Horizontal violence

In a study examining horizontal violence among SLIs, Ott (2012, 15) defined the concept as ‘[P]ersistent behaviors such as gossip, diminishing comments, devaluing others’ professional worth, and criticism, perpetrated by members of a group toward one another, whether consistently or inconsistently, that cause harm, anxiety and stress in the receiver’. This definition fits some of the comments we saw on social media about the interpreter at the festival.

In a face-to-face setting, this behaviour...
might come in the form of the unsolicited feedback you receive from a peer that may not feel like it came from a good place – the cold shoulder that leaves you feeling unwanted and unvalued or the undermining comments from a co-worker which may play on your mind after you leave.

It is important to stress that constructive and/or critical unsolicited feedback is not horizontal violence in itself. There may be times when, for example, a colleague’s work may be having a negative impact on the deaf or hearing customers, and such feedback is deemed professionally necessary. As a profession, we need more research and training into both how to appropriately give and receive such feedback for our growth as practitioners and for the development of the profession. However, when feedback comes from a place of harmful intent and great impact to the recipient, then it may be horizontal violence.

Ott’s research (2012, 91), carried out with interpreters in the US, indicated a ‘culture of horizontal violence among interpreters’. All four of the interpreters she interviewed reported being scarred by incidences of horizontal violence; however, they all also gave examples of ‘unknowingly perpetrating this culture, as well’ (p91). She encourages SLIs to become more aware of horizontal violence and how we may both be affected by it and unintentionally contributing to it.

Causes and context

There are theories about why this behaviour exists in our profession, mainly rationalising the phenomenon as a consequence of oppression. Ott (2012, 38) explains that ‘horizontal violence is created by conditions of oppression that exist in female-dominated practice professions’. She cites research carried out on horizontal violence in the fields of nursing and education that found that – as well as being stressful and psychologically harmful to the recipient – horizontal violence was responsible for burnout and high attrition. In these professions, supervision and deliberate, purposeful induction by colleagues into the field was helpful in preventing horizontal violence. Similarly, citing Harvey (2008), Ott (2012, 19) states that interpreters may be unkind to each other as a consequence of working with an oppressed group, ‘witnessing oppression regularly, a situation that causes interpreters to behave like an oppressed group’.

However, Dean and Pollard (2005) (cited by Dean 2012, 1) state that this is the result of the ‘technical profession focus’ (Dean &
Pollard, 2015) where ‘many of us have formed bad habits’ by adopting the “Master-Apprentice mentality” (Feasey, 2002). ‘More than likely, we have taken our place in the hierarchy and learned to talk to others in the way that we’ve been talked to’ (Dean 2012, 1).

Regardless of the causes, it is likely that ‘overly critical perspectives of each other have detrimental effects on the collaborative environment required for working interpreters to be successful’ (Block 2015, 1).

**Keyboard courage**

‘Keyboard courage’ is the more memorable, sexier term for a concept known as the ‘online disinhibition effect’. Suler (2004) identified the online disinhibition effect as the tendency for people to say or do things online that they would not normally do in a face-to-face setting. Depending on the social media platform and the context, keyboard courage may at times be exacerbated by the ability to post things anonymously online. Comments and actions online also have the added impact of being able to travel very far, very fast via screenshots and shares, hence things expressed on social media may have more impact than things said in person.

There is evidence that keyboard courage is evident in our profession. In focus groups with signed language interpreters in the US, UK and Denmark, Best (2015) found that each group reported witnessing examples of situations that align with the concept of keyboard courage. These examples ranged from comments that were expressed in the online domain that research participants felt would have likely not been said in a face-to-face environment to disagreements that escalated to a point that participants felt would not have been reached had discussions happened face-to-face.

**Horizontal violence online**

We believe that horizontal violence could be amplified due to keyboard courage. Anecdotes abound about interpreters expressing hesitation or anxiety about writing posts or asking questions in certain social media groups dedicated to SLI discussions or suffering repercussions from colleagues’ posts after going viral.

In a digital setting, horizontal violence might look like a post on a social media account questioning a (usually) unnamed interpreters’ performance or behaviour, comments under a video that undermine or undervalue the interpreter’s work or screenshots/recordings of an interpreter’s work to send to colleagues for critique. It may also manifest through disparaging comments made to colleagues via email forums, interpreter groups or webinar chat platforms.

What might be worse about horizontal violence online is that the digital platform now enables such behaviour to have a path directly into our homes, our private time and an audience of our peers to view it. It is more public than face-to-face horizontal violence
from a co-worker, and it is more permanent, making it difficult to both literally and figuratively walk away from.

With the emergence of social media over the last 15 years, the digital domain is a new frontier, presenting new challenges for the interpreting industry to navigate with a whole new system of rules of etiquette and professionalism (Best, 2019). It is a platform from which we have little escape, considering the extent to which society has embraced it. It is therefore vital that we discuss how to respectfully and professionally converse with each other online, often in plain sight of our community, peers and clientele.

Research into BSL/English interpreters and horizontal violence

In an effort to ascertain how and/or if these concepts are applicable to BSL/English interpreters, we devised a simple survey, which introduced the concept of horizontal violence and then asked questions about both face-to-face horizontal violence and horizontal violence online. Question formats included a list of possible answers as well as having an ‘other’ field that allowed respondents to elaborate or offer unmentioned answer choices; other questions were open-ended and invited participants to share their thoughts on the topic.

A link to the survey was posted on E-Newsli, a listserv with 723 recipients. The survey was open for two weeks during which 107 responses were submitted.

An important point about the research findings is that they are not indicative of the occurrence of horizontal violence in the field of BSL/English interpreting. Rather, this survey gathered people’s perceptions of having experienced horizontal violence. This is important to note because individuals may have different thresholds and perceptions about colleague behaviour and unsolicited feedback. Furthermore, as explained previously, unsolicited constructive or critical feedback may not in itself be horizontal violence, although it could be perceived as such by the recipient, hence this survey reports on subjective experiences as reported by survey participants.

It is also worth noting that the survey raised the term and concept of horizontal violence, which may have been new to some respondents. The ability to label an experience may colour a person’s perception of that experience so that their perception is then framed in a way that aligns with the label’s definition. Therefore, this survey was only able to capture respondents’ experiences in retrospect and under the definition of the given label as opposed to what their original perception of the experience may have been when it happened.

Out of the 107 interpreters that responded to the survey, 80.2% said that they had experienced horizontal violence, 8.9% answered that maybe they had experienced it, and 10.9% said that they did not feel that they had experienced horizontal violence themselves (see Figure on page 10).

Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer to several survey questions, hence some percentage summations may exceed 100.

‘We have taken our place in the hierarchy and learned to talk to others in the way that we’ve been talked to’ (Dean 2012, 1)
Do you feel you have ever been subject to horizontal violence?

![Pie chart showing: Yes 80.2%, No 10.9%, Maybe 8.9%]

**Perceptions of face-to-face horizontal violence**

Just over half of respondents (56.3%) said that they had experienced horizontal violence during a face-to-face interaction. Twenty-eight per cent said an incident occurred while coworking in an Access to Work booking; 22.7% said it happened while interpreting at a conference; 17.3% said it occurred while interpreting performance work. However, the majority (42.7%) described the situation as a ‘different setting’ to those above, listing team debriefs, deaf events, union meetings, training courses (numerous responses named this as the setting for their experience of horizontal violence) and, most worryingly, during peer groups and supervision meetings.

In 58.1% of these incidents, the behaviour came from a coworker, and in 50% of reported incidents it was another interpreter in the setting. The type of behaviour reported in these incidents ranged from unsolicited criticism to public humiliation, physical contact, threats and mimicking.

When asked how they responded to this incident in an open text question, most of the respondents replied that they did not respond at all. Many were either too stunned to react, too embarrassed or reported that they tried to ‘ignore’ or ‘tolerate’ the behaviour.

The next question asked ‘How long did this incident affect you for?’, and 52.5% of respondents said that the behaviour of their peer towards them still affects them today. Ten per cent said it affected them for about a month, and 8% said that the incident affected them for a year or more after. Others reported impacts ranging from just a moment to around a week.

Fifty per cent said that they would not work with that interpreter again, while 11.3% said they have and 10% said they would have to. Others reported that they would work with the person again.

**Perceptions of horizontal violence online**

Thirty-one per cent of respondents reported experiencing horizontal violence, both online and face-to-face, while 17.2% reported experiencing it exclusively online. The most commonly reported platforms through which respondents experienced this behaviour were email (60%); Facebook (30.9%), WhatsApp (27.3%); Twitter (7.3%). Texts, online forums and discussion boards were also mentioned.

Three quarters of respondents said the behaviour was from someone they knew, while 30.4% of respondents said that it happened with someone they had heard of but did not know, and 17.9% of the reported
incidents involved somebody that they did not know at all.

There was an even split between the incident happening in response to an SLI’s work (46.2%) and an opinion or post that they had shared (46.2%). One quarter felt that the comments stemmed from their experience as a newly qualified SLI, and 13.5% said that it happened out of the blue.

When asked in an open text question, ‘How did you respond?’, the answers differed hugely in comparison to the responses to face-to-face horizontal violence. In a majority of cases, the interpreters did respond by privately messaging the perpetrator, making complaints using formal channels where possible and even boycotting the forum/group altogether. This shows us that the online disinhibition effect may work both ways, empowering the victim to say something they might ordinarily, in a face-to-face confrontation, feel unable to say.

When asked ‘How long did this incident affect you for?’, 42.4% said that the incident still affects them now; 20.3% said it affected them for about a week. Other responses ranged from momentarily to the rest of the day and about a month. The duration of the impact (how long it affected the interpreter for) was less for online horizontal violence than for a face-to-face experience. Further research could look at why this may be the case, but it could be that the victim’s online disinhibition allowed them to defend themselves, therefore lessening the overall impact as the survey shows that the victim was more likely to respond online than in a face-to-face encounter.

When asked ‘Would you work with that interpreter again?’, 36.2% said that they would not, 24.1% said that they have, 10.3% said they might, and 6.9% said that they will have to. Others reported that they would, and they may have offered more detailed caveats in the open text field. Again, the numbers of respondents reporting that they would not work with the perpetrating colleague are lower than that reported for horizontal violence experienced face-to-face.

Future research could further examine additional factors by seeking demographic information such as qualification status, years of experience, gender, age, self-reported frequency of social media usage, etc.

Conclusion

We found horizontal violence in general to be far more prevalent than we had anticipated. This survey did not indicate that horizontal violence was more prevalent online, but it did identify some differences between the receiving SLI’s response and the self-reported lasting impacts of horizontal violence online.

As a practice profession, we need to consciously shape a safe space – both offline and online – for colleagues. In recent years, our industry has focused on reflective practice and supervision as a means to

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...horizontal violence, we need further training available to interpreters on how best to both give and receive feedback when deemed appropriate. Policies from our professional associations and governing bodies to acknowledge and discourage horizontal violence would support a move away from this culture. These steps can ensure that, as a profession, we deliver a quality service while also supporting our colleagues.

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