

**Gender similarities and differences  
in selected personality characteristics  
of (future) interpreters**

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**Abstract**

The paper presents the results of research on the selected personality characteristics of professional interpreters and interpreting students, with a specific focus on gender differences. The characteristics studied were anxiety (measured by STAI) and achievement motivation (measured by AMI). The results of our research show that women (n=33) are characterized by higher anxiety compared to men (n=10). Regarding motivation, women (n=31) in our research were also characterized by statistically significant higher pride in productivity, status orientation, and competitiveness compared to men (n=10). However, these differences in personality characteristics do not cause significant differences in interpreting performance between men and women.

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## **1. Introduction**

Research confirms that personality has an impact on occupational performance (Barrick and Mount 2005) and learning success (Oakes et al. 2001). Specific requirements are placed on the personality of the interpreter, especially in the physiological, psychological, professional, and moral areas (Breitung 1994; Fleischmann, Kutz and Schmitt 1997). The personality of interpreters contains many aspects worthy of investigation. Among such aspects are the personality characteristics of professional interpreters or interpreting students and the gender differences in these personality characteristics. Our research focuses on two specific components of personality – anxiety and motivation. In doing so, we investigated the impact of these two components on interpreting performance and personality differences between female and male (future) interpreters. The starting point for examining gender differences in particular (occupational) fields is the study of personality. The personality can be understood as a dynamic organization of such psychological systems, the inner conditions of the individual, which determine their unique adaptation to the environment (Allport 1937). Elements of personality are demonstrated in the form of specific traits. Traits are the consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviours that a person displays in different situations (Fleeson and Gallagher 2009). The aim of the research on gender differences in personality is to explain the differences among general patterns of behaviour in men and women on average, with the understanding that both men and women can experience states across the full range of most traits. Gender average differences do not imply that men and women only experience states on opposing ends of the trait spectrum; on the contrary, significant differences can exist along with a high degree of overlap between the distributions of men and women (Hyde 2005).

The aim of this paper is to present research on gender differences in perceived anxiety and dimensions of achievement motivation in professional interpreters and interpreting students, and to contribute to the state of knowledge in personality psychology and interpreting studies in the context of personality specificities in the interpreting profession.

## **2. Gender differences in selected aspects of personality**

In the literature, we find research confirming gender differences in some personality characteristics. Men were found to be more assertive and have slightly higher self-esteem than women. Women are on average higher in extraversion, anxiety, confidence, and especially tenderness (e.g., nurturing) than men. However, no significant differences were found between the genders in social anxiety, impulsivity, activity, ideas (e.g.,

reflexivity), locus of control, and orderliness. Gender differences in personality traits are generally constant across age groups, years of data collection, education levels, and nations (literature review and meta-analysis by Feingold 1994).

In terms of personality traits, also investigated in our paper, research confirms gender differences in both anxiety and motivation structure. Trait anxiety refers to the stable tendency to attend to, experience, and report negative emotions such as fears, worries, and anxiety across many situations. It is characterized by a stable perception of environmental stimuli as threatening (Gidron 2013, 1989). Women, on average, are characterized by higher levels of trait anxiety and are more likely to suffer from some types of anxiety disorders (Cameron and Hill 1989). At the same time, different profiles of trait anxiety also cause differences in the decision-making process in men and women (de Visser et al. 2010).

Achievement motivation is a concept that can be used to explain individual differences in achievement and success in various contexts (including professional life) as well as an explanation of motivated behaviour. Research indicates significant gender differences in achievement motivation dimensions related to self-assurance and ambition in favour of men (e.g., confidence in success, dominance, and fearlessness) and self-control in favour of women (Ružić, Matešić and Štefanec 2016).

## **2.1. Gender in interpreting**

The profession of interpreter is typically associated with certain personality traits, such as the ability to cope with high-stress situations (Gerver et al. 1984; Cooper et al. 1982), intellectual curiosity (Seleskovitch 1978; Melicherčíková and Hodáková 2023a), flexibility, adaptability, self-esteem or openness (Seleskovitch 1978; Bontempo et al. 2014). However, research confirms that interpreters do not belong to one distinct personality type; on the contrary, the interpreting profession attracts all personality types (Schweda-Nicholson 2005; Melicherčíková and Hodáková 2023a). In relation to this diversity, it can be assumed that as far as gender differences are concerned, general differences in some personality characteristics will also apply to interpreters or interpreting students.

Research on gendered interpreting has mainly focused on textual and linguistic aspects (cf. e.g., Cecot 2001; Magnifico and Defrancq 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020; Verdini 2019; Collard and Defrancq 2020; Xiong 2022), on gendered discourse as a social concept (MacDougall 2012), or on differences in the interpreter's perception of gender in sensitive situations related, for example, to violence, expressions of empathy, etc. (Varela 2016/2019). The aim of this paper is not to stereotype the profession of interpreting in terms of gender, but all the research we have

referred to so far confirms the higher representation of women, both among professional interpreters (both conference and community interpreters) and among interpreting students (Du 2020).

Given the above, it can be assumed that women's higher average scores on certain traits (such as anxiety) do not limit them from pursuing the interpreting profession; on the contrary, it is likely that some of the traits on which women typically score higher on average enable them to perform well in the interpreting profession.

### **3. Gender comparison of anxiety and motivation dimensions in (future) interpreters**

The aim of the presented research was to identify gender differences in personality traits, specifically anxiety and achievement motivation dimensions, in professional interpreters and interpreting students. We hypothesized that because the interpreting profession or the interpreting degree programs attract a variety of personality types, differences in personality traits by gender would correspond to the average differences generally found by studies in the field of personality psychology.

#### **3.1. Research design**

The present study was part of a more comprehensive investigation of the personality and cognitive characteristics of professional interpreters and interpreting students (cf. e.g., Melicherčíková and Hodáková 2023a, 2023b). We used the following quantitative methods, namely two psychological tools in online form, to investigate differences in anxiety and motivation: *The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)* and *the Achievement Motivation Inventory (AMI)*.

The Slovak version of the standardized State-Trait Anxiety Inventory was prepared by Müllner, Ruisel and Farkaš (1980), who adapted the Spielberger, Gorsuch and Lushene (1970) questionnaire. The questionnaire is based on Spielberger's concept, which distinguishes between anxiety as a state and anxiety as a personality trait, while allowing the measurement of differences between them, i.e. between a temporary, transient state and a relatively permanent predisposition. The test is designed for the adult population. Within the analysis, we address in detail only the data found on participants' anxiety as a permanent trait (Form X-2).

The Slovak edition of the Achievement Motivation Inventory (Schuler et al. 2011) is based on a test developed by a team of authors (Schuler and Prochaska 2000; Schuler, Thornton, Frintrup and Mueller-Hanson 2004). The AMI is a psychological instrument mainly used in human resources practice, in personality and motivation research, in sport

psychology, and in other fields that focus on psychological aspects of motivation. The questionnaire consists of 170 items that are divided into 17 dimensions (persistence, dominance, engagement, confidence in success, flexibility, flow, fearlessness, internality, compensatory effort, pride in productivity, eagerness to learn, preference for difficult tasks, independence, self-control, status orientation, competitiveness, goal setting). The individual items are defined and formulated in relation to the profession but are not restricted to the context of the occupation or to specific activities (Schuler et al. 2011). The test is designed for individuals over the age of 16.

The research sample (n=43) was obtained by convenience sampling and consisted of different groups of subjects, with different length and intensity of experience (senior professional interpreters<sup>1</sup>, junior professional interpreters<sup>2</sup>, interpreting students who expressed a clear preference to pursue interpreting<sup>3</sup>, and interpreting students who do not yet have a clear idea of their professional future<sup>4</sup>). For the purposes of the current research, we did not divide our sample by length and intensity of experience, but by gender; in total, the sample consisted of 33 female and 10 male (future) interpreters.

Our current research is characterized by several limitations. Due to the relatively small research sample, it is not possible to generalize the findings. Due to the methods used (introspective questionnaires), the findings are subjective in nature. Nevertheless, we believe that the results of the research will contribute to the current state of the issue under study.

Since differences in personality traits by gender are generally constant across age groups, and at the same time, people with different personality types are involved in the interpreting profession, we expect that gender differences in our research population will correspond with general differences found by research in personality psychology. Therefore, we hypothesize that the women in our research sample will be characterized by greater anxiety compared to men and, in the area of motivation, the men will be characterized by higher confidence in success, dominance, and fearlessness compared to women.

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<sup>1</sup> With a length of interpreting experience ranging from 20 to 25 years.

<sup>2</sup> With a length of interpreting experience ranging from 6 to 10 years.

<sup>3</sup> Students of the MA Translation and Interpreting programme.

<sup>4</sup> Students of the MA Translation and Interpreting programme (control group).

### 3.2. Gender comparison of trait anxiety in (future) interpreters

In our research, we analysed the values of trait anxiety by the length of experience or the interpreting preference and by gender. A basic analysis of the data by gender in our research sample (Table 1) confirmed that women scored significantly higher on average in trait anxiety (47.70) compared to men (40.50). These findings are consistent with the norms for STAI, according to which women are more anxious than men (Müllner, Ruisel and Farkas 1980). Next, we confirmed the normal distribution of values (Shapiro-Wilk test, women  $p = 0.374$ ; men  $p = 0.124$ ) and then investigated whether the differences in anxiety between men and women were statistically significant. The parametric test, Student's t-test for two independent samples, confirmed statistically significant differences ( $p = 0.039$ ) in anxiety between men and women in our study sample (Table 1).

Gender		Trait anxiety (STAI)	t	p
<b>Women (n=33)</b>	mean	47.70	2.132	0.039
	SD	8.81		
<b>Men (n=10)</b>	mean	40.50		
	SD	11.07		

SD – standard deviation; t – t-test; p – significance

Table 1. Two-sample Student's t-test for trait anxiety by gender

Statistical analysis confirmed that women, on average, are characterized by significantly higher anxiety compared to men. The anxiety of male and female interpreters was also investigated by Kurz (1997). The gender differences in anxiety in her research were not large, but, contrary to our research and the respective norms, female interpreters on average scored lower on anxiety (31.7) than male interpreters (32.65). We cannot clearly substantiate the conclusions reached, as the author of the study does not further characterize the group of interpreters. At the same time, however, these results suggest that, in terms of trait anxiety, on average, this was a rather balanced group of professional female interpreters ( $n=24$ ) and male interpreters ( $n=8$ ). Our findings also establish the assumption that women's higher anxiety is not disqualifying in the profession or preference for interpreting, as our research sample, like other studies, includes more women than men, both in the group of professionals and in the group of students who are inclined towards interpreting. Thus, coping with anxiety experienced in a stressful situation rather than anxiety as a relatively stable personality characteristic is likely to be crucial in the performance of the interpreting profession (Melicherčíková and Hodáková, 2023a).

### **3.3. Gender comparison of motivation dimensions in (future) interpreters**

Similarly to the analysis of anxiety, we also examined the mean values of individual motivational dimensions by interpreting experience or interpreting preference<sup>5</sup> and by gender. In the analysis of the mean scores achieved by women (n=31) and men (n=10) in the research sample, we found that women showed higher scores compared to men in the dimensions of persistence, dominance, engagement, internality, compensatory effort, pride in productivity, self-control, status orientation, competitiveness and goal setting. Compared to women, men scored higher on the dimensions of confidence in success, flexibility, flow, fearlessness, and preference for difficult tasks. Both groups scored comparably on the dimension of independence. The dimensions of pride in productivity, status orientation, competitiveness, internality, and preference for difficult tasks show the largest differences in mean values (see Tables 2 and 3).

We confirmed a normal distribution of data for most of the motivation dimensions except for internality, willingness to learn, independence, and goal setting, so we performed a nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test of significance of differences for these dimensions (Table 3) and a parametric Student's t-test for two independent samples for all remaining dimensions. Statistically significant differences were identified in the dimensions of pride in productivity (Sig. = 0.046), status orientation (Sig. = 0.014), and competitiveness (Sig. = 0.03), while the statistical significance of the differences was not confirmed in the remaining dimensions (see Tables 2 and 3).

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<sup>5</sup> The professional interpreters and interpreting-inclined students in our research were characterized by higher internality, higher fearlessness, and higher compensatory effort compared to the control group (Melicherčíková and Hodáková, 2023a). In the case of interpreting students, we observed some similarities with existing research on motivation. Also, as indicated by the research of Timarová and Salaets (2011) and Heinzová and Nábělková (2015), in which interpreting students were more motivated than the control group, or showed a higher achievement motive than the reference population, the interpreting students in our sample also scored higher than the control group and the reference population on several dimensions of achievement motivation (persistence, engagement, flexibility, flow, fearlessness, internality, compensatory effort, eagerness to learn, preference for difficult tasks, self-control, independence, and goal setting).

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<b>Dimension of motivation (AMI)</b>		<b>Women (n=31)</b>	<b>Men (n=10)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>persistence</b>	mean	44.52	42.80	0.462	0.647
	SD	9.73	11.68		
<b>dominance</b>	mean	43.23	39.20	0.946	0.350
	SD	11.42	12.61		
<b>engagement</b>	mean	38.29	36.00	0.922	0.360
	SD	12.27	8.10		
<b>confidence in success</b>	mean	43.42	44.90	-0.486	0.630
	SD	8.26	8.77		
<b>flexibility</b>	mean	44.03	45.40	-0.359	0.722
	SD	9.25	13.83		
<b>flow</b>	mean	48.19	52.70	-0.413	0.682
	SD	9.30	6.15		
<b>fearlessness</b>	mean	35.39	38.10	-1.226	0.228
	SD	10.24	13.69		
<b>compensatory effort</b>	mean	50.68	48.70	0.648	0.521
	SD	8.59	7.67		
<b>pride in productivity</b>	mean	55.90	50.30	2.066	0.046
	SD	7.19	8.29		
<b>preference for difficult tasks</b>	mean	33.29	39.60	-1.511	0.139
	SD	10.20	14.97		
<b>self-control</b>	mean	47.68	43.30	1.306	0.199
	SD	8.68	10.81		
<b>status orientation</b>	mean	45.29	34.10	2.575	0.014
	SD	10.91	14.89		
<b>competitiveness</b>	mean	39.71	29.60	2.247	0.030
	SD	12.35	12.44		

SD – standard deviation; t – t-test; p – significance

Table 2. Two-sample Student's t-test for dimensions of motivation by gender

<b>Dimension of motivation (AMI)</b>		<b>Women (n=31)</b>	<b>Men (n=10)</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>internality</b>	mean	53.52	50.00	0.235
	SD	6.80	7.48	
<b>eagerness to learn</b>	mean	44.48	45.00	0.988
	SD	6.99	7.38	
<b>independence</b>	mean	42.97	42.50	0.939
	SD	7.02	13.00	
<b>goal setting</b>	mean	41.90	40.50	0.638
	SD	10.20	11.24	

SD – standard deviation; p – significance

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis test for dimensions of motivation by gender



Thus, it can be concluded that the women in our research sample were more ambitious and motivated by the drive to achieve success and the positive feeling of performing well compared to the men. When comparing the mean scores of women with the Slovak reference population in terms of gender, we found that women in our sample scored higher only on the dimension of pride in productivity. On the dimensions of status orientation and competitiveness, on average women in the general population show higher scores compared to women in our research sample. Since women in our group appeared significantly more anxious than men in STAI, we can assume that higher ambition, pride in productive performance, and drive to achieve success are also aspects that enable them to manage feelings caused by anxiety and use them constructively to benefit performance in interpreter role.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results of our research confirmed some personality differences between (future) interpreters by gender. These differences are in line with previous research in the field of personality psychology, which found higher anxiety in women compared to men (Cameron and Hill 1989) and different levels of individual dimensions of achievement motivation (Ružić, Matešić and Štefanec 2016).

No significant differences were found between professional interpreters (juniors and seniors) and students preferring interpreting in our research sample (cf. Melicherčíková and Hodáková 2023a, for details), so we can assume that an important role will be played by coping mechanisms and combinations of traits and cognitive abilities that allow to pursue the profession of interpreter independently of gender. This assumption is supported by the finding that women in our research were characterized by higher trait anxiety and, at the same time, higher levels of competitiveness, pride in performance, and status orientation. More research is needed to fully understand the impact of gender on interpreting performance and to identify potential gender-related biases or challenges in the field.

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