Reaping the Benefits of Vicarious Trauma

Michael Harvey

Abstract

This article illustrates a mode of inquiry for reaping the benefits of experiencing vicarious trauma that can be utilized in interpreter education, mentoring and supervisory relationships, debriefing, and personal reflection. An adaptation of constructivist self-development theory and a narrative therapy approach are described. The latter approach includes the uncovering of what is absent but implicit, the uncovering of actions reflective of one's personal agency, the relevant skills that one utilizes, and the social/relational history of these skills. Mitigating the risks and reaping the benefits of vicarious trauma may catalyze significant professional and personal growth such as clarification of values, self-identity, and skills, and provide interpreters with the essential fuel to sustain their passion for the work they do and the lives they live.

Keywords: vicarious trauma, interpreters, benefits, narrative therapy, Constructivist Self-Development Theory

1 Correspondence to: mharvey2000@comcast.net
1. Introduction

Trauma is contagious. The high prevalence of trauma and oppression for Deaf persons has been well documented (Tate, 2012). And those who bear witness to trauma, such as interpreters, may experience vicarious trauma: the transformation of one’s inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with another’s distress (Andert & Trites, 2014; Barrington & Shakespeare-Finch, 2014; Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Hetherington, 2012; Lai, Heydon, & Mulayim, 2015; Moulden & Firestone, 2007; Røkenes, 1992; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996). Simply put, when we open our hearts to someone in emotional pain, we are changed. In one interpreter’s words, “I felt as if I had been attacked, too.”

In previous publications (Harvey, 2001, 2003), I described common psychological dynamics that catalyze vicarious trauma and coping strategies for sign language interpreters. The present article provides further illustrations of these effects and a mode of inquiry that can be utilized in interpreter mentoring relationships for reaping benefits of experiencing one’s own vicarious trauma as well as that of one’s peers. Although there are several factors in interpreting situations that cause stress and trauma (Dean & Pollard, 2005), the specific focus of this article is the effects of witnessing perceived oppression. The conclusions are based on my perspective as a clinical psychologist; 14 structured interviews that I and an interpreter, Pamela Gunther, conducted; and 81 interpreter responses to a longitudinal survey (2000 to present) that I have posted on http://www.michaelharvey-phd.com. The protocol begins with the following request:

If you’d be willing, would you think back to some interpreting situation in which you felt that a hearing person somehow oppressed a Deaf consumer? It can be significant oppression or not significant oppression; anything that kind of got under your skin as you observed the event. Please describe that interpreting situation and give as many details as possible.

Table 1: Survey participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–60</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reaping VT Benefits

Table 2. Interpreting context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private practice</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health clinic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-patient treatment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-patient treatment</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the survey questions was, “How did you feel in the situation?” It is striking to observe the interpreters’ intense and overwhelming emotional reactions, because, in accordance with their professional training (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2005), these emotions cannot be expressed during interactions. For example, recalling a situation in which a hearing coach demeaned a Deaf football player, one interpreter reported,

If I didn't have the control I had, I think I would have killed that coach. Now for you to understand just how grave that statement is, you need to know that I sometimes get teased for seeing something good in every situation. In high school, I was labelled as “the peacemaker.” What bothers me most is that I still harbour such awful feelings for this man. I have met him since at various school functions, and I always maintain composure in these professional situations. However, give me a dark alley some night and the story might end differently.

Other examples of emotional reactions:

- “The oppression which was shown from this teacher was uncalled for and made me sick.”
- “Inside I was on fire.”
- “Long after my interpreting was over, I finally broke down in tears.”
- “I was scared, stunned, shocked and then angry.”
- “My heart was pounding and my head felt like a large rubber-band had been snapped around it.”
- “I felt (in succession) curious, personally challenged, confused, helpless, irritated, really pissed off, empathic to the Deaf consumer, conceding, newly energized, and as I left, I felt used, taken advantage of and REALLY, REALLY PISSED OFF at the farcity of the whole thing.”
- “Be prepared for heartbreak!”

The protocol of the survey also included the question, “Did these reactions prompt memories of other personal experiences with oppression, i.e., gender, cultural, sexual orientation, family of origin?” The responses confirmed that the so-called “costs of caring” (Figley, 1995) may become exacerbated by family-of-origin transference issues. For example, after interpreting for an “insensitive doctor,” an interpreter reflected on her own mother’s birthing experience: “That doctor seemed to disapprove of my mother’s marriage to a man of another race and treated her like a little girl when discussing birth control options. Her anger and frustration came back to me while interpreting.” Another interpreter, a child of Deaf adults (CODA), reported, “We were the only Deaf family in the whole area and people can be stupid and cruel. I saw/heard countless examples of bigotry and oppression while
Reaping VT Benefits

growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. My family was treated like contagious circus freaks. It doesn’t take much to remind me of all that.”

Interpreter identification with the Deaf consumer is common. When asked for memories that got triggered by a Deaf student’s frustration in a mainstream setting, one interpreter reported, “As a woman, I’ve been talked down-to, negated, and belittled by men who think they have the upper hand in knowledge, regardless of whether this is true or not.” Another interpreter reported, “Having grown up in a little-understood and often-oppressed religious minority (Jehovah’s Witness), empathizing with the oppression of the Deaf community has been fairly natural.” Another interpreter reported, “What was happening to the Deaf consumer right in front of me reminded me of my own experiences as an incest survivor.”

2. A Framework for Understanding Vicarious Trauma Effects

I use an adaptation of constructivist self-development theory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) as a framework for understanding the emotional impact of interpreters bearing witness to perceived oppression. Constructivist self-development theory suggests that vicarious trauma lessens one’s anticipation and security that certain psychological needs will be fulfilled, and therefore leads to emotional distress, including anger, guilt, fear, grief, shame, irritability, and other manifestations of emotional dysregulation. Briefly, the theory describes how the following beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about one’s psychological needs may be affected by trauma:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frame of reference</td>
<td>Ability to view the world as just, meaningful, stable and controllable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Feeling reasonably secure from harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy/Trust</td>
<td>Feeling connected to and validated by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group affiliation</td>
<td>Belonging to a larger community or cultural group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Having self-approval; valuing oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Exerting control over others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential meaning</td>
<td>Articulating the purpose of one's life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Feeling connected to that which transcends secular experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey participants described how their anticipated fulfilment of each need was thwarted:

Frame of reference:

• “I’ve always had a positive view of the world, but, as an interpreter, the negative parts were beaten into me every day. It's a harsh, cruel world.”
• “I thought this kind of oppressive treatment went out with the Dark Ages.”
• “I knew that if he were hearing, the doctors wouldn't have given him a shot to calm down.”
• “Although not all hearing people are bad, I got a sense, beginning on that day, that many supposedly well-intentioned hearing folks are not what they seem.”
• “It's another example of how I completely distrust systems that are supposed to protect us.”
Reaping VT Benefits

Safety:

- “I felt intimidated by the so-called professionals in the room—soooooo many of them.
- “It felt like I was personally stabbed in the chest.”
- “Maybe this could happen to me?”

Intimacy/Trust:

- “It made it hard for me to ‘see that of God in those people’ as we are supposed to try to do.”
- “The cumulative effect of such interactions has the potential to make me be short, critical and snooty.”
- “I have become less trustworthy of hearing people, including ones that should know better, i.e., interpreters.”
- “Feeling my deaf parents’ pain makes me angry at other interpreters, i.e., when they walk into situations talking to each other without signing.”

Group affiliation:

- “It makes me question whether I want to continue in this field because so often it involves these painful type of experiences. How much can one person take?”
- “I feel that as long as I’m in the role of the neutral party delivering words of the oppressor, it hinders my bond and cultural affiliation with the deaf consumer, at least at that time. It’s an awkward and uncomfortable position to find oneself in, especially after decades of working hard to establish those very bonds.”

Self-Esteem:

- “The situation damaged my self-competence because I again questioned my temperament and wondered later if my anger (even though it wasn’t expressed at the time) got in the way of doing my job.”
- “The situation was so egregious, I thought I must be reading it wrong.”
- “This event shook my esteem and undermined my confidence for a long time, and I questioned my professional competency. It’s been years and I have regularly stated that I would be leaving the field, that I could never do it justice, that I’m just not good enough, but I’m still here. I guess that emotion comes in waves for me.”
- “I think that if my student fails because of how he’s treated by the teachers, that it’s my fault.”
- “I felt dirty, like I was participating in the oppression because I was the vehicle through which the information was being processed.”
- “I was interpreting for a black, deaf male in the emergency room and all the white staff were firing questions at him. He became agitated and wrapped his hands around my neck . . . I think because we shared the same language and had eye contact. I doubted myself for many years following this experience.”

Power:

- “I have never felt so utterly helpless before or since.”
- “I felt angry, powerless, and, frankly, scared.”
- “I saw the student look to me with an expression saying ‘Help me, please!’ I was powerless.”
- “I went home feeling very shaken and unresolved.”

Existential meaning:

- “Bigotry like I observe every day is here to stay. What’s the use of trying?”
Reaping VT Benefits

Spirituality:
  • “I recently left my church after nearly 3 years of feeling caught between the hearing and Deaf congregants. I don’t even pray anymore.”

3. An Interpreter Interview: “How Can This Be Happening?”

The following vignette from a debriefing interview in 1993 exemplifies some effects of vicarious trauma. The interpreter, Laurie Robbins Shaffer, had interpreted an in-service work training for a Deaf consumer. The training included a videotape of a panel discussion with panelists with different disabilities, including a Deaf person. However, in Laurie’s own words, the Deaf person on the tape was ignored, “discredited and vanished” which shattered her idealized world image, her frame of reference, rendered her helpless, and threatened Laurie’s self-esteem.

LRS: The videotape had something to do with ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], I think. The videotape had representatives from the disabled community including a deaf person with an interpreter. I was interpreting the videotape for deaf people who were watching the videotape. But as the moderator got around to asking the Deaf person a question, he—as Deaf people tend to do culturally—related a whole bunch of background information before answering the question. I don’t think the Deaf person got a full sentence out before the moderator said, ‘That’s not the point of my question.’ And she never went back to the Deaf person!

I was interpreting the videotape for the Deaf consumer in the room who had no idea, I don’t think, of what had just happened on that videotape. But I almost fell out of the chair! I could literally feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I was shocked. Because it was just a neutral setting and there was nothing going on at all, I thought this videotaping would be no big deal. It came so out of the blue and my jaw almost fell to the ground. It was disgusting, the way this Deaf person was treated in this tape. And the tape was going to go out and be used for training for years!

To see someone blatantly overlooked and discredited, to see how fast it could happen, how quickly that person went from being an equivalent participant in that meeting to be totally vanished. He vanished, and it just broke my heart to see this and to know that the people who made this videotape allowed it to happen. And it also blew me away that now this tape was going to be used as the model. The whole thing, it was so fast and had so much impact.

MH: You’re feeling this as you are interpreting?

LRS: Yeah, I could feel the color going out of my face. I was thinking, I gotta cover this, I gotta cover this. Because the people in the room didn’t clue into what was really going on. They didn’t think anything of it. And even the Deaf consumer, he was tired; he had been sitting for four hours. I don’t think even he caught it. It wasn’t his responsibility to be totally tuned in, but as an interpreter, we’re tuned in 110% of the time. It just absolutely blew me out of the water.

MH: So you felt shocked, you felt tears; it broke your heart. Any other thoughts come to mind?

LRS: Well, I’m an action person. All I thought was “What can I do about this?” And I kind of ended up feeling that there wasn’t much I could do at all. . . [The interpreter who was with me] basically didn’t even notice it and she was sitting right there in the room, too. I was beginning to think I was losing my mind. Why am I finding this incredibly offensive?
Reaping VT Benefits

MH: You began to feel that there must be something wrong with you?

LRS: Initially, yeah, after I saw no reaction out of anybody.

MH: Then what feelings and thoughts came up?

LRS: I think the first thing was this total feeling of how can this be happening? I mean, I kept wanting the moderator to restate the question—then somehow this would be fixed. Again, it all happened very fast. But it then dawned on me that nothing’s going to be fixed. My whole feeling was trying to maintain control of myself while thinking about the fact that this is being done. The Deaf person’s been turned off. They turned the screen off of him and they’re never coming back to him.

MH: And it shouldn’t be happening. Would you say more about that? What do you say to yourself?

LRS: Yeah, there are two things that are a part of me. One is the fact that I believe that somewhere out there, the world is fair; and I’m always disillusioned when it’s not. Sometimes I think that’s an advantage because obviously I’m going to try to be fair and that’s helpful, and I try to create an environment that’s an equivalent. However, then I get devastated when I find out I’m wrong. It’s a naiveté, I guess. It still shocks me when people aren’t treated fairly.

As an experienced interpreter who was very much oriented to reality, Laurie certainly knew that the world wasn’t fair, particularly for Deaf people. Nevertheless, her language demonstrates how witnessing unfairness close up devastated her: “I almost fell out of the chair,” “tears welling up in my eyes,” “shock,” “disgusting,” “broke my heart.”

4. Central Benefits to Examining Vicarious Trauma

Why might verbalizing all this distress be helpful? Indeed, the retelling of the story may be retraumatizing and detrimental. A relevant principle of healing: “Pain has a size and shape, a beginning and end. It takes over only when not allowed its voice” (Brener, Riemer, & Cutter, 1993, p.9). The more words an individual has for describing her distress, the more it has a beginning and end, and the better she’s able to manage it. With fewer words, the more the pain takes over; and the more she succumbs to vicarious trauma. As I have discussed in previous publications (Harvey, 2003, 2001), articulating and examining one’s experience with another person who seeks to understand one’s reactions and validate one’s feelings often renders the detrimental effects of the vicarious trauma less emotionally toxic. This facilitates insight that ushers in the use of coping or self-care strategies, such as various physical safeguards, self-soothing activities, limit setting, social supports, organizational supports, and access to psychotherapy. The vicarious trauma self-care literature provides an extensive list of coping strategies (see, e.g., Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Meichenbaum, 2007; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996). Dean and Pollard (2001, 2005) also describe methods of reducing interpreters’ stress, via the application of demand-control theory.

There is also psychological value in examining, ferreting out, and articulating one’s own psychological needs, to ask oneself questions such as:

• What are my relevant psychological needs?
• How are these needs manifested?
• Which needs are more prominent?
• How might witnessing oppression be affecting these needs?
• What compensatory needs can I access when one need is thwarted?
Reaping VT Benefits

Sometimes this self-examination happens serendipitously. Ann, an interpreter who attended a vicarious trauma workshop I once conducted on the grounds of a national park, became overwhelmed by a recent experience in which she interpreted for a Deaf patient whom she perceived as being abused by professionals. She left the workshop with plans to leave the conference. However, as “luck” would have it, Ann’s car was one of two cars out of over 100 that were blocked in the parking lot. She walked around the lake instead, and, in a short time, decided to sit on a rock. She returned to the workshop and recounted an amazing and instructive story in regard to her need for control: She told us that she had noticed a butterfly right above the water line, trying without success to fly. It was obviously injured.

I found a stick and lifted the butterfly up. It flew for a second, only to fall down a little further in the lake. I then found a longer stick and again lifted it up. Again it flew for an instant and fell into the water. With a still longer stick, I helped it again but it was in vain. And soon the butterfly was out of my reach. Then I knew that I did all I could do. I had to let it go.

What additional emotional benefits might there be for an interpreter when debriefing from an oppressive situation other than to retell the story, express feelings, examine needs, and learn coping strategies? This question echoes emerging literature in the subfield of traumatology, referred to as posttraumatic growth (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2014; Splevins, Cohen, Murray, Joseph, & Bowley, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012). In my clinical experience, those who give expression to the myriad deleterious trauma effects will often also spontaneously mention its benefits. Many survey respondents indicated that witnessing oppression catalyzed positive, growth-enhancing effects, including a greater anticipated fulfillment of certain psychological needs:

Frame of reference:
- “It helps me to see how the world can operate, and the scope of injustices in it.”

Intimacy/Trust:
- “I’ve learned to value my friends who are deaf and their experiences more.”
- “I came home and cried with my husband.”

Group affiliation:
- “For the first time, I realized that I didn’t want to just get through it and shrug it off and say 'tomorrow will be better.' I knew from then on I wanted to connect more with the Deaf community.”
- “After a while, I began to see incredible strength in Deaf people sustaining oppression and felt privileged to be invited to be part of these experiences.”

Self-Esteem:
- “I let myself get off the hook. It's okay to cry; it's okay to feel helpless sometimes. I am being much more gentle with myself these days.”
- “This has made me a much more introspective interpreter, a more human person in the world, and a person who can better understand (regardless of the pain or joy it may cause me to feel) that the lives of Deaf people are full of all kinds of pain and frustration. Perhaps I only knew this intellectually before this situation.”

Power:
- “I was astonished at my brazenness to stand up to a judge. Where in the world did I get the balls to do that?”

2 In Jungian terminology, this is referred to as synchronicity: a perceived meaningful coincidence between two or more events that mirror or echo one’s personal concerns.
Reaping VT Benefits

Existential meaning:

- “I know that I am where I need to be and must continue serving the Deaf community in order to educate the hearing community and make a difference.”
- “I guess I created meaning from this experience by going on to work for the Department of Mental Health to train interpreters in working in mental health settings and educating hospitals and providers about their obligations to Deaf persons, and to create specialized programs that are linguistically and culturally affirming.”
- “This event made me consciously decide that I no longer wanted to be a ‘hidden’ oppressor. If I had supposed issues or questions about the Deaf community, Deaf culture, I was now going to face them and openly talk about them. I have no doubts that the experience taught me a lot about integrity and who I want to be as a person and as an interpreter.”
- “It helps me to construct meaning out of life by guiding me away from practicing injustices, and being extra aware of them in my daily life. I’ve attained a level of awareness that if I hadn’t witnessed oppression frequently for 18 years in this field, I wouldn’t have attained.”

Spirituality:

- “Deep reflection about the emotional and practical consequences of oppression had intensified my spiritual awareness.”
- “My spiritual faith came out deep within me, thinking, ‘I will survive.’”
- “That event showed me that my spirituality is ever-present inside of me, ready to be drawn from when needed.”

Evident in these responses is the plethora of self-perceived anticipated fulfillment of existential and spiritual needs, as compared to the previous listing of thwarted needs. This is consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2012) finding that individuals who face trauma may be more likely to become cognitively engaged with fundamental existential questions, to value the smaller things in life more, and to examine important changes in the religious, spiritual, and existential components of life.

5. Are There Even More Benefits to Be Realized?

Can we do even better, “kick this up a notch”? How might interpreters achieve more profound, long-lasting benefits from vicarious trauma, ones that sustain them and – at the risk of asking too much -- perhaps even enrich their lives? One survey respondent recommended, “Prepare your own internal environment to allow for good things to come from horrible situations.” At first glance, this directive reminded me of a complicated recipe that says, “Cook it carefully.” Not helpful. Beyond the standard self-care advice to eat right, exercise, set limits, take breaks, meditate, how exactly can interpreters prepare? In my work with vicarious trauma for others and myself, I find myself repeatedly coming back to the following piece of wisdom:

In order to transform vicarious trauma, you must love your work or some important aspect of your work. . . . This work is too difficult and too personally demanding to do without a sense of mission or conviction. . . . . The work must be meaningful to you. Then, paradoxically, your work itself is part of your antidote to vicarious trauma. (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996, p.72 ).

I have found a narrative approach to be most useful for understanding how vicarious trauma can promote finding meaning. Narrative therapy was developed by Michael White (Australia) and David Epston (New Zealand) for use in psychotherapy, but its applicability extends far beyond this context, including, as will be elaborated later, in interpreter-mentoring relationships. In a nutshell, it provides “scaffolding” for discerning
Reaping VT Benefits

*absent but implicit* personal aspirations that are contained in interpreters’ vicarious trauma testimonies” (White, 2000). This is a mouthful and warrants clarification.

6. Scaffolding Questions: A Tool for Interpreter Mentoring

Scaffolding is a temporary structure used to support people and material in the construction or repair of buildings. In a narrative approach, metaphorical scaffolding refers to a temporary conversational structure, or mode of inquiry, that supports the emergence of personal stories that “fit” with what people want and intend for their lives, what matters to them, their life aspirations. For an interpreter who experiences vicarious trauma, thoughtfully scaffolded questions can support one to step from the “known and familiar” of one’s distress into what may be one’s “less known and less familiar” life aspirations that until then had been relatively dormant: *absent* from one’s trauma narrative but *implicit* in their influence.

Stated differently, people typically do not simply give a passive retelling of their vicarious trauma response. If the retelling of the story is quiescent, without protest, or reflects a passive acceptance of the status quo, by definition, it would not constitute trauma (White, 2007). Rather, the narrative evinces protest, resistance, anger, and fear. Although these reactions typically do not rise to the level of warranting a clinical diagnosis, nonetheless, they significantly “get under one’s skin.” Laurie was vicariously traumatized. Her protest was how “incredibly offensive it was that the Deaf person was blatantly overlooked and discredited,” and this protest precipitated a painful array of emotions. One key reason why that situation was so distressing to her was *because* it violated her absent but implicit “sense of fairness,” a life goal that she had cherished. Her sense of fairness was the out-of-focus background, relatively absent but implicit in her narrative with me, and it “set the stage” for her expressed experience of distress.

Note that “absent but implicit” doesn’t necessarily imply unawareness; it implies a paucity of elaboration, fewer words. While Laurie readily attributed her distress to a violation of fairness, she initially she used fewer words in her explanation. Her absent but implicit narrative remained in the background. In contrast, she used more words, including those that had a higher affective intensity, to describe the distressing foreground, for example, “It broke my heart,” “blew me out of the water,” “I almost fell out of the chair with tears welling up in my eyes,” “I felt shock, disgust, helplessness, confusion, disillusionment, and devastation.”

However, in my experience, these absent but implicit background factors are not always readily accessible without a specific mode of inquiry; in fact, they often come as a surprise to those who are giving testimony. As one interpreter put it, “This survey generated more thought than I anticipated.” Another interpreter expressed that she became overwrought with anguish because a Deaf consumer was left out of a conversation, despite interpreter services. That interpreter initially denied any absent but implicit issues but then reconsidered: “I didn’t think that the situation brought up any personal memories, but thinking about it now, I often felt unheard and unseen in my childhood, [like that Deaf person]. I know that not being heard or s...
psychotherapy. Indeed, this narrative therapy approach can be used as a template for engaging in probing conversations in a mentoring relationship. Mentorship can be a bridge from interpreter education to the world of work or a vehicle for professional advancement toward specialization and personal growth for practicing interpreters (National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, http://www.interpretereducation.org).

Key scaffolding questions to uncover what is absent but implicit

- Why do you resist passively accepting the situation and instead find it distressing?
- What might your distress say about what is important to you?
- What of your values, beliefs, hopes, or dreams have been violated, devalued, or dislodged?
- What might your distress indicate about what you hold precious and what you intend for your life, how you want to live life?
- What is the history of these values? Have you always held them as important?
- Who else in your life would know about these values? How might you have indicated these values to them?

Key scaffolding questions to uncover and name actions reflective of personal agency

Vicarious trauma inquiries also offer an opportunity to illuminate one’s personal agency, that is, an individual’s sense of being able to direct or have influence on his life in accordance with his values (White, 2007). Indeed, the very act of giving expression to what was distressing about the interpreting situation and how it violated implicit values is an example of taking action, of responding in some way. As one survey respondent reported, “These types of situations only serve to reinforce that expressing and teaching my beliefs must always be my first ‘career.’”

- What are you doing in response to being bothered by how the Deaf consumer was treating during the interpreting situation?
- Behaviorally, what exactly are you doing to hold onto what is precious to you?
- How are you reclaiming that which you value?
- How are you affirming beliefs about your life?
- What are/were you hoping for in taking this action?
- What does your distress reflect about what you are planning for your life?

Key scaffolding questions to uncover and name individual skills

Once the expression of distress has been named as an action, it is possible to develop a description of the skills or know-how involved in taking such action.

- How is it possible for you to take this action?
- What does this action you are taking reflect about what you know about life?
- What life skills are you using here?
- Do you remember when you realized that you possessed this skill?

Key scaffolding questions to uncover the social and relational history of what is "absent but implicit"

Once we have established what it is that is being given value to, and the related pragmatics of how one is doing this, we can support this underpinning of identity by bringing forward the history of what is being valued.

- Where have these purposes shown up in your life before?
- Can you tell a story about how you learned these skills or values?
- Have you done anything like this before?
Reaping VT Benefits

- Do you remember what was important to you back then?

7. “What Can I Do for You?” Turning Vicarious Trauma into Personal Enrichment

These scaffolding questions and responses are illustrated in a 2015 interview with Laurie Robbins Shaffer following up on her response to my previous interview with her 21 years earlier (see above). In that interview she discussed her experience interpreting a videotape on the Americans with Disabilities Act in which a Deaf man was “blatantly overlooked and discredited,” which she found vicariously traumatic, and it became clear that the absent but implicit value that was violated was her sense of fairness.

MH: You’ve read the transcript of our conversation that took place almost 21 years ago. The first question is what thoughts or reactions do you have now about what you said?

LRS: I think that first thing that struck me was how much I sound the same today! I’m an action person, so watching people either participate in or perpetuate oppression and/or be on the other side of oppressive actions is still very hard for me to witness and I often want to do something and that’s often not possible in the moment.

MH: Did you remember that situation that you spoke of?

LRS: If I saw the Deaf gentleman today, I wouldn’t remember who he was, but I do remember the whole scenario of the video training and him sitting there and me going, “Oh my god, I can’t believe this is happening.” Would that encounter bother me today as much as it did then? Probably. I don’t know what I would do differently. I wish I remembered more about did I go there often, did I have any connection to the assignment other than coming in as a freelancer and leaving? I think that would have influenced whether I thought I could speak to someone or not. Like asking, “Do you realize that this video training is coming across this way?” I’ve spent half my career freelancing and half my career in staff positions, often as coordinator of services. Part of what drives me to take that position is an ability to do more than just come in and come out and have so little to say to make a difference.

MH: You’d be more empowered to make some real change.

LRS: Yeah, and also have a relationship with Deaf people on a more consistent basis. So I could ask, “Do you want to say something about this?” It’s different from when you’re just flying in and flying out. I also remember that the Deaf gentleman was an employee who was in a mandated training, and he wasn’t going to raise a fervor about the video. It didn’t strike him as a catastrophe so why should I add a scar? You know, if it’s not upsetting him, why should I make him upset? I guess that was my thinking and I guess it might still be. But when people do react with “This is not fair, this is not right,” I think when you’re a member of an institution, you can work with them to make that change whereas it’s harder as a freelancer.

MH: So you envision that if you were part of an institution and the Deaf person said, “This isn’t fair,” you’d build a relationship and you’d effect change that way?

LRS: Yeah, like sitting down and asking the Deaf person, “What do you want me to do?” “Do you want me to be your interpreter while you negotiate the situation?” “Do you want me there as your ally and maybe bring in someone else to just interpret?” Or “Do you want to go with a different interpreter?” There’s an array of options that when you’re not part of the institution you don’t always have that.
Reaping VT Benefits

MH: Being part of an institution is one piece but being you is the other. So let me ask you what is it about you, what is it about the skills that you have, the knowledge that you have, that you draw on in order to help empower the Deaf consumer?

LRS: Well, I’m not very good at just being a passive observer. And people know they can come to me and I will speak out. And I know the system. As a white, well-educated, hearing woman, I’ve been exposed to these systems all my life. I can say, “Maybe you wanna talk to so and so. Maybe you wanna go to this person.”

MH: So you have the knowledge base of how these systems operate?

LRS: Yeah, and I try the best I can to be the listener. I made the mistake earlier in my career of sort of telling Deaf people they should be upset about whatever, but let’s hold the horse here. That’s exhausting. And Deaf people face oppression every day of their lives and need to decide which battle to pick or not. Before, that would have been about me, but it’s not about me. If this Deaf person wants to fight, that’s great, but if not, that’s his or her choice. And I have to respect the choice either way, I get it.

MH: So respecting the Deaf person, listening, seeking to understand, asking, “How do you want me to help?” Would you give me the history of how you learned those skills? All this may have nothing to do with interpreting.

LRS: I’m trying to think. Remember those Peanuts cartoons with Lucy with the booth and the five cents for psychiatric consultations? That’s who my mother always thought I was. It has always sort of been in me. I always look for the one who’s at a disadvantage. In elementary school, there was a series of foreign exchange students trying to find their way. I would latch on to that kid. I would always name which kid that was all through elementary school.

MH: And that has been a very cherished quality that you’re proud of?

LRS: Yeah, yeah.

MH: And any thoughts about how that developed? Where did you learn to do that?

LRS: Not to get too psychoanalytic, but I was always the unheard kid. You’ll never believe this but all my report cards said I never spoke up in class and was kind of shy. And if people really wanted to know me, they kind of had to work at it. I didn’t do this on purpose, but because I was shy and reticent, not a lot of people knew me really well. So I was drawn to kids who were kind of in the same place. I’m glad I have that quality, but I’m not sure I always play it out well. I do make my mistakes. But I’m glad I can do it!

MH: And how do you see that playing itself out in your future? Where is this gonna go?

LRS: Well you know, I’m in doctoral studies right now and my dissertation is about the interplay between deaf people, interpreters, and institutions and how the whole power dynamic plays out. Who gets heard and who doesn’t.

MH: I get that. Would you name the quality you have that enables you to act according to your values, whether in an interpreting situation or with your dissertation?

LRS: I think it goes back to privilege and wanting to use it to its best advantage. In other words, can I share privilege with you to your advantage?
Reaping VT Benefits

MH: I’ll do my share of getting psychoanalytic. Isn’t that from elementary school? You mentioned earlier that you would latch on to foreign exchange students who were trying to find their way. Do you remember their names?

LRS: Yep! Grateziella was Italian and she was my bud in second grade. I befriended Ingrid who was Australian and she and I were inseperable in third grade. There was also a Turkish girl named Nur who had been at my school for two weeks in the first grade and spoke no English. “What can I do for you?”

In this interview, in contrast to the one conducted approximately 21 years ago, Laurie was much less consumed by her visceral shock and devastation when, as she put it, she “witnessed unfairness close-up.” Whereas in that first interview, she was treading the vicarious trauma “waters” in order not to affectively drown, here she is confidently swimming and navigating those waters—even enjoying the process!—in the service of benefiting both herself and others. I believe that this shift is attributable to more than the passage of time.

The mode of enquiry in this second interview provided the scaffolding for Laurie to uncover important narratives that would facilitate her professional and personal growth. Her tenacious absence but implicit value of fairness continued to occupy center stage: “Oppression is still very hard for me to witness.” She then articulated what actions are reflective of her personal agency by proudly proclaiming that she is an “action person,” that her doctoral dissertation will examine external power dynamics that affect Deaf consumers, and that her life action goal is to “share privilege to another’s advantage” by asking “What do you want me to do?” We were able to uncover what skills she utilized to actualize her values, for example, her knowledge of how systems operate. Finally, in terms of the social and relational history of her values, she recalled that, in elementary school, she sought out disadvantaged peers like Grateziella, Ingrid, and Nur. Moreover, she noted that she was always the unheard kid and that she was drawn to kids “who were kind of in the same place.”

Laurie’s increased insight and clarification of her life values, self-identity, and skills were among the significant professional and personal benefits she reaped from experiencing vicarious trauma. She was able to transform the negative effects in service of her growth. Reaping the benefits of vicarious trauma provided Laurie with the essential fuel to sustain her passion for the work she does and the life she lives.

8. Concluding Thoughts

Given the extremely high likelihood, if not the inevitability, of interpreters experiencing vicarious trauma (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012), it is essential for educators of interpreters to provide adequate preparation. This would include formal training about the causes and dynamics of vicarious trauma, self-care strategies for minimizing and coping with its negative effects, and, as this article described, a framework for reaping its myriad benefits.

This could occur in several contexts. Bontempo and Malcolm (2012) provide several recommendations for such training, such as a lecture series, workshops, study modules, mentoring relationships, role playing and presenting realistic vignettes and case studies of traumatic interpreting situations. Hetherington (2012) reported that interpreting should be recognized as a practice profession requiring the support framework of supervision. These reflective practices can also be profitably utilized by both novice and experienced interpreters for debriefing after a traumatic assignment.

Engaging in reflective practice would foster collegial support, trust, and a spontaneous evolution of ideas. As Hetherington (2012) observed, topics for discussion among interpreters in supervision are not always formulated in advance; an issue raised by one member may trigger something for another, which then becomes their issue for the session. And dyadic or group discussions would, in narrative therapy parlance, provide scaffolding for personal reflection.

The psychological pain of vicarious trauma is not something to avoid, even if it were possible. Provided one has adequate coping mechanics, there are significant inherent rewards. Sigmund Freud once explained that the place where crystal breaks is the place that most clearly reveals its structure (Muller, 1992). In the same way, our
Reaping VT Benefits

vicarious trauma can be a vehicle for revealing our life aspirations and the deepest textures of our heart and soul, if only we will allow ourselves to be taught.

Acknowledgments

I thank Laurie Robbins Shaffer for her kind permission to have part of the interviews replicated here for the purpose of sharing with other interpreters.

References


Reaping VT Benefits


