CALD users are understood as being those who were born abroad, especially in non-English-speaking countries, and/or who do not speak English at home, excluding indigenous people (Pham et al., 2021).

Operating under the premise that the interpreter role ought to be informed by the needs and views of users, this article draws together the findings from a research project undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand. CALD people in Aotearoa account for around 30% of the population and include Pacific peoples, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, African and Continental European groups (Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management, 2013; Stats NZ, 2019). Devised to redress the dearth of literature on CALD users’ perspectives in community interpreting (Edwards et al., 2005; Hlavac, 2019; Vuori & Hokkanen, 2020), this project aimed to explore their understanding of the interpreter’s role, their positioning on allyship and social justice, and possible ways to improve the alignment of interpreting practice in Aotearoa New Zealand with users’ perspectives. Towards this aim, the research involved one-on-one dialogues with Spanish-speaking Latin American users and a group dialogue with some of these users, English–Spanish interpreters and a community representative.

By drawing together the findings through a social justice lens, this article argues that service-users know what they need from interpreters and that their preferences or expectations are often at odds with the dominant trends, education and ethics in community interpreting. In view of what has been stated, allyship emerges as a way of transitioning to a more proactive,

situated and flexible approach to interpreting that can act upon power differences and advance social justice.

2. Under the veil of neutrality: power and allyship in interpreting

The debate about the role of community interpreters constitutes a considerable share of the research in the field (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2013). The adoption of the conduit model in the second half of the 20th century, with its tenets of neutrality and disengagement, has affected the understanding of community interpreting considerably. Conduit ideals still affect the profession today (Dean & Pollard, 2018; Gentile et al., 1996; Roy, 1993) and have often led to restrictive codes of ethics that incentivize reactive decision-making based on narrow rules. This can result in a disregard of the critical thinking and flexibility needed to attend to individual and contextual demands.

At a societal level, the emphasis on invisibility and non-involvement may contribute to the perpetuation of prevailing power dynamics (Adelstein & Clegg, 2016; Coyne & Hill, 2016; Minges, 2016). For example, when an interpreter is aware that a patient with limited English literacy may struggle to read the written information provided by their doctor and chooses not to intervene, they can be seen as perpetuating inequality in the name of neutrality (Baker-Shenk, 1991). In fact, previous studies have found that, in situations where lay people are expected to master bureaucratic modes of communication, interpreters tend to reinforce rather than downplay the dominance of the institutional perspective, refraining from assisting users to voice their perspectives (Wadensjö, 1998/2014).

Community interpreting involves public servants with institutional power as representatives of the state who operate in a broader context of cultural and linguistic hegemony that conceals systemic injustices (Coyne & Hill, 2016). This primary distinction between the parties is compounded further by intersecting factors such as gender, age, race, nationality and socioeconomic status, which may shift the balance of power in favour of certain groups. For example, white people may be favoured over people of colour, men over women, and the rich over the poor (Crenshaw, 1989/2018). Because the concepts of “neutrality” and “professionalism” are culturally constructed (Rudvin, 2007), “acting impartially” can often be equated to fulfilling the expectations of the group in power (Elliott, 2016), which can prevent interpreters from taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Baker & Maier, 2011). For this reason, some scholars have argued that “interpreters who do not incorporate social justice work into their professional practice risk worsening situations” (Coyne & Hill, 2016, p. 3).

This combination of proactiveness based on knowledge and training is best encapsulated in Nieto et al.’s (2010) definition of allyship as “awareness plus action” (p. 127). Because of the “interpersonal and performative nature of social justice” (Boéri, 2023, p. 2), allyship also requires the development of meaningful relationships between those striving to become allies and the members of non-dominant groups. This is because all anti-oppression work must be long-term and relational (Goodman, 2011; Nieto et al., 2010). Establishing and nurturing these relationships is essential to mitigating paternalistic attitudes and fostering accountability, both of which are imperative in community interpreting. Finally, allyship can account for

"interpreters' unique middle position in interaction" (Wadensjö, 1998/2014, p. 191), while simultaneously allowing for interpreters' fluid alignment in the acknowledgement that "our ethics are not always tied to one location of oppression" (Reynolds, 2010, p. 13).

In spoken-language interpreting, proactiveness and intervention are commonly covered by the concept of "advocacy", which is generally perceived as interpreter actions that go beyond facilitating communication. Advocacy is occasionally included in models that conceptualize different degrees of interpreter intervention (Bancroft, 2015; Mikkelson, 2000); and it features in some codes of ethics such as those of the International Medical Interpreting Association (IMIA) and the California Healthcare Interpreters Association (CHIA) (Phelan et al., 2020). However, because it is often defined as anything the interpreter does *on behalf of* the user when the user's needs are not being met due to systemic barriers (Mikkelson, 2000), advocacy does not address interpreters' potential for silencing and disempowering members of a non-dominant group (Leslie et al., 2024). Conversely, allyship seeks to avoid paternalistic attitudes by using power to centre those experiencing oppression. In this sense, it represents more accurately interpreters' complex and flexible position in an interpreted event, which must be fluid enough to account for any power negotiations that arise from the intersection of individuals' identities. Allyship also accounts for the interpreter's and the service user's potentially shared background without conflating their experiences (Leslie et al., 2024).

In view of the above, allyship proposes a constant repositioning of community interpreters based on the recognition of interpreters' inherent biases, an awareness of the implications of their actions, and an understanding of the broader systems of oppression brought about by colonization, capitalism and patriarchy (de Sousa Santos, 2018). In interpreting, allyship has been examined predominantly by sign language scholars (e.g., Baker-Shenk, 1991; Elliott, 2016; Mole, 2018; Ziebart, 2016), who regard it as being conducive to a more critical analysis of interpreter power (Dean, 2015), with a focus on its application and its consequences (Baker-Shenk, 1991). However, allyship is largely overlooked in spoken-language interpreting (Hsieh et al., 2013). The present study seeks to contribute to the development of a situated and culturally grounded theory of allyship and social justice in (spoken-language) interpreting so as to inform practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.

3. Methodology

This article reports on findings from a research project submitted to the Auckland University of Technology as part of a Master of Language and Culture degree. The project, approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 12 November 2020[1], sought to respond to three research questions:

RQ#1. How do interpreting service users view the role of the interpreter?

RQ#2. What are users' perceptions of allyship and social justice in relation to interpreting?

RQ#3. How do interpreting users think their perceptions of allyship and social justice should be incorporated into the interpreter's practice?

The study was designed using a horizontal methodology which has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Marianacci, 2022b). Horizontal methodologies were originally developed by a group of Latin American and European transdisciplinary researchers to disrupt the structural asymmetries that contribute to hegemonic research. These methodologies conceptualize dialogues as places where all interlocutors – including the researcher – take turns as both speaker and listener, creating new knowledge in the process (Corona Berkin, 2020; Kaltmeier & Corona Berkin, 2012).

For this project, horizontal methodologies were operationalized in three stages of knowledge creation, following Wolcott’s (1994) categories of qualitative research writing: description, analysis and interpretation. The knowledge presented in this article was created in dialogue with users, community representatives and interpreters from the Latin American community in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Table 1 below for details). All the participating interpreters had university qualifications in interpreting, ranging from a one-year graduate diploma to a master’s degree, and they were members of Aotearoa’s professional association, the New Zealand Society of Translators and Interpreters (NZSTI).

The first stage involved four one-on-one dialogues with the users, which varied in length and were subject to the interlocutor’s availability and interest. These dialogues ranged from 40 minutes to 90 minutes. The researcher (the author of this article) positioned herself as an interlocutor whose knowledge offered one of countless perspectives, minimizing academic distance and the researcher’s authority as much as possible and supporting broader values of equality and liberation (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Kaltmeier, 2012). The second stage consisted of a thematic analysis of the one-on-one dialogues using NVivo 12. The transcripts have been presented elsewhere (Marianacci, 2022a) and provide the indispensable contextualization of the findings presented in this article. Finally, the third stage involved a group dialogue with users, trained interpreters and a community representative. The group dialogue aimed to interpret the themes derived from the one-on-one dialogues, incorporating meaning beyond that offered by the thematic analysis (Wolcott, 1994). Each group member received a summary of the themes and the characteristics of an ally ahead of the meeting, which served as a starting-point for the emergence of new themes.

Table 1: ***Research structure and interlocutors***

	Name	**Country of origin**	**Migration pathway/ educational background**	**Group**
One-on-one dialogues	Cristian[2]	Colombia	Refugee Quota Programme[3] (2008) Unknown educational background	Interpreting service user
	Alberto	Colombia	Refugee Quota Programme (2015) Doctoral candidate	
	Juana	Colombia	Migration from Chile (2018) Undergraduate degree	
	Candela	Argentina	Migration from Argentina (2017)	

			Tertiary qualification	
	Agustina	Argentina	Migration from Argentina (2014) Master’s student	Researcher, interpreter and author of this article
Group dialogue	Alberto	Colombia	Refugee Quota Programme (2008) Doctoral candidate	Interpreting service user
	Candela	Argentina	Migration from Argentina (2014) Tertiary qualification	
	Valeria	Argentina	Migration from Spain (2016) Master in Interpreting	Interpreter
	Antonia	Uruguay	Migration from Germany (2019) Master in Interpreting	
	Luisa	Argentina	Migration from Germany (2003) Graduate Diploma in Interpreting	
	Helena	Colombia	Certificate in Bicultural Social Services Year of migration unknown	Community representative and social worker
	Agustina	Argentina	Migration from Argentina (2014) Master’s student	Researcher, interpreter and author of this article

4. Findings and discussion

This section explores the research findings in the light of the existing literature on ethics, roles, allyship and social justice. It substantiates users’ preference for engaging with interpreters who display humane qualities and their reframing of or expansion upon several ethical principles, including role boundaries, impartiality and confidentiality. Since assessing the social context in which an interpreted event occurs is a crucial component of ethical decision-making (Dean & Pollard, 2011), this section also examines the users’ perceptions of their sociocultural environment, feelings of otherness and experiences of injustice. Finally, the users’ experiences are compared to the interpreters’ understanding of their own role, which highlights the cultural and situated nature of concepts such as ethics, professionalism and allyship in interpreting.

4.1 “If you have information, you have the power” – the role of the interpreter from the users’ perspective

Users’ views on the interpreter role can affect their expectations of and satisfaction with the services provided. However, their perceptions and preferences are underrepresented in interpreting research. In this study, the Latin American users involved discussed the interpreter role through a series of metaphors and comparisons, accounting for the

multifaceted nature of the job (Dean & Pollard, 2018). They also acknowledged its complexity, with Alberto referring to it as “a very serious commitment” [*“un compromiso muy serio”*]. Candela referred to interpreters as “aides” when discussing the stand-by interpreting services (see Monteoliva-García, 2020) she was offered when she had developed enough English proficiency to communicate almost independently. She also referred to interpreters as “mothers” based on her experience at the hospital, where she received the emotional support she needed from her interpreter. Alberto compared interpreters to lawyers and social workers, highlighting their advocacy function, which is highly controversial in the spoken-language interpreting literature (Ozolins, 2023; Phelan et al., 2020). Finally, Alberto and Candela made reference to a desired or established friendship with their interpreters, which also conflicts with the dominant understanding of professionalism in interpreting.

Unlike the prevailing models which compare interpreters to conduits or bridges, users’ analogies of interpreters as friends, mothers or social workers emphasize the humanity they expect from interpreters. This highlights a preference for close and even affectionate service provision with a focus that extends beyond mere message transfer. Indeed, the users positively referred to interpreters’ empathy, kindness, care, love, warmth and positive attitude. Cristian, for example, recalled his interpreters “doing [their job] with love” [“*lo hacen con amor”*] and “a lot of affection” [“*mucho afecto*”], while Juana commented on her interpreter’s “good vibes” [*“buena onda”*] and helpful attitude. According to Cristian, having a sincere and affectionate relationship with the interpreter is essential to communicating through them: *“Entonces el intérprete te acerca a la persona y encuentras la familiaridad con el intérprete y la persona que te habla.”* [So the interpreter brings you closer to that person and you can find that familiarity with the interpreter and the person who is talking to you.][4] These findings stand in contrast to the field’s focus on interpreters’ accuracy or linguistic proficiency – as highlighted by researchers such as Boéri and de Manuel Jerez (2011), González Campanella (2024) and Pena Díaz (2016) – which the users did not explicitly prioritize.

Moreover, the diversity of comparisons – interpreters as aides, mothers, lawyers, social workers and friends – points to the mutable nature of the role. This is consistent with the existing literature, such as that on role-space theory, which maintains that the role is as dynamic as the interactions that are being interpreted (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2013). Scholars such as Pöllabauer (2004) have highlighted the “highly discrepant roles, and the role overload that interpreters have to bear” (p. 175), which raises questions about the validity of traditional codes of ethics in practice (also Drugan, 2017; Inghilleri, 2005; Marzocchi, 2005; Mikkelson, 2000). The users themselves directly and indirectly questioned some of the ethical tenets included in Aotearoa New Zealand’s predominant code of ethics, that of the New Zealand Society of Translators and Interpreters (2013), and also the interpreters’ approach to professional ethics. Alberto, for example, criticized interpreters who followed the code too strictly: *“la intérprete fue como que seguía el protocolo y nada más, (…) que se acabe el mundo, que se acabe, pero este es mi protocolo y de ahí, de la línea, no me salgo. Y me parece que no está bien. Es ridículo.”* [The interpreter was following the protocol and nothing else. (…) The world can end, it can end, but this is my protocol and I won’t go beyond that, beyond that line. And I think that’s not right. It’s ridiculous.]

The users primarily reframed or called for an expansion of the principles of role boundaries, impartiality and confidentiality. Limitations based on ethical role boundaries were often perceived as irritating, which aligns with previous research correlating “coldness or interpersonal hostility” to users’ mistrust of their interpreters (Robb & Greenhalgh, 2006, p. 441). “The line is not right” [*“no está bien la línea”*], said Alberto, who saw role boundaries as impinging on his freedom and the natural development of relationships between interpreters and users. Juana described her interpreter as “very dry” [*“muy seca”*] because she was “very much playing her part” [*“muy como en su papel”*]. This led her to reject and mistrust the interpreter, whose presence she had to endure to communicate with hospital staff. Candela and Cristian mentioned that some aspects of the interpreters’ boundary-setting – for instance, refusing to share their notes or repeat information without the medical professional present – were selfish and unsupportive towards the users, amounting to a failure to fulfil their duty to convey all the information.

Impartiality was also a contentious issue. Candela, for example, preferred interpreters to “show that warmth, and feeling that they are closer to you” [*“que tengan esa calidez, de sentirte más apegado a vos”*]. Alberto openly recognized the impossibility of neutrality and framed impartiality as dependent on need, which should determine interpreters’ alignment:

> ***Alberto:*** *Pongámonos en este caso. Yo no hablo inglés, como al principio, cuando llegué aquí. Tengo que ir al médico. A mí me van a hacer un examen médico, yo no hablo inglés, el médico no habla español. Entonces ahí siempre me empezaba a hacer la pregunta: ¿Quién es el más interesado, el médico o el paciente? En este caso el paciente, porque yo soy el que está enfermo, necesito curarme. Y ese señor o señora que me va a interpretar va a ayudarme a que a mí me hagan el examen médico.*
>
> [**Alberto:** But in this case, let’s say I don’t speak English like at the beginning, when I arrived. I have to go to the doctor. I’m the one getting a medical examination, I don’t speak English, the doctor doesn’t speak Spanish. So I always asked myself then: Who is more interested in this, the doctor or the patient? In this case, it’s the patient, because I’m the one who’s sick, I need to get better. And that man or woman who is interpreting for me is going to help me get my medical examination.]

When asked about impartiality, Juana replied that her interpreter had been “super neutral” [*“superneutral”*]. Her assessment is significant because of the importance she attributed to interpreters engaging in side conversations to “break the ice” [*“romper el hielo”*], which may be perceived as contravening the “professional detachment” mandated by the principle of impartiality in the NZSTI code of ethics (2013, p. 7). They can also be seen as contradicting the provision that “conversations that may arise during periods of waiting (…) do not become personal” (NZSTI, 2013, p. 15). However, Juana does not appear to assume an incompatibility between impartiality and closer practitioner–user relationships. In fact, the development of these relationships is intrinsic to allyship (Goodman, 2011; Nieto et al., 2010), because they are considered essential to fostering accountability and avoiding patronizing behaviour.

Alberto also focused on relationship-building when he framed the principle of confidentiality as a possible bonding factor for interpreters and users. He drew parallels between confidentiality and friends’ ability to keep a secret, commenting that interpreters “can be a

friend, but [they] won’t disclose anything. And it’s even nice to know that you can tell [the interpreter] something and that he won’t say anything because of their code of ethics” [*“tú puedes ser amigo pero ya de ahí tú no vas a revelar nada. Y hasta es bonito saber eso que tú le cuentas algo y que él no lo va a decir porque es un código de ética”*.]

In the reframing of these ethical principles to support their understanding of the interpreter role, the users appear to be favouring teleological ethics, defined as ethical decision-making based on their consequences rather than on *a priori* rules (Dean & Pollard, 2018). This could be seen to conflict with the normative ethical ideals in the NZSTI code of ethics (2013), which interpreters in Aotearoa New Zealand are expected to follow. These findings align with calls for a more critical understanding of interpreting ethics that relies on values and the achievement of desirable outcomes (Dean & Pollard, 2018; Enríquez Raído et al., 2020). The users also recognized interpreters’ power and the role interpreters play in securing users’ access to information:

> ***Agustina:*** *Entonces me decís que la función de la intérprete tiene que ver con esta función de contención…*
> ***Juana:*** *Y de informar, ¿no? Como, por el poder. Porque, a la larga, si tú tienes información, tienes el poder de cualquier cosa, entonces es poder.*
>
> [**Agustina:** So you are telling me that the role of the interpreter has to do with support ...
> **Juana:** And information, right? Like, for empowerment. Because, ultimately, if you have information, you have the power to do anything, so it is power.]

Users’ recognition of interpreters’ power stands in contrast to many interpreters’ perception of their own role (Dysart-Gale, 2005; Hsieh, 2009; Major & Napier, 2019) and lack of power in institutional settings (Mason & Ren, 2013). If ethicality is to be flexible, situation-dependent and values-based, as elucidated by the users above, interpreters must acknowledge their own power and the power differences intrinsic to their working environment. Allyship may serve as a means to achieving this.

4.2 “The social system is not fair” – allyship and social justice in spoken-language interpreting

During the one-on-one dialogues, Alberto declared that “the social system is not fair” [*“no es justo el sistema social”*], while Cristian commented on the “abysmal” disadvantage that people from refugee backgrounds like himself have to face in their new homes. As discussed below, the users’ lived experiences have informed this project’s situated understanding of social justice as being intrinsic to community interpreting in Aotearoa New Zealand and, therefore, of ally theory as a possible path to the safer and fairer provision of language services.

The users’ definition of social justice was heavily informed by the pressure they face to conform to dominant sociocultural practices regarding both language and other aspects of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Commenting on linguistic differences, Cristian mentioned that “when someone comes and talks to you in a language that you don’t understand, you feel like

running away” [*“Cuando una persona viene y te habla en un idioma que tú no entiendes, te dan ganas de salir corriendo”*.] Juana recalled arriving “in a country where [she] truly didn't understand anything. Absolutely nothing. Nothing, nothing at all” [*“en un país donde en verdad no entendía nada*. *Nada de nada. Nada de nada de nada*”.] Anecdotally, Alberto mentioned his difficulty in coming to grips with the logistics of local recycling conventions and the need to purchase petrol in prescribed containers. Similarly, Juana shared her bewilderment when she encountered unfamiliar contraceptive options and immunization schedules.

These experiences highlight the ways in which linguistic differences are merely one of many factors in a broader context of inequity, which is maintained in part by the perpetual foreigner stereotype that drives social marginalization (Tankosić, 2020). Everyday practices such as recycling are normalized together with institutional power distributions and practices through mass media and education. They result is an implicit separation of those who belong to a space from others who do not (Armas, 2019; Haldrup et al., 2006). As stressed in the previous literature (Crezee & Roat, 2019), therefore, CALD communities often find themselves needing more than just language support.

The lack of familiarity with the new context and institutions combined with language limitations can result in complex feelings of isolation and powerlessness (Le Goff & Carbonel, 2020). Throughout her one-on-one dialogue, for example, Juana mentioned getting “really frustrated” [*“me frustré un montón”*] on several occasions. Her inability to communicate, compounded by other aspects of her life in a new country, affected her mental health, leading even to a period of depression: “I obviously ended up depressed afterwards. That situation plus other ones, right? But that was, like, ugh.” [*“Obviamente terminé con una depresión después. Claro, la situación más otras, ¿no? Pero eso fue como pff.”*] These findings are consistent with the literature about the emotional toll faced by migrant communities based on their identity, language and culture (López, 2022; Tankosić, 2020). In such circumstances, inadequate interpreting service provision was seen as potentially exacerbating the situation. In the words of Cristian, the patient “depends on the interpreter’s translation. And if [the translation] is incorrect, he’s affected.” [*“El paciente en este primer caso depende de la traducción de la intérprete. Y si está mal, es afectado.”*] These findings are consistent with research suggesting that users’ negative experiences can be (re)settlement stressors with the potential for (re)traumatization (González Campanella, 2023).

In their assessment of their experience with interpreting services, the users acknowledged the systemic rather than individual nature of many of the challenges they faced. Speaking about her difficulty in communicating with an English-speaking doctor in an Auckland hospital when no interpreter was available, Juana highlighted how limitations can go beyond the attitudes of the individuals involved. Despite the doctor’s goodwill, Juana’s understanding of the medical situation was still hindered by the lack of interpreting services: *“Se acercó la doctora a explicar – (…) siento que aquí todo el mundo es muy suave, es muy dulce, pero a mí no me sirve la dulzura ni la buena onda si no entiendo.”* [The doctor came to explain – (…) I feel like everyone here is very soft and very sweet, but sweetness and good vibes are not

useful to me if I can't understand.] Similarly, she said: *"Sí hubo amabilidad de las personas, de la doctora, (…) pero igual sentí que me estaban vulnerando un poco el derecho."* [People were kind to me, yes. The doctor was, (…) but I still felt that they were infringing upon my rights a bit.] As interpreting is often necessary for CALD communities to use the available services and participate in society, these kinds of difficulties become "a political, rather than a merely pragmatic, issue" (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1).

The users recognized a range of individual and collective power asymmetries which may be exacerbated by interpreter neutrality. Juana revealed an understanding of the way different parts of an individual's identities – for instance, Latin American and queer – can intersect (Crenshaw, 1989/2018), which may result in a greater need for interpreter interventions. This understanding informed her disapproval of interpreters who would remain neutral in the face of rights violations: *"Si como intérprete te vas dando cuenta que están vulnerando derechos y sigues neutral, entonces es como … qué terrible, ¿no?"* [If, as an interpreter, you start realizing that rights are being violated and you remain neutral, it's like ... So terrible, right?]

As allyship "provides a multi-dimensional view of an individual's social identities" (Gibson, 2014, p. 205), it stands as an effective means of consciously and proactively responding to shifting asymmetries as they arise in a communication event. When asked about allyship, the users offered a varied understanding of the concept, some even indicating that they had never heard of it. However, the findings reveal their nuanced grasp of systemic oppression and power differences at both the linguistic and the non-linguistic levels. Their experiences therefore point to the need for language service provision as one part of a broader support system that strives for equity and social justice.

4.3 "Be, be ... professional" – possible pathways to implementation

Allyship is often met with resistance in spoken-language interpreting because it tends to challenge persistent views on the interpreter's role. During the group dialogue involving users, trained interpreters and a community representative (see Table 1 on p. 121), different and often conflicting perspectives were raised. This conflict is most evident in the disagreement between Alberto, an interpreting service user, and Luisa, an experienced interpreter. When discussing community interpreting, Alberto focused on the systemic faults and the expansiveness of ethicality, whereas Luisa supported a more traditional understanding of the interpreter role:

> ***Alberto:*** *Si van a meter preso a alguien inocente y yo me quedo callado, soy cómplice.*
> ***Luisa:*** *No, no, no, no, pero no se trata de complicidad porque tú no tienes ni el derecho ni el deber de expresar, de abogar o de expresar o de aliarte–*
> ***Alberto:*** *Sí, yo entiendo porque la ética dice "no te metas", pero yo si veo que lo van a meter preso injustamente, yo me meto.*
>
> [**Alberto:** If they'll send someone innocent to jail and I remain silent, I'm an accomplice.
> **Luisa:** No, no, no, no. It's not about complicity because one [interpreters] has neither the right nor the duty to say, advocate or ally oneself–

> **Alberto:** Yes, I understand that ethics say “don’t get involved”, but if I see that they’ll put someone in jail unfairly, I get involved.]

Similarly, Luisa’s position diverged from that of Helena, the community representative with a social work background:

> ***Helena:*** *(…) [La doctora] sabía un poco de su* background *[circunstancias personales de la paciente] y que habla por una condición de refugio, etc. Y le dijo, “Pregúntale si ha experimentado situaciones de violencia en su vida”. Y yo dije como “Oh, guau. Y yo no puede ser que me esté preguntando eso”. Y bueno y [la paciente preguntó], “¿Qué dijo?”. Y bueno lo que yo hice fue [decir] “Mira, preguntó eso, si no quieres responder no lo hagas.”*
> ***Luisa:*** Yeah *pero eso, eso, eso- eso lo puedes hacer tú porque tú eres trabajadora social, entonces está perfecto que hagas eso dentro de tu rol.*
> ***Helena:*** *Pero de buena intérprete también lo haría.*
> ***Luisa:*** *No, no puedes. No puedes porque tú como intérprete no eres nadie para decidir si la persona tiene que responder o no. No.*
>
> [**Helena:** (…) [The doctor] knew a little bit about her background [the patient’s] and about her refugee status, etc. And she said, “Ask her if she has had to face violence in her life”. And I was like “Oh, wow. I can’t believe she’s asking this.” And so [the patient asked], “What did she say?”. And so what I did was [say] “Look, she asked me this, if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to”.
> **Luisa:** Yeah but that, that, that – you can do that because you are a social worker, so it’s okay for you to do that within your role.
> **Helena:** But as a good interpreter, I’d do it also.
> **Luisa:** No, you can’t. You can’t because you, as an interpreter, you are not to decide if the person has to answer or not. No.]

In Aotearoa New Zealand, interpreting research tends to involve only professional interpreters and/or public service providers (e.g., Bouterey, 2019; Britz, 2017; Crezee, 2003; Crezee et al., 2011; Magill, 2017; Seers et al., 2013; Wang & Grant, 2015), with the exception of a few, more recent studies that included the participation of users (González Campanella, 2022a; Shrestha-Ranjit et al., 2020). These trends mirror Luisa’s assumption that “it is the interpreter who knows what their role is, not the user” (*“el intérprete es el que sabe cuál es el rol que tiene, no el usuario”*). Therefore, this disparity could be partly associated with the interpreting field’s disregard for users’ preferences.

As the dialogue unfolded, to reconcile opposing perspectives, some group members began asking for a middle ground between Luisa’s stance of non-involvement and Alberto’s view that silence or inaction implies complicity with injustice. Interpreters Antonia and Valeria, for example, both spoke against radical and simplistic stances:

> ***Antonia:*** *Me parece que [Alberto y Luisa] lo están viendo, a mi criterio, de una forma sumamente radical y creo que hay un punto medio que es por el que tendríamos que trabajar y a lo que deberíamos apuntar.*

[**Antonia:** I think that, in my opinion, [Alberto's and Luisa's] points of view are extremely radical and I believe there's a middle ground which we should be working on and aiming for.]

Valeria: *Yo creo que también hay matices, ¿no? Entre lo que le sucedió a Alberto y lo que está proponiendo Luisa.*

Valeria: I think there are nuances as well, right? Between what happened to Alberto and what Luisa is suggesting.]

Achieving this middle ground was seen to require skills beyond linguistic proficiency, including knowledge of trust and approachability, mediation, empowerment, empathy and compassion, how to work with vulnerable populations, psychological first aid, critical thinking, and interpersonal management. Although members of the group dialogue reaffirmed that ensuring communication is the interpreter's primary task, they acknowledged its non-verbal and contextual aspects. The context was a recurrent topic, with mentions of the need to recognize inequality and maintain up-to-date knowledge of current affairs, New Zealand systems, and their shortcomings.

The above definition of a nuanced middle ground emphasizes the need for flexible ethical principles to account for such complexity. A teleological understanding of interpreting ethics is also required to navigate what Luisa and Valeria recognized as "overwhelming" demands regularly made of interpreters. According to Luisa, "the interpreter is with you at the tribunal today, at two they need to go to the hospital, at three– Imagine being mentor, lawyer, social worker, nurse, mum, what other roles were there? Of all those people! The mental workload." [*"el intérprete hoy está contigo en el tribunal, a las dos tiene que ir al hospital, a las tres– imagínate ser mentor, abogado y trabajador social, enfermera, mamá, ¿qué otros roles había? ¡De todas esas personas! La carga mental*."] Luisa's insistence on non-intervention is challenged by the emotional toll she experiences from the job. Conversely, as a user, Alberto could recognize the place of emotions in interpreting and stated that navigating feelings is always a part of the job, while acting like a machine is solely "English propaganda".

Without preparing interpreters to engage in the reflexivity typical of other practice professions (Dean & Pollard, 2018), the focus on technical skills can lead to a disregard of their feelings, a lack of coping strategies to deal with them, and the covert exercise of their power (Tate & Turner, 2001; Wilson & Walsh, 2019). An understanding of neutrality as denying "personal experience, judgement and culture", and also of "the socio-cultural structural differences inherent in each language" (Rudvin, 2002, p. 7) can help practitioners to avoid the neocolonial practices identified by Alfredo as "English propaganda". Instead, allyship complements teleological decision-making and fosters the development of a proactive approach that encourages reflexivity, a recognition of interpreters' positionality, and a fluid alignment with parties tied to need and oppression (Nieto et al., 2010; Reynolds, 2010).

Apart from stressing the importance of teleological ethics, the group dialogue also provided insights into the culturally bound nature of ethicality. Alberto, for example, highlighted the fact that interpreting norms are not universal and that it would be useful to check what "the

protocol" is in other countries. He suggested that interpreter behaviour in Aotearoa New Zealand is informed by English customs and institutions inherited through colonization: *"Porque aquí es el protocolo inglés de que esto se acaba a las en punto y bueno, me voy. Se acabó"* [Because here they have the English protocol, where things finish at whatever o'clock and, well, I leave. It's over.] His view can be seen as paving the way for a decolonial culturally grounded revision of interpreter ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Similarly, parts of the dialogue which present professionalism as a universal concept fail to offer a convincing solution to parties' competing expectations. Luisa commented that, when "both parties are asking you to be something different", the best you can do is "be, be ... professional. If you remain within your role, you're in your role." [*"Las dos partes te están pidiendo que seas de diferente manera. Y tú puedes ser de la manera que, que- profesional. Si tú te mantienes en tu rol, estás en tu rol."*] In this case, professionalism is seen as an absolute truth and a safe net, instead of a "socially constructed and subjectively situated act" (Rudvin, 2007, p. 48). To incorporate users' preferences into practice, interpreters must critically examine the origin and bias of culturally bound concepts. This would help to prevent the inadvertent perpetuation of ethnocentric perspectives or the reinforcement of oppression (Elliott, 2016).

5. Conclusion

The present findings support the premise that users of interpreting services are knowledgeable about effective interpreter-mediated communication, even though their self-identified needs and expectations are often at odds with mainstream views on the interpreter role. The users involved in this research emphasized their preference for interpreters with social and relational skills who are capable of prioritizing relationship-building, all of which are key elements of ally theory. Fostering closer and more humane bonds with users was considered essential to developing trust, while strict adherence to normative principles so as to enforce role boundaries in practice was perceived as being hostile, self-serving and unsupportive. Users also underscored the importance of recognizing their varying needs across settings – legal, medical, mental health, social services – acknowledging power differences and moving beyond incontestable impartiality. Instead, they supported an interpreting approach aligned to each user's needs (whether linguistic or otherwise) that arise from the individual and systemic challenges they navigate.

In view of these findings, the users identified allyship as a way of fostering empathy, flexibility, self-reflection and empowerment in the face of inequality and oppression in interpreter-mediated communication. However, the group dialogue revealed a range of potentially conflicting expectations regarding the interpreter's role, with varying degrees of stringency among users, and ad-hoc and trained interpreters. To deal with this diversity of views without prioritizing any one perspective, members of the group dialogue suggested that a nuanced approach to interpreting which avoids simplistic stances be adopted. To achieve that, the group highlighted the importance of developing interpersonal and emotional competencies, which were perceived as lacking in mainstream training and definitions of the role. These competencies were seen to include mediation skills, psychological first aid, and the ability to develop trust and work effectively with vulnerable populations. Further research is therefore

needed to examine the ways in which these skills can be acquired and put into practice by interpreters with differing training, backgrounds and career paths.

The current study was developed together with a small number of members of the Latin American community, itself very diverse and heterogenous. Moreover, it is only one of the hundreds of CALD communities in Aotearoa New Zealand living alongside the indigenous Māori. For this reason, there is a need for more culturally affirming research with other CALD and minoritized communities, in Aotearoa and abroad, which can shift the focus away from the norms arising from professional and academic centres of decision-making (Marianacci, 2022b; Nakhid, 2021). Interpreter education also needs to take into account users’ flexible and culturally grounded understanding of the role and ethics involved in bridging the gap between users’ and interpreters’ expectations. Training in trauma-informed interpreting (e.g., Bancroft, 2017; González Campanella, 2022b) and an emphasis on interpreter mental health would also encourage the development of self-care, self-reflection and critical thinking. In turn, these skills would enable the assessment of interpreters’ positionality, biases and assumptions, which is crucial in a professional practice rooted in social justice.

This kind of interpreter training must be accompanied by a change in the policies and the codes of ethics and conduct. For this revision process to be effective, it must rest upon the horizontal involvement of users, with due respect for their different kinds of knowledge. Moreover, in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, this horizontal process calls for us to embody the worldviews, customs and knowledges of the Māori, the indigenous custodians of the land where the interpreted events are taking place, and of all people involved in them (National Ethics Advisory Committee, 2023). This dimension must be taken on board in future research. Finally, a horizontal and inclusive approach goes hand in hand with the need to shift from deontological to teleological ethics, and from universal principles to context-based and value-laden practice. A situated approach grounded in horizontal and inclusive research on actual interpreting practices in Aotearoa New Zealand would identify and cater to the needs of all users in their sociocultural context more effectively.

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[1] AUTEC Reference Number 20/325.

[2] While everyone involved in the research project gave consent to be named, pseudonyms have been used in this article to safeguard individuals’ privacy and integrity. This precaution is taken due to the summarization of their knowledge and the absence of the transcripts, which are included elsewhere (Marianacci, 2022a) for contextualization purposes.

[3] The New Zealand Refugee Quota Programme is part of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regular resettlement programme; it welcomes 1,500 UNHCR-recognized refugees into the country every year (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.).

[4] Extracts from the dialogues were translated from Spanish into English by the author, a professional translator and interpreter member of the New Zealand Society of Translators and Interpreters.