

# Dialogue interpreting in multi-party encounters: two examples from educational settings

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## Abstract

*This article examines two multi-party encounters involving dialogue interpreting. Participant observation was conducted in these mediated interactions between service providers and Chinese users. The analysis of field notes and transcripts reveals some challenges these complex situations can pose for the interpreter: translating, coordinating turn-taking, and managing exchanges that include both adults and children, or even bilingual participants. The conclusions discuss how the interpreter can ensure an equal balance of power among the participants.*

## Introduction

Public service interpreting (PSI) has mainly been described in terms of triangular interactions where the interpreter enables communication between a public service provider and a user who cannot understand or speak the local language(s). Studies analysing interpreted interactions often presuppose this triadic nature of the exchange (see, for instance, Baraldi 2009; Bolden 2000; Davidson 2000; Gavioli/Baraldi 2011; Valero Garcés 2010; or Wadensjö 2001, among others). This description has also influenced the way PSI has been taught, at least in Spain, where the research described here was conducted.

This paper discusses two cases in which PSI was required in multi-party encounters in educational settings. The study is based on qualitative research

which draws on different data collection strategies. In the first case, participant observation was employed in a mediated interaction with Chinese users. In the second, the interaction was also audio-recorded and transcribed. Both the field notes and the transcripts were subjected to qualitative content analysis. In-depth interviews with the interpreters in these encounters were also transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis.

These different sets of data have been triangulated in order to give an overview of two similar situations in which interpreters were present. The interviews document the interpreters' training and experience, while the participant observation data confirms the challenges often posed in complex situations: for instance, the interpreters' need to change their physical position during the exchange, to shift between different interpreter roles, and to manage interactions including both adults and children. The coordination of turn-taking may also be more complex if different participants who share the same language are involved.

The analysis shows that participants' empowerment depends on the interpreter's decisions, and we consider how the interpreter can promote a more equal distribution of power among them.

## 1. Previous research

Previous research in PSI has examined the different roles and functions the interpreter must perform (Brisset *et al.* 2013). Since Wadensjö's (1998) seminal contribution, it is widely accepted that dialogue interpreters normally assume a function of coordination, managing turn-taking in the interaction. This function has been described in different ways: in Bot's (2005) work on dialogue interpreting in mental health, the author compares three models of coordination, i.e. the *translation-machine model*, where the interpreter is not in charge of turn-taking but the therapist is; the *restricted interactive model*, where the interpreter limits his or her interventions to the coordination of turn-taking; and the *liberal interactive model*, where the interpreter is not only in charge of turn-taking, but may also intervene freely where s/he thinks it may help communication.

Baraldi (2009) distinguishes between *transformative dialogic mediation*, where the mediator's support enhances user involvement in the interaction, and *mediation as a dyadic separation*, which avoids direct interaction between the service provider and the user. In this regard, Gavioli/Baraldi (2011) attribute an empowering function to the coordination of turn-taking. For instance, in interpreter-mediated interactions, the power distance between service providers and users may place the user at a disadvantage, and this often leads to shorter turns when users intervene in the conversation. However, interpreters may resort to *suspended rendition*, allowing users more time to intervene, and hence re-involving them in the interaction. The coordination of turn-taking is thus directly related to the interpreter's role.

Various metaphors have been used to describe the agency of the dialogue interpreter. For instance, Davidson (2000) sees the interpreter as an *institutional*

*gatekeeper* when s/he attempts to meet the expectations and requirements of the institutions, a role similar to Pöllabauer's (2004) providers' *assistant* and to Hale's (2008) *gatekeeper*. On the other hand, when interpreters try to help users, for instance by simplifying explanations, they seem to adopt the role of the *advocate* (Kaufert/Koolage 1984; California Healthcare Interpreters Association 2002).

Intercultural mediation is sometimes regarded as part of the interpreter's job. For instance, the IMIA Code of Ethics (2006) acknowledges that:

interpreters will engage in patient advocacy and in the intercultural mediation role of explaining cultural differences/practices to health care providers and patients only when appropriate and necessary for communication purposes, using professional judgement.

However, most authors distinguish between interpreters and intercultural mediators as different professions. In Spain, where this research was conducted, García-Beyaert/Serrano Pons (2009) suggest that while both share the same general objective (enabling communication between providers and users), intercultural mediators tend to intervene more in the interaction, while interpreters adopt less intrusive roles.

Bolden (2000: 391) argues that dialogue interpreting constructs a single conversation between the two principal parties (i.e. service providers and users), while mediation results in two interweaving but separate conversations – a distinction similar to that of Baraldi (2009) between dialogic mediation vs. dyadic separation.

The interpreter's role has also been related to physical location during the triadic exchange. Some authors advocate a triangle, so that all the participants (service provider, user and interpreter) can look at each other directly, and the interpreter has a complete view of the primary participants' non-verbal behaviour (see, for instance, Phelan/Parkman 1995). However, others point out that this kind of seating arrangement emphasises the interpreter's visibility and suggest that s/he sit behind the user. Wadensjö (2001), Bot (2005) and Aguilera *et al.* (2015) agree that in mental health encounters, location behind the user is unsafe or unpleasant, since the patient needs to have a good view of the other participants.

Nevertheless, questions arise when the triadic exchange becomes a multi-party encounter. Among the few contributions on this issue, Amato's (2007) analysis of interpretation in multi-party medical encounters sheds some light on interpreters' agency in prioritising interventions by certain participants (usually doctors), or omitting to interpret side conversations (husband-wife; father-daughter). This article attempts to shed further light on multi-party encounters in which the dialogue interpreter is still needed in moving beyond a triadic schema.

## 2. Method

This study, which is part of a broader investigation of public service interpreting and intercultural mediation for the Chinese in Catalonia (Vargas-Urpi 2012), focuses on two multi-party encounters where dialogue interpreting was used. A mixed-method approach is taken.

It is based on the one hand on participant observation in two Chinese-Catalan mediated interactions in educational settings in the province of Barcelona in September and November 2010. In both encounters field notes were taken, and the second was also audio-recorded. The field notes were subjected to discourse analysis and for the second encounter were complemented by conversational analysis of a transcript of the recording.

The interpreters were also interviewed as part of the broader research project. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and December 2010, and were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the information about interpreter training and experience gathered in these interviews is used to contextualise the analysis of the two encounters.

## 3. Two examples of dialogue interpreting in multi-party encounters

This section describes the settings and objectives of the selected multi-party encounters. It examines the mediators' training and experience, their roles in the encounters, the seating arrangements, and the participation of the various interlocutors.

### 3.1 The first encounter

Primary schools in Catalonia also provide three years of preschool courses for children aged between 3 and 5 years old. The first encounter is a parent-teacher meeting held in September 2010, where the participants were the mother of a three-year-old boy, the teacher of a P3 preschool group, the interpreter and the child. There was also a toddler (the boy's sister). Mother and child were Chinese and used Standard Chinese (Mandarin) to communicate with the interpreter. The teacher used Catalan. The interpreter, who was not from Catalonia but another region in Spain, used Catalan to talk with the teacher and Standard Chinese with the mother and child.

The purpose of the meeting was to give the mother general information about the school, where her son had just started some days before. The meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes.

### 3.1.1 The interpreter

The interpreter worked part-time as bilingual staff for a city council (20 hours per week) and mainly covered educational settings and social services. Apart from enabling communication in Chinese-Catalan interactions, she also undertook functions that are commonly related to intercultural mediation; for example, promoting activities to enhance intercultural exchange in neighbourhoods where the immigrant population was considerable. She had an MA in Immigration and Intercultural Education. At the moment of the data collection, she had been working with the Chinese community for nearly ten years (since 2001).

### 3.1.2 Seating

Seating was arranged around a hexagonal children's table in a preschool classroom. These tables are normally used in preschool, so that six children can sit together at each table, and all the adult participants had to adapt to sitting at a children's table on the corresponding chairs, considerably smaller than adults'. Figure 1 depicts distribution around the table.

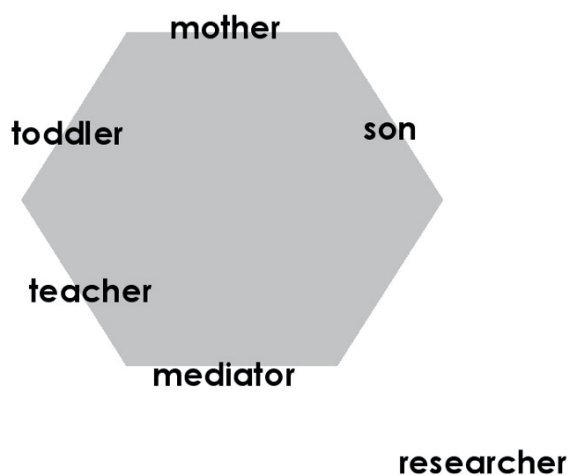


Figure 1. Seating arrangement in first encounter

As can be seen, the interpreter sat next to the teacher, a fact that may have portrayed her as the service provider's assistant from the mother's perspective. Initially the three-year-old son was also seated at the table, but he soon started moving around the classroom, playing with things, and the mother stood up to watch him. Consequently positions were not all static.

### 3.1.3 Participation in the encounter and the role of the interpreter

The interpreter took an active role during this encounter, in which she suggested questions and clarifications that could help the mother understand how the school was organised. For instance, the teacher wanted to start by explaining the purpose of the encounter, but the interpreter suggested she start by introducing the teacher, as maybe neither the mother nor the son knew her name. The teacher agreed and the interpreter not only introduced the teacher, but also herself (extract 1).

#### Extract 1

这个老师是小朋友的班主任，名字叫 [...]. 我今天来这里翻译，我叫 [...].  
(This teacher is the little boy's tutor, her name's [...]. I have come here today to interpret, my name's [...].)<sup>1</sup>

The interpreter carefully used the word *xiaopengyou* (小朋友), literally meaning “little friend”, but normally just translated as “child” or “little boy”. This is a common endearment used by adults when addressing children in Chinese and, in this example, the interpreter used it when talking to the mother and the boy, thereby making them both more active participants in the conversation.

After some short questions and answers between the teacher and the mother, the teacher asked if the boy had other friends outside school. The mother answered that he had a friend who was also living with them, and after interpreting that piece of information, the interpreter suggested another question to the teacher: “Do you want me to ask her if there are other people living with them?” The interpreter’s own intervention is evident in this question. On the one hand, she may have thought this information could be relevant to contextualise the mother’s answer; on the other hand, because the interpreter had an in-depth knowledge of Chinese immigrants’ living conditions she may have thought this explanation could be useful to understand the family’s situation. In this specific example, the interpreter seems to act as intercultural mediator, facilitating provision of cultural information that may be relevant to understand the other (IMIA 2006). However, she also plays the role of service provider’s assistant described by Pöllabauer (2004), searching for information that could be useful for the teacher.

In the following extract, the interpreter uses her own voice to suggest a different approach to the information she has to render.

1 English translations of utterances in Chinese or Catalan are provided in brackets.

Extract 2

- Teacher *Quan sigui el seu aniversari, pot portar pa de pessic o galetes per compartir amb els companys.*  
(For his birthday, he can bring a cake or cookies to share with his classmates.)
- Interpreter *Però és una cosa que fa tothom? Així l'hi introduiré dient que és una cosa que fan tots els nens...*  
(But is that something everyone does? Then I can tell her it's something all the children do...)
- (...)
- Interpreter *Però és igual com siguin aquests pastissos? Poden ser de nata?*  
(But it doesn't matter how these cakes are? Can they also bring cream cakes?)
- Teacher *Sí, sí, mentre no siguin llatinades, és igual com siguin.*  
(Yes, yes, as long as they're not candies, it's OK.)
- Interpreter *T'ho comento perquè als xinesos els hi agraden els pastissos amb MOOOLTA nata i a vegades més que res que embruten molt... és que en altres escoles ja s'hi han trobat.*  
(I'm telling you because the Chinese like cakes with LOTSSS of cream and sometimes they can get really dirty... and other schools have already been in this situation.)
- Teacher *Ah, llavors, comenta-l'hi...*  
(Oh, OK, then tell her...).
- Interpreter *蛋糕最好是没有奶油的。*  
(It is better if the cakes are not cream cakes.)

In extract 2, the interpreter first asked for information that could help contextualise a specific practice inside the school. In her second intervention, though, she establishes a short exchange with the teacher to introduce a cultural practice. It must be noted that the content of the exchange is not transmitted to the mother, only its conclusion. The interpreter again tries to act as an intercultural mediator, providing information based on her own experience with the Chinese community. However, even though this information may be useful to the teacher, the mother and son are excluded from the monolingual exchange.

In another intervention, the interpreter seems to adopt an advocate role. The teacher explains the activity of the *travelling notebook*. Every weekend, a different child takes the notebook home, so that parents can note down what they have done during the weekend, and the next Monday brings it back to school. The interpreter asks: "And what if they can't write in Catalan or Spanish?". By asking in advance, she seems to protect the mother from a possible face-threatening situation.

As already noted, the active role of the interpreter is evident in her questions and suggestions when she believes some information may not be shared by the participants. For instance, she asks the teacher: "Do you want me to tell the mother that they should let you know in advance if they plan to travel to China during

the school year? I'm telling you because some of them just go without saying anything." Again, it is her experience with the Chinese community in Catalonia which underlies this suggestion.

In brief, in trying to act as a mediator who is searching for the most relevant information for both participants, the interpreter also shifts between the roles of the service provider's assistant and the user's advocate. Even though the teacher-mother exchange is primary, there are also monolingual exchanges between the interpreter and the teacher, which are instead scarce between the interpreter and the mother. The boy is only engaged at the beginning and at the end of the meeting.

### 3.2 The second encounter

The second encounter took place in November 2010 in an Educational Welcome Space (*Espai de Benvinguda Educativa*). These kinds of settings, created in various cities in 2008, aimed to offer an introduction to Catalan and to Catalonia to newly arrived immigrant children before their enrolment in an ordinary school, which took place a couple of weeks later. The Educational Welcome Spaces were closed in 2012.

In this specific meeting the participants are the community worker (*educadora social*), a Chinese mother, and her two children (teenage daughter and eight-year-old son), and the interpreter. The mother only spoke Chinese, but the children could understand and speak basic Catalan. The interpreter's mother tongue was Catalan and she also spoke fluent Chinese.

The purpose of the meeting was to collect and confirm information about the two children, who were about to start the course offered in the Welcome Space, and to give information about the course to the mother and children. The encounter lasted approximately 25 minutes and was also audio-recorded.

#### 3.2.1 The interpreter

The interpreter worked full-time as intercultural mediator for the city council and mainly covered educational settings and social services. She was in charge of public service interpreting for Chinese users of the latter, and of intercultural mediation activities with the Chinese community in the city. She had a degree in Translation and Interpreting, but her degree programme had not included work on community or dialogue interpreting. She had, however, attended a seminar on intercultural mediation. At the moment of data collection, she had been working in this area for two years (since 2008).



### 3.2.2 Seating

Seating was arranged at a round table in a meeting room (Figure 2). The researcher sat with the participants around the table.

The interpreter sat between the community worker and the mother, which may have transmitted a more balanced image of her status to the main participants. She and the mother and children already knew each other, having met at a city council meeting. They had also met by chance on their way to the Educational Welcome Space, arriving together. This may have helped produce a certain closeness and complicity between the interpreter and the family, and may have also reinforced their sense of trust towards the interpreter (Edwards *et al.* 2005).

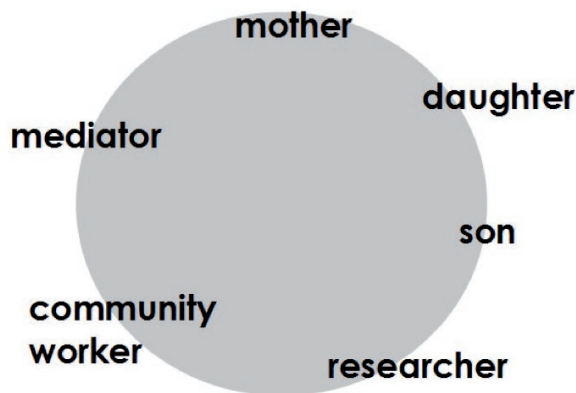


Figure 2. Seating arrangement in second encounter

The interpreter and the community worker also knew each other, from previous meetings with other Chinese families. All these factors (the purpose of the meeting, the seating arrangement and the fact that the participants already knew each other) helped create a relaxed atmosphere.

### 3.2.3 Participation in the encounter and the role of the interpreter

Since both children could understand basic Catalan and the little boy was eager to answer the community worker's questions, the interpreter's turns and renditions were relatively scarce. The community worker also addressed her questions to the children and overtly involved them in the conversation, as may be noted in extract 3.

Extract 3

- C.W. *Sí. Llavors, ja ja havíeu estat a l'escola aquí a [...]?* Eh, vosaltres, quan vàreu venir de Xina, la primera vegada, vàreu venir a [...].  
(Yes. Then, did you already go to school here in [...]? I mean, when you came from China, the first time, you came to [...].)
- Boy *Sí.*  
(Yes.)
- C.W. *Tu recordes a quina escola anaves?*  
(Do you remember which school you went to?)
- Girl *Sant Jordi.<sup>2</sup>*  
(St. George's.)
- Boy *Sant Jordi.*  
(St. George's.)
- C.W. *Tots dos a Sant Jordi anàveu? Molt bé. I això quin any era?*  
(You both went to St. George's, right? Great. And what year was that?)
- Boy *El dos mil vuit.*  
(In two thousand and eight.)

As may be noted, interpreting was not needed in this exchange, which took place at the beginning of the encounter. The community worker-boy axis was given priority, though the girl also tried to participate. In fact, the community worker used the second person singular in Catalan (*tu*) in her second question, addressing it only to the boy. The mother was excluded from this dialogue, which was not interpreted to her, neither by a summarised rendition (Wadensjö 1998) nor by means of *chuchotage*.

Extract 4 shows the continuation of extract 3. It presents the first turn of the interpreter, a non-rendition (Wadensjö 1998), where she uses her own voice to pose a question.

Extract 4

- Interpreter 是吧? 你们是 =  
(Really? Did you =)
- C.W. = *Ui! Així fa quatre dies, d'això.* =  
(= Wow! That was not long ago =)
- Interpreter = 2008 年离开中国的吗?  
(= leave China in 2008?)
- Boy < INAUDIBLE >
- Interpreter 不是2008年, 我觉得是早一点是吧? 不是2007年吗?  
(It was not in 2008, I believe it was a bit earlier, right? Wasn't it in 2007?)

2 Proper nouns have been changed to protect participants' identities.

- Mother            2008年四月二十三号  
 (The twenty-third of April 2008)
- Interpreter      是啊? 2008 年…… Vale.  
 (Really? 2008... OK.)

The interpreter's first turn here is interrupted by the community worker, who makes an observation that is left untranslated. The interpreter's second turn includes an intuition based on her personal experience (*I believe it was...*), as she started working at the city council in 2008. As in the previous excerpt, one participant is left outside the exchange, as the dialogue was not interpreted for the community worker.

The transcript of this encounter reveals that it is built on separate conversations which at certain points converge. While Bolden (2000) talks about "interweaving but separate conversations", the multi-party nature of this encounter allows participants to expand monolingual exchanges, and makes the separation between the participants more visible.

The monolingual exchanges take place between the community worker and the children, between the community worker and the interpreter, and between the interpreter and the mother and children. As the interpreter already knew the family, some of the community worker's questions are directly addressed to her, and the interpreter answers on behalf of the mother. The children's understanding of both languages puts them in an advantageous position, allowing them to participate in both the Catalan and the Chinese exchanges. Paradoxically, the mother almost becomes a spectator: when certain questions are addressed to her, the children answer on her behalf, as in extract 5.

#### Extract 5

- C.W.            *D'acord. I quin any era això que van arribar els pares aquí?*  
 (OK. And when did the parents arrive here?)
- Interpreter    你们父母，你们两个是什么时候到[...]?  
 (Your parents, when did you both arrive in [...]?)
- Boy             不一样的。  
 (It was different.)
- Interpreter    是什么时候?  
 (When?)
- Boy             不一样的。我妈妈先到。  
 (It was different. Mum arrived first.)
- Interpreter    哦!  
 (Oh!)
- Girl             你先到[...]是不是?  
 (You came to [...] first, right?)
- Interpreter    我什么不知道。谁先到[...]?  
 (I didn't know anything. Who arrived first?)

- Mother            或者西班牙？西班牙，我先到西班牙。  
(Or to Spain? To Spain, I was the first to arrive in Spain.)
- Interpreter       哦。  
(Oh.)
- Mother            我到西班牙六年了。  
(I came to Spain six years ago.)
- Interpreter       *Fa sis anys que és aquí.*  
(She's been here for six years.)

Despite herself understanding the questions, the mother allows the children to answer on her behalf and only intervenes to confirm and clarify after the exchange between the interpreter and the children. The interpreter does not translate, merely providing a partial answer to the community worker's original question.

Overall, the interpreter's reluctance to intervene as a coordinator or even as an interpreter, instead allowing monolingual exchanges to develop throughout the meeting, results in imbalanced participation, with some voices silenced or excluded.

#### 4. Discussion

There are important differences between the interpreters in these encounters. The first interpreter limits her own interventions to what she feels is important for the teacher to know, based on her experience of mediating with the local Chinese community. She shifts between two roles, that of the service provider's assistant (e.g. suggesting complementary questions) and that of the user's advocate, especially when trying to avoid situations that may cause the latter to lose his/her face or feel uncomfortable, either now or in the future. However, during the short monolingual exchanges, one of the participants is excluded from the conversation, while other strategies might have avoided this; for instance, Bancroft/Rubio-Fitzpatrick's (2011) non-intrusive five-step mediation, which stresses the importance of directing interpreters' own interventions to both participants of the conversation.

The second interpreter becomes an active participant in the encounter, answering the community worker's questions on the basis of what she has learnt in previous encounters with the family. She selects what to interpret to the mother or to the community worker, and lets monolingual exchanges flow without interruption. Consequently, the two monolingual participants are excluded from the exchanges in the other language, as is particularly evident in the case of the mother.

Surprisingly, the interpreter in the second encounter has a degree in Translation and Interpreting. However, her answers during the interview did not link her work to her training, which had mainly focused on conference interpreting.<sup>3</sup>

3 This bias has now lessened, as PSI has been gradually introduced into most Translation and Interpreting degree courses in Spain.

She acknowledged not knowing how to introduce herself to Chinese users, as she did not feel comfortable with the label either of interpreter or of intercultural mediator, and sometimes just said *I will help you*. Nevertheless, more continuous dialogue interpreting, maybe combined with *chuchotage* during monolingual exchanges, could perhaps have helped provide more equal chances to participate in the encounter.

## 5. Conclusions

The encounters discussed in this paper support Baraldi's (2009) finding that mediated interactions (Bolden 2000: 391) often result in a dyadic separation where two distinct conversations develop. The context in which these encounters took place makes this study particularly valuable from the point of view of research on PSI.

First of all, interpreting in educational settings is one of the under-researched contexts in the growing literature on PSI, especially if compared to healthcare or court interpreting. Apart from Davitti (2012, 2013), Foulquié Rubio/Abril Martí (2013) or Vargas-Urpi/Arumí Ribas (2014), little has been written about the specificities of such encounters. The encounters presented in this paper show that despite developing in a more relaxed atmosphere, the unequal distribution of power still becomes evident. The interpreters in both these encounters displayed this difference in power, going so far as to intervene in place of the mother in the second encounter. Rendering all the original utterances could have helped to empower the less powerful participant, by providing a more constant flow of information.

Their broader experience in intercultural mediation certainly influenced the roles taken by the interpreters during these encounters. However, previous research has shown that intercultural mediation needs to be fitted to the specificities of dialogue interpreting. Baraldi (2009) and Gavioli/Baraldi (2011) stress the potential for interpreters to balance power relations by coordinating turn-taking. On the other hand, Bancroft/Rubio-Fitzpatrick (2011) suggest a strategy whereby cultural explanations are provided without excluding any of the participants, and promoting their direct interaction.

Multi-party encounters may call for particular turn-taking coordination strategies. Taking the example of the second encounter, the children's bilingual competence gave the interpreter less control on turn-taking, as the boy's quick responses prevented her from providing renditions of the original questions. Multi-party encounters seem to require basic communication rules to be established at the beginning, to ensure that interpreting turns are respected.

Having only considered two encounters, these findings need to be interpreted cautiously. More research is required to better understand and describe the specificities of interpreting in educational settings. Issues of role, empowerment and turn-taking have been considered, but what also arises as an issue worth studying is how the presence of children may shape interpreters' behaviour. In both these encounters, the interpreter seemed to adopt an affectionate tone, be-

cause even when not participating directly (e.g. in the first encounter), the children could still pick up on what was being said about them.

Finally, despite its limitations, this study suggests new variables to take into account when designing activities for PSI training. Role plays often depict the traditional triadic exchange, but real practice may involve more complex situations that need to be addressed in both formal and informal training courses.

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