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CHAPTER 3

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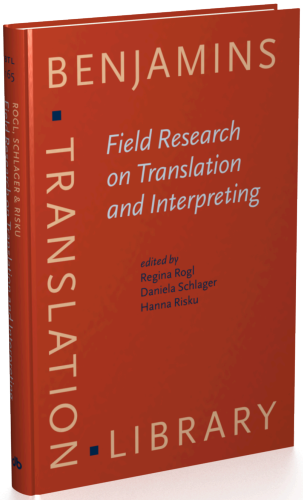

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CHAPTER 3

Retrospective ethnography and remembrance

A narrative of UNOG field missions

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The present chapter seeks to promote a methodological discussion around the pertinence of drawing on retrospective reflexive ethnography and the notion of 'past presencing' to investigate the practice of interpreting in field missions deployed by the United Nations. The chapter provides an overview of the methodological choices that were made after analysing the implications of the second author's positionality as an insider and after considering the different methods that could be used to make the most of her wide experience as an interpreter who had been deployed to many field missions. After highlighting the particularities of practical issues related to interpreting in said missions, we examine the application of the findings to design and implement interpreter training, which brings about institutional changes at the UN that will eventually have an impact on the interpreters' work.

Keywords: interpreting, reflexive ethnography, retrospective ethnography, past presencing, field missions, international organisation, United Nations, training

1. Introduction: Defining the context

Academic studies about interpreting in the field (see below for a discussion of our specific understanding of this term), which have proliferated particularly in recent decades, have shed new light on the figure of the interpreter in different challenging contexts. Most of the studies about interpreting in the field have focused on the role of interpreters who have been systematically recruited to work alongside armed forces in conflict zones. When interpreters become visible, it is rarely due to the recognition of the crucial role they play as linguistic and cultural mediators, but rather as a result of media coverage of the risks they face, particularly

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local interpreters recruited during contemporary conflicts, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Salama-Carr 2007; Baker 2014). Moreover, academic interest in the role of interpreters in conflict zones has been sharpened by researchers' interest in the interpreter's positionality and in the political role of language in translation studies (Jones 2014).

This increasing interest from scholars helps to underline the importance of interpreting and translation in the field and to understand the need to develop and adapt ethical principles based on current and available practices. Researchers in this context usually base their studies on surveys and interviews carried out with the interpreters themselves, in which the latter relate the difficulties and challenges they have faced as a result of their complex positionality (e.g. Todorova 2016; Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud 2019; Ruiz Rosendo 2020; Martin and Gómez Amich 2021). However, such investigations rarely involve conference interpreters working for international organisations, in general, and for the United Nations (UN), in particular, despite the fact that they are frequently deployed to the field. This category of interpreters is of interest because they are trained conference interpreters with substantial professional experience whose involvement in missions worldwide has increased in recent decades, especially following the creation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in 1993.

Therefore, there is a scarcity of academic research relating to this category of interpreters and the texts governing their role. It is worth noting that the terms 'interpreting in conflict zones', 'interpreting in war-related scenarios' and 'in conflict-related scenarios' are not universally applicable to UN missions. UN missions can indeed be related to conflict, for example, when a Commission of Inquiry is deployed in the post-conflict phase; when the Secretary General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights or their representatives go on a country visit in a war-related setting; or when they go to refugee camps in countries neighbouring a country in conflict. However, these missions rarely take place *during* armed conflict: to visit any country, UN field missions must obtain prior security clearance from the UN Department of Safety and Security, which is extremely rarely granted during conflict. Moreover, UN field missions are not humanitarian *stricto sensu,* either, unlike missions for other agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Therefore, the results of studies carried out about interpreting in conflict zones (e.g. Inghilleri 2008; Footitt and Kelly 2012; Gómez Amich 2017; Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud 2019) or on the role of the interpreter in the humanitarian field (e.g. Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche 2018; Moser-Mercer et al. 2021; Tedjouong and Todorova 2022) do not always apply to UN field missions in that the latter are different in nature to military or humanitarian missions carried out by other organisations. Furthermore, the profile of the trained conference inter-

preters who participate in UN field missions differs from the profile of untrained local interpreters who are usually recruited by the armed forces or by humanitarian organisations.

Our research (Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin 2021; Barghout and Ruiz Rosendo 2022) has revealed that the vast majority of UN field missions are serviced by the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). In these missions, interpreters are usually deployed to accompany Special Procedures who conduct country visits, mainly to investigate violations of human rights and ascertain the compliance of member states with their human rights obligations. This probably explains why, prior to the current drafting of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on field missions (internal unpublished document) by UNOG's Interpretation Service, the only available internal guidelines (2010) used the term 'Missions with human rights mechanisms'[1] as 'clients' of interpretation services. They included information on travel arrangements and the working hours and conditions to be taken into account for interpreters accompanying the mission.

Therefore, UN field missions cannot be defined as missions in conflict zones, or in conflict-related zones,[2] inasmuch as they include mandates where there is no link to a conflict. Examples include the missions of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women deployed in European countries; or missions of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while countering terrorism visiting the United States or Australia.[3]

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1. This is a general term that refers to human rights monitoring mechanisms. There are two types of human rights monitoring mechanisms within the UN system: treaty-based bodies and charter-based bodies. The ten human rights Treaty Bodies, made up of committees of independent experts, monitor implementation of the core international human rights treaties. The charter-based bodies include the Human Rights Council (OHCHR), Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review and Independent Investigations. OHCHR provides expertise and support to all of the different mechanisms, including interpretation services. However, field missions serviced by UNOG go beyond these mechanisms, since interpreters are also deployed to accompany the Secretary General or his special envoys and representatives. Interpreters also service missions of the Security Council and Special Commissions and Special Committees established by the General Assembly. This is why the new SOPs use the more inclusive term 'field missions'.

2. There is the exception of peacekeeping operations. However, these are serviced by a different category of interpreters. When needed, peacekeeping operations are accompanied by interpreters from troop-contributing countries for their own contingents. These interpreters are a different category from UN staff or freelance interpreters.

3. Special Procedures currently include 45 thematic mandates and 14 country mandates. For a clearer idea of the range of topics that are covered by Special Procedures, please consult the OHCHR website (see https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council).

Consequently, given these particularities of UN missions, in a previous article we decided to use the more general and better-suited term 'field mission' to define an event where a team of interpreters accompanies a UN mission to locations outside of the four UN duty stations and which does not take place in a conference setting (see Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin 2021 for more information about these missions). All further references in this chapter to 'missions' and 'the field' should be understood as referring to 'field missions' as we have defined them here.

We decided to carry out a study to shed more light on the role of interpreters in this very specific setting by answering the following research questions: How can the practice of interpreting be defined in UN field missions? How can the results of the field research serving as the basis for this study be used and applied to training? In this chapter we will focus on the methodological choices and the description of the methodology used to collect the data that informed the training.

The study draws on the notion of 'past presencing', coined by anthropologist Sharon MacDonald (2013), and on Ferreira and Vespeira's (2017) process of 'retrospective ethnography'. In so doing, the chapter will present field work insights by interrogating the various modes whereby the past may be enfolded into the present. Following our reflections, we have adopted an approach which we have entitled 'retrospective reflective ethnography', described in detail below. This approach acknowledges the value of both big and small stories: apart from data collected through interviews, described by Freeman (2006) as big stories, we argue for the relevance of small stories, of casual conversations about events that happen in everyday life (Georgakopoulou 2007). Therefore, our research was based on a dialogue between the two authors of the chapter in which the first author, a conference interpreter and scholar in the field of interpreting studies, acted as interviewer and the second author, a UN conference interpreter, acted as narrator. It also included informal conversations between the second author and other interpreters. The study was further complemented by semi-structured interviews held with all four UN chief interpreters representing the different headquarters (New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi) and a representative of higher management from UNOG to collect their views about the organisational and logistical aspects related to field missions. These complementary activities — the retrospective reflective ethnography, the conversations with interpreters and the semi-structured interviews — enhanced ethnographically-informed knowledge production as a collaborative endeavour.

The chapter also examines the application of these field research findings in a training course to make lasting institutional changes that have a positive impact on the interpreter's work. Therefore, the chapter also deals with the use of the findings to design and implement interpreter training that takes account of the problems encountered on UNOG field missions.

In this discussion of ethnographic field work, we hope to contribute to four ongoing debates. In interpreting studies, this research will offer an account of the challenges faced by *practisearchers,* defined as researchers who work as interpreters during the research period (see also Steinkogler, Chapter 6, this volume). Secondly, it will also describe less-used approaches and processes, such as retrospective reflexive ethnography. Thirdly, it aims to deepen our understanding of current possibilities for applying the findings of field work to training. Finally, the chapter will contribute to current debates about the complexity of doing research when in the employ of international organisations.

2. Ethnographic approach in interpreting studies

In the present chapter, we use 'fieldwork' to refer to fieldwork as carried out in traditional ethnography (Delamont 2009). We will be using the word 'ethnography' to refer to fieldwork as an approach that "establishes a relationship between personal experience and the production of knowledge" (Ferreira and Vespeira 2017: 215).

As Wellin and Fine (2001: 323) posit, "whatever else it may be, ethnography is a form of work". It has, by its very nature, a double meaning: on the one hand, it is an approach based on data collection; a qualitative research method based on obtaining data through direct observation and participant observation, as well as interviews and informal exchanges with interlocutors, as is the case in this study. On the other hand, it is the result of the research, a detailed text written as a first- or third-person account (Clifford and Marcus 1986) within a wider social context. Such a method requires a field presence, allowing the researcher to observe a wide spectrum of interactions at different times and in different circumstances which they analyse in order to draw patterns, values or social schemes.

The ultimate goal of any ethnographic study is, essentially, to present an account of the way in which a social group shares meaning (Geertz 2000). In other words, this method is used to observe and report on the various dynamics that occur between the members of a social group and the interaction these members have with their greater environment. Importantly, ethnography has recently expanded and transformed (Fine and Hancock 2017) and has transcended its initial focus on understanding marginalised groups (Marcus 1986; Ragin 1994) to include other topics.

Ethnography as a method has been increasingly used to shed light on the "everyday practices and implicit knowledge associated with … interpreting settings" (Delgado Luchner 2019: 97). This means that contemporary ethnography has moved away from the traditional assumption of the powerful researcher and

the exotic, less powerful, researched group. Furthermore, its aim has evolved to not only focus on the researcher's perspective, but to reproduce the diversity of participants' perspectives. In so doing, the line between the researcher and the researched has become more blurred. It is also worth noting that ethnography has evolved from small-scale studies over lengthy periods of time to projects conducted over shorter periods and several physical sites. In fact, there are some events examined by ethnography, such as UN field missions, that do not take place for a long time — they usually last anywhere from a single day to two weeks — or in one single place. This means that ethnographic studies are, at times, characterised by a compilation of observational periods that are separated through time and space. In the present study, the ethnography was based on 30 missions deployed in different places and times, and within the framework of different UN mandates (see Section 4).

In the field of interpreting studies, we find some examples of ethnographic studies that analyse the practice of interpreting in a given context, time and place, assuming that interpreting is a "socially situated activity" (Flynn 2010: 116). Bahadır (2004), in her analogy of the interpreter-researcher as an anthropologist, describes the professional identities of the interpreter-researcher as identities consisting of different social and cultural roles, positions and attitudes. Delgado Luchner (2015, 2019), in her analysis of the 'Nairobi project', aims to deepen our understanding of the challenges associated with interpreter training in Africa by using a participant-observer paradigm. Hokkanen and Koskinen (2016) explore narrated affect using retrospective reflection by reporting on three ethnographic studies negotiating professional identity in different contexts. Hokkanen (2017), in her study on simultaneous interpreting during church services, defines herself as a participant-researcher, and uses autoethnography to contribute to the analysis of embodied somatic and affective field experiences. Duflou (2016) uses her position as a member of the community of practice under observation to explore the skills that conference interpreters working for the European institutions need to acquire in order to cope with their professional tasks, through observation, in-depth interviews and the analysis of institutional documents. Finally, anthropologist Laura Kunreuther (Kunreuther 2020; Kunreuther et al. 2021) focuses on the experiences of interpreters who worked for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during its mission in Nepal by carrying out a conversation with them. Other authors who have used ethnography as an approach are Angelelli (2000) and Inghilleri (2003) to examine the practice of medical interpreting and of interpreting in asylum seeking procedures, respectively.

However, despite the existence of these works in interpreting studies, which make use of ethnography and which have undoubtedly inspired our work through

their use of different methods to collect data (i.e., informal conversations, interviews, autoethnography), to our knowledge no ethnographic studies have been carried out to examine the role of conference interpreters who are deployed to the field by an international organisation, with the noteworthy exception of Haidar and Ruiz Rosendo (2023).

3. Understanding the researcher's positionality

The reason for carrying out an ethnographic study to examine the practice of interpreting in UN field missions was the gap in interpreter training for that specific context, identified by this study's second author: UN interpreters, even if they are fully-fledged conference interpreters, are not necessarily equipped with the skills that they need when deployed in field missions. She remembered how she had to venture into the unknown the first time she went on a mission. Interpreters did not receive any briefing on what to expect and on the challenges of working in the field, meaning that they had no idea of what a field mission was or of how to behave on such missions, not least because there were no guidelines available for interpreters.

In qualitative studies, in general, and in ethnographic studies, in particular, it is essential to be aware of and analyse the researcher's positionality, understood as "the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene" (Tracy 2013: 2). The researcher is confronted with their own positionality regarding the participants and the knowledge they bring with them or help construct in such a collaboration (Flynn 2010). In this context, researchers are human actors who cannot be neutral or objective, in that their mere presence influences and is influenced by the phenomenon under study. Therefore, one may argue that an ethnographer cannot just dispassionately observe events unfolding around them. This is especially true in those cases in which the researcher is also a participant; or, applied to the field of interpreting, when the researcher is also an active interpreter while carrying out the ethnography. In these cases, Bahadır (2004) argues that the interpreter-researcher is caught in the Geertzian dilemma (Geertz 1973) between the 'emic' and the 'etic' perspective, and that when they embody this dual role, interpreter-researchers cannot *not* communicate: communication occurs just by being and behaving. Some degree of subjectivity is therefore unavoidable, because a researcher "never observes the behavioural event which would have taken place in his or her absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would have given to another person" (Behar 1996: 6).

In the present study, the ethnographer — the second author of the chapter — is an Arabic-booth interpreter who has, since 1997, accumulated experience on 30 missions as a UN staff member; she was an active interpreter in all these field missions, which allowed her to informally speak with interpreters and with other colleagues. Furthermore, from an institutional perspective, she is a staff conference interpreter at an international organisation to which she has pledged allegiance — an insider (Berger 2015). This positionality is not devoid of challenges: the interpreter, while carrying out her work, must abide by the rule of confidentiality (a *sine qua non* condition for interpreters), and by a clear code of conduct (applicable to all officials of and persons under contract with the organisation). These aspects can be very restrictive for research, since professional comments exchanged during a mission, whether interpreted or not, cannot be reported under any circumstances.

4. Choosing the ethnographic method

4.1 Reflexive ethnography

Understanding this positionality was essential in order to decide on the method to collect information. The researcher, in her role as an insider, had privileged access to the phenomenon and to the people involved and had been an active observer-participant herself. This observation allowed her to subsequently reflect on the dilemmas faced by the interpreters, the decisions made, the practical aspects to be considered and the self-care strategies used when confronted with challenging situations. Narrative inquiry seemed to us to be a relevant method, in that it is widely used to focus on stories or storytelling activities (Cihodariu 2012), on life experiences as narrated by those (narrated lives) who live them as a way of "understanding one's own or others' actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (Chase 2011: 421). As Chase (2011) posits, there are some researchers who use their own stories as a focus of narrative inquiry in an attempt to include their experience of a given topic or research question (see, for example, Behar 2007 or Saukko 2008). Autoethnography or interpretive biography is another version of this approach, in that there is no distinction between the researcher and the researched. It is defined as

> an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions,

> premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. (Poulos 2021: 4)

Autoethnography is an increasingly-used method of qualitative research whose aim is to include the researcher's lived experience, recentred as the focus of the research, in the phenomenon under study, a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Campbell 2016; see also Hokkanen, Chapter 4, and Davier, Chapter 7, for examples of autoethnographies in this volume). Delamont (2009) introduces an interesting distinction between reflexive ethnography and autoethnography, according to which, in the latter, the main object of study is the researcher themselves, whereas in the former, the researcher studies a phenomenon, including participants other than themselves, but is very sensitive to the relationships created between themselves and the focus of the research (see, for example, Wolcott's reflexive ethnographies published in 1977 and 1981).

Therefore, whilst we agree with Campbell (2016) that stories of lived experience are needed to gather knowledge of a phenomenon and understand its meanings in a given context, we also consider that we had to go beyond autoethnography to describe the phenomenon under study. Drawing on Delamont's (2009: 58) claim that "the main focus of social science should be analysis of social settings and actors to whom the researcher has had access, not the introspections of the researcher", we also think that it is important to move away from what has been (somewhat controversially) termed autoethnographic self-obsession: the danger of autoethnography is that the personal self is so deeply ingrained in the text that it completely dominates the narrative.

For all these reasons, we wanted to go beyond autoethnography towards an ethnography in which the researcher incorporates her own personal narratives into the ethnographic materials, along the lines of Reed-Danahay's (2001) notion of autobiographical ethnography. Given the importance that we attach to the notion of reflexivity and to the view that the observer is inevitably linked to the observed, we opted for a reflexive ethnography, in which the researcher crafts narratives stemming from her personal experience within a culture, and includes different methods of data collection, such as interviews, participant observation, conversational engagement, archival research, and narrative inquiry, as a procedure of interrogating and integrating the researcher's personal experience into the narratives and experiences of others.

Another important factor to be considered in choosing the method is that we wanted to include the researcher's testimonies about past experiences in the present study, given her wide experience as an interpreter in field missions. Therefore, the retrospective nature of the ethnography also had to be considered: we did not want to ignore the researcher's wealth of experience throughout her 28

years at the UN and in the 30 missions that she had serviced, in the context of different mandates and in different regions. In other words, we did not want to wait for new missions to be organised because we did not know if and when these missions were going to be deployed and if the second author was going to service them. In fact, she did not service any other missions due to her lack of availability and to the fact that local interpreters were increasingly recruited by the UN. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was also a significant factor resulting in the cancellation of all field missions. Even though missions resumed at the end of 2020, travel restrictions still applied in many places, and the UN continued to mostly recruit local interpreters.

4.2 Retrospective ethnography

Ferreira and Vespeira (2017: 208), in their study on 20th-century pre- and post-revolutionary Portugal, define retrospective ethnography as "a theoretical and methodological process that allows the intensive study of a specific past event and its present reverberations" through different methods, such as interviews, fieldwork, life stories, archive research and observation. The ethnographic participants' narratives of past time allow the researcher to reflect on memory and recollection during the moment of the ethnographic encounter, characterised by the comparison with the present.

These authors focus on the relevance of the dialogical moments stimulated by a retrospective ethnography and inspired by Miller's (2001, 2007) use of mini-analytical portraits for the analysis of the remembrance process. Working by retrogression, diachronically, Ferreira and Vespeira (2017) interviewed two individuals who had experienced the historical episodes and based their study on the two resulting portraits, reviving the past in the present, in order to proceed to a critical analysis of the context they represent. Diachronic ethnography is used to acknowledge the multiple, mutating, polyphonic temporalities of the ethnographic encounter and its multi-timed layers and to move away from an anthropology based in synchronicity and on the "ethnographic present" (Ferreira and Vespeira 2017: 208). As they put it:

> Retrospection and biographic recollection are not linear; there are detours and leaps, (re)creations and silences, periods that are remembered and others that are forgotten. And that moment in time when remembrance is aroused is the terrain par excellence of the ethnographer who maps the past … making it possible to access information that could not be obtained through daily social interactions.
>
> (Ferreira and Vespeira 2017: 209)

In our present study, careful ethnographic attention had to be directed towards the ways interpreters themselves reflect on events and their involvement in field missions. Taking the lead from Ferreira and Vespeira (2017), we applied retrospective ethnography to recollect past field experiences of the narrator (i.e. the second author). Similarly, our analysis took its cue from anthropologist Sharon MacDonald's (2013: 52) notion of 'past presencing', described as "the empirical phenomenon of how people variously experience, understand and produce the past in the present", which examines the multiple modes whereby the past may be enfolded to the present, not only at institutionalised levels but also in everyday practices (Sandberg 2020).

The selected method of *retrospective reflexive ethnography* enabled collaborative knowledge production in that it allowed us to bring together experiences to gain a better understanding of the practice of interpreting in field missions. This method has limitations and risks of biases, 'bias' being defined as "an inclination or tendency in favour of or against one thing, in a way considered to be unfair or not revealing the reality" when what is depicted is "a story or account that the researcher wants to display in order to present a certain impression or conclusion" (Kristi 2021: 311–312). Remembered data also comes with certain risks and limitations, in that past occurrences could be mixed up in the absence of specific notes taken during the different missions. Furthermore, we tend to view past events differently the more they are removed and distant from the present. In fact, self-reflection has been criticised for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualised (Sparkes 2000; Eriksson 2010). For our study to be relevant and methodologically sound, we followed Alvesson's (2003: 189) recommendation to avoid 'staying native'. Therefore, intersubjectivity and reflexivity were two essential aspects when carrying out the study. Intersubjectivity referred to exchanging thoughts and feelings between the narrator and the interviewer, while reflexivity entailed the narrator being aware of her positionality and of its impact on the process and outcomes of the research. In practical terms, we decided that there was a need to examine UN documents to identify all references to interpreters (such as internal guidelines), as well as to organise multiple encounters between us — interviewer and narrator — and with the other interpreters. In addition, we designed semi-structured interviews with chief interpreters and a representative from management, which enabled us to triangulate the data, as McIlveen (2008) recommends (see Section 5).

5. The study: Researching the practice of interpreting in UN field missions[4]

5.1 Conversations between the interviewer and the narrator

The study sought to investigate the practice of interpreting in UN field missions by using retrospective reflexive ethnography as a methodology to collect data. Remembrance, in the sense of recalling the past, started *stricto sensu* in 2017, when the two authors of the present chapter decided to design a tailored programme to train UN conference interpreters who were deployed in field missions, as a collaborative endeavour between the University of Geneva's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting and UNOG. After consulting the UN archives and the relevant literature, we identified a lack of documents governing the interpreters' work in field missions, as well as a lack of recorded testimonies of interpreters sharing their experiences in this specific context. We soon realised that in order to firstly fill in these gaps and subsequently design a relevant programme, it was necessary to revisit the past to understand the challenges that interpreters face in this context as well as their needs.

As described above, the second author of this chapter, in her role as researcher and as narrator of the ethnography, falls into the category of the participant-observer, an active member in the phenomenon observed. The narrator was asked to recount, analyse and reconstruct her own past experiences and the context in which she had experienced them in a series of conversations that took place between her and the first author of this chapter, who embodied the role of the interviewer and who took notes during and after these conversations. Similar to Ferreira and Vespeira's (2017) study, the time frame was not completely fixed, and the narrative came and went between multiple missions. More specifically, the missions included 15 UN Special Commissions and Special Committees, 2 Commissions of Inquiry, 5 fact-finding missions, 1 special envoy, and 7 special rapporteurs. These took place in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Jordan, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey throughout the interpreter's career as UN staff member. These conversations helped the

4. This study is part of an ongoing PhD dissertation carried out at the University of Geneva. It complies with the ethical procedure of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva (Directive relative à l'intégrité dans le domaine de la recherche scientifique et à la procédure à suivre en cas de manquement à l'intégrité) [Guidelines on Scientific Research Integrity and on the Procedure to Follow in the Case of Breach of Integrity]. The study is supported by the Division of Conference Management of UNOG. The study has been granted the Certification of Ethical Compliance by the Commission Universitaire pour une Recherche Ethique à l'Université de Genève (CUREG).

interviewer to understand practices and experiences that could not be lived and observed directly by her given that she would not have the opportunity to go on a field mission. There was a close interaction between the interviewer and the narrator. In this sense, our study focuses on the analysis of a life story (that is elicited by another person) contrary to an autobiography (which is self-initiated). Consequently, the interviewer was an agent of the remembrance process, instigating the remembrance of past experiences and helping the narrator to reconstruct and to analyse them, in "trusted, private encounters" (Schwander-Sievers 2010: 102). In the interviews, the narrator was asked to remember not only her own experiences but also those conversations with the other interpreters that took place in everyday practice throughout all the aforementioned missions. The narrator also relayed her colleagues' experiences (which they shared with her upon their return from the field) of other Special Procedures deployed in 2018 and 2019 in which she had not participated herself.

In this process, the narrator was considered an active player with her own history and story, a storyteller that allowed the interviewer to become immersed in the narrator's personal narratives in order to, vicariously, live through the described experiences. The methodological choice for life stories and oral collection of data was a response to the narrator's positionality, an interpreter-researcher who had experienced her professional life in the field in an undocumented way — without leaving a written trace of these experiences — similarly to her interpreter colleagues who were in the field with her. In addition, the method was chosen to investigate not only what interpreters do in this context, but also what they intended to do, what they believed they were doing and why and what they think they should have done. All these experiences and questions were the basis for a series of case scenarios that were developed with the intention of using them for training interpreters in the future.

The ethnographic encounters between the interviewer and the narrator were characterised by the memory of emotions. The remembrance process was marked by a narrative that shifted between descriptions that emphasised the challenging context in which interpreters work in the field and memories that highlighted the congenial nature of the community of interpreters and the emotional implications of working in this context. The past was compared with the present, highlighting the similarities and the differences, travelling through missions, countries, years, experiences, personal memories, and traumas, to identify commonalities and, more importantly, things that could be done to improve the skills of interpreters who are deployed on missions to the field. In this sense, the future was always present in the ethnographic encounter, as if a continuous past embraced both present and future. As is usually the case in personal stories, some memories were too traumatic to be expressed in words, but the silence surrounding them indi-

cated the emotional implications of a given event, which was essential to really understand the stakes of interpreting in field missions. These passages conveyed through fewer words were even more telling in their silence, particularly because the conversations allowed the interviewer to feel and fill the unsaid, what Gallinat (2006: 355) calls the "heavy silence". Emotions contributed to "the processes of remembering and forgetting, of feeling compelled or unable to speak about the past" (MacDonald 2013: 79). These emotional experiences were usually related to the impact and the psychological toll that the exposure to sensitive or traumatic testimonies of victims of human rights abuses had on the narrator, along the lines of studies carried out in other challenging contexts, for example, humanitarian interpreting (Loutan, Farinelli, and Pampallona 1999; Holmgren, Sondergaard, and Elklit 2003); community interpreting (Hetherington 2011; Bontempo and Malcolm 2012); or interpreting at international criminal tribunals (Ndongo-Keller 2015).

The ethnographic encounters not only triggered an ethnographic narrative on the part of the narrator, they went beyond this to recall the multitude of informal discussions that took place over the years with her interpreter colleagues. Most of these conversations took place during the missions and immediately thereafter. It is worth noting that each mission is unique in its characteristics and multiple challenges, and a very special bond usually forms between the members of the interpretation team, as well as with other UN colleagues accompanying the mission, whether from the OHCHR secretariat or Security. This is due to the fact that the mission team spends all their time together, sharing meals, vehicles and very long working hours. Confidentiality is another reason why those on the same mission share thoughts, feelings, and experiences with one another: colleagues are not permitted to discuss the mission with anyone outside of those assigned to it. Discussions were sometimes of a purely practical nature, such as the interpreter's physical position, the interpreting modality, how and what to prepare but other discussions related to ethical dilemmas or to psychological implications, sharing emotions and even tears at times. These discussions were held in informal debriefing sessions usually at the end of a workday or during the breaks.

During these informal conversations, the need for training and especially for psychological self-care was identified by the interpreters themselves. This led to several initiatives that were supported by management, such as a workshop dedicated to interpreters on 'Mission Readiness and Wellness' with the Staff Counsellor. This workshop included sessions on stress management, meditation and self-care.

5.2 Conversations with other interpreters at UNOG headquarters

In a second stage, other conversations took place with other interpreters at the headquarters to go beyond the narrator's recollection: in 2018 several conversations were held with 3 interpreters from the Arabic and the French booths who shared their experiences about the challenges encountered in the field. The information gathered so far allowed us to organise a first pilot training course in January 2019. After the course, a focus group was organised with the participants in the course (UN staff conference interpreters) to assess the contents of the course and gather their views about the needs and challenges in the field (see Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin 2021, as well as Barghout and Ruiz Rosendo 2022 to obtain more information about this course and the results of the focus groups).

More recently, a film entitled 'In Flow of Words' (Bots 2022) was featured at UNOG in the context of the World Day for Safety and Health at Work, an annual UN observance that aims to raise international awareness around the effort to make work environments safe and healthy for all. The film focuses on the experiences of three interpreters who served at The Hague during the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Born and raised in the former Yugoslavia, and witnesses to the brutal wars of the 1990s, the interpreters were forced to contend with their personal memories and traumas. The screening was followed by a panel discussion on the importance of safeguarding the health and wellbeing of interpreters, whose work can subject them to extraordinarily difficult situations. The success of the event led to a second screening dedicated only to staff and freelance interpreters alike. Over 25 interpreters attended the event, which was a safe space for them to voice many of their experiences and predicaments. Similarly to the narrator and UNOG colleagues, the interpreters in the film recognise the suffering from recurring distressing memories and feelings and the demanding and psychologically degrading working conditions and high level of distress, frustration and powerlessness suffered by interpreters who have to interpret stories of torture and annihilation. The psychological implications were indeed one of the most recurrent narratives shared by both the narrator and the other interpreters.

5.3 Semi-structured interviews with Chief Interpreters and management

In order to complement the information gathered through this process of retrospective reflexive ethnography in which the narrator's own experiences and the experiences of her colleagues were remembered and examined, and the conversations with other interpreters at the headquarters, it was essential to collect the views and needs of the UN Chief Interpreters. Semi-structured interviews were

held with all Chief Interpreters at the four Duty Stations, in addition to an interview with a member of higher management. The interview period spanned from December 2020 to February 2022. In addition to organisational needs, some of the Chief Interpreters had serviced field missions themselves and were able to provide substantive input on ethical and other considerations. The same interview questions were sent to all participants in advance of the interview and, due to their physical location and health measures imposed by the COVID pandemic, all interviews were held online. All participants signed informed consent forms and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol was divided into general questions about field missions serviced from the four duty stations, New York, Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna (who the clients are, if they are serviced by staff or freelance interpreters, language combinations, some examples of missions); previous courses and support to interpreters; specific training for UN interpreters who go on field missions (if such specific training is needed, the contents to be included, the skills to be developed); and the feedback received from both users and interpreters about the interpreters' work (main complaints, challenges and needs).

The qualitative analysis of the transcripts confirmed that most UN field missions were serviced by UNOG, a result that is in line with the official statistics (see Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout, and Martin 2021). They also revealed that, apart from peer-to-peer support and occasional briefings with the secretariat organising the mission, there were no institutional measures in place to prepare interpreters for field missions or to debrief them upon their return. Almost all of the participants responded that dedicated training for interpreters was lacking and definitely needed. With regards to the categories of interpreters, the majority of participants confirmed that both staff and freelance interpreters should receive such training since they embark on the same missions and do the same job.

All the resulting stories told during the conversations between the interviewer and the narrator, the conversations with the interpreters at the UNOG headquarters — both codified in notes — and the transcripts of the interviews with UN Chief Interpreters and with the representative of management were then analysed. Data analysis started inductively, with a thorough reading of the notes and interviews, drawing on Corbin and Strauss's (1990) grounded theory. Categories were then identified and were gradually refined and organised hierarchically into higher level themes. These themes were the particular atmosphere of a field mission, very different to a conference setting; the interpreter's distress due to a lack of training in interpreting for field missions and lack of internal guidelines; the interpreter's complex positionality; the importance of the interpreter's physical position; practical aspects to be considered before, during and after going on mission; the ethical implications related to decision-making; security impli-

cations in the field; legal and administrative issues; psychological implications; and the importance of self-care. These categories were used to inform the design of the first online self-paced course, backed by the Interpretation Service and the Division of Conference Management, for staff and freelance interpreters who are deployed in field missions which is planned to be launched as soon as possible. The different categories identified during the study allowed us to articulate the contents in the course and to structure it around five main modules:

1. Preparation, both from a logistical and from a contextual perspective.
2. Practical issues, in which a code of conduct for interpreters in the field was identified and described, by using short videos which show what is allowed and what is not allowed in these missions.
3. Ethical implications that could be encountered in the field, drawing on a series of case scenarios that were designed as paradigmatic scenarios based on the experiences shared during the study (real life experiences were used and adapted to preserve confidentiality by changing the subject matter of the title or changing elements that insiders would automatically recognise as belonging to a specific country or mandate).
4. Security and legal implications.
5. Psychological implications and self-care.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we present the use of retrospective reflexive ethnography as a relevant method to define a specific interpreting practice. In the many conversations taking place between the interviewer and the narrator, the purpose was to delve into the narrator's thoughts, experiences and emotions not just to understand her role in this context, but also so that knowledge could make a contribution to the field. The contribution was to understand the practice of interpreting in UN field missions and what could be done to improve the performance, working conditions and well-being of those interpreters who are sent to these missions through training that takes into consideration the many different challenges that they face in their work, the dilemmas they are confronted with when making decisions and their needs.

As described in this chapter, understanding the researcher's positionality is essential in choosing the method in qualitative research. In the present study, the researcher's positionality as an insider with many years of experience allowed her the privilege of access to hidden information and lived experiences to which no external researcher would be granted access or allowed to live first hand. Due to

their often sensitive and confidential nature, no researcher would be authorised to accompany such missions. As such, she became a narrator whose past personal narratives were considered as a way to help her make sense of herself and of the context. A central focus was the ways in which the past was configured in the present, what was recalled, when and why, and how the past was used and embedded in everyday life. The presence of the interviewer played an essential role in this remembrance process, as a kind of what Sandberg (2020: 123) calls "midwifery of memory" in which recollections of past events were compelled to be spoken about, which suggest that memory work is the result of collaborative achievement.

In addition to reflection and introspection, the ethnographical encounters of this study triggered a comparison between all the informal conversations held throughout the years with a focus on the needs of the interpreters and the challenges they identified. The past was then compared to the organisational needs as revealed by the semi-structured interviews with the Chief Interpreters and a representative of higher management. In so doing, the past became intertwined with the present with a view to improving the working conditions and well-being of interpreters servicing future UN field missions.

This study is characterised by the convergence between academia and practice. While the interviewer had the methodology and academic experience needed to conduct the study, the narrator had a unique position as a practitioner and researcher. The ethnographic encounters allowed for a valid method of soliciting memory and remembrance in an academic framework that was conducive to elucidating the most pertinent needs and challenges of a UN interpreter on field missions.

7. Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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