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... for Sign Language Interpreters?

DAVE COYNE | MAY 20, 2014 | COMMUNITY & CULTURE | 17 REPLIES



The field of sign language interpreting still finds itself at a very serious and critical juncture as interpreters and educators attempt to put Deaf community members back into its center. Without considering the tenets of social justice and the perspectives of those who aim to proliferate it, sign language interpreters face the reality that they may be contributing to the oppression of Deaf people.

*“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”
-Desmond Tutu*

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A Critical Juncture



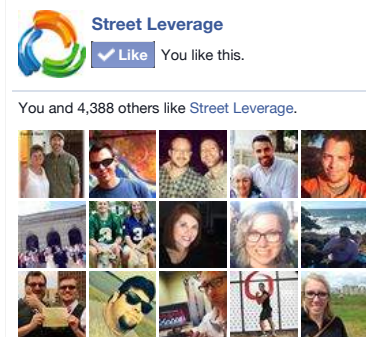
The aim of social justice is to prohibit privileged majority members from taking control – accordingly, a significant amount of guidance and support by those in the minority is needed. Social justice permeates daily experiences because practices, policies, and laws perpetuate the very existence of majority members. Though there is little space today for the appreciation of individual efforts toward justice, and perhaps less space to celebrate times of creativity, sign language interpreters need to create the capacity to give meaning to the Deaf experience in socially conscious ways.

Embracing social justice and incorporating its tenets at the center of interpreters’ practice moves professionals away from explanations that people’s outcomes in life (more

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specifically minorities' lives) are merely results of their good and bad choices toward a position that highlights the strength and conviction required to create opportunities for positive change. Social justice works to include the experiences of others that showcase both social injustices as well as how to move us toward equality—in the case of sign language interpreters, this process is about keeping or changing behaviors that are supported by Deaf people and support their desires and goals to achieve autonomy.

What is Social Justice?

While the United States Government is responsible for ensuring basic quality of life for all citizens, interpreters know too well that people's reactions to injustice in situations differ depending on their political background, media influences, and affiliations. Often we use the same terms to talk about differing scenes of injustice (political, social, economical, and the like). We find that these terms can be vague, meaningless, and often leave us with our wheels turning, but going nowhere. Although the terms justice, e.g., political and social justice, are often seen as interchangeable and often used synonymously, but they can also be defined as distinct terms concerning various inequalities experienced by minority groups.

But do not allow all of this wordsmithing to stop you—minority groups' injustices (regardless of the realm they fall within) are about being targeted, discriminated against, and oppressed; often concerning power rooted in the social order of our society.

An important component of any social injustice is that conversations about minority lives are happening.

Maintain Fairness

Discussions guided by the uses of status, meaning the effects of today's socially constructed hierarchies (i.e., social ordering), are real and important pieces in sign language interpreters' productions of interpretations. Taking types of social ordering into account within interpretations can show us how status affects people (their views and how they are represented in the eyes of others, both individually and systematically). We are talking about reading between the lines of language use to show prestige, respect, and esteem for individuals. In addition to this, those working with hearing interpreters are often from very different communities. To articulate accurate messages, we must consider the real challenges of attempts to maintain fairness based on the myriad relationships (which are symbolic of status used within the exchange) possible within situations. Status can be used to maintain, leverage, and define the types of relationships between people, e.g., best friends, teachers and students, employees and managers.

Advocacy

Social justice is also a concept that deals with people's actions to craft equitable opportunities for positive change (Rawls, 1971), so it is vital that interpreters work closely with Deaf community members to support equitable experiences. These practices can include sometimes-controversial behaviors, yet are critical interventions of oppressive acts found within our professional role, e.g., advocating, supporting, educating. The more we shift control of our field to the hands of Deaf leaders, the less controversial our behaviors will become because appropriate actions will carry the Deaf community's seal of approval.

On the other hand, pausing or avoiding behaviors that intervene oppression may actually prohibit various forms of respect for individual autonomy. The explanation behind such pauses/avoidance may be due to our understanding of ethical relativism, whereby those experiencing the injustice may have the right to determine right and wrong behaviors based on their cultural norms and individual contexts within situations. Perhaps some of us are too worried about doing wrong that we perpetuate current habitual patterns that support the status quo, and thus, inadvertently contributes to injustices.

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Inclusion

Similar worries have given rise to growing public controversy surrounding political, social, and economic institutions, which have centered conversations on social justice since the late 19th century. Though these conceptions related to justice have been formulated and reformulated over the years, we realize that political justice generally deals with equality, while social justice addresses freedom (Rawls, 1971). These forms of justice are actually elements of each other and represent unique challenges of those experiencing injustices.

Because inclusion related challenges exist (which many minorities experience) the Deaf community faces similar challenges about involvement in conversations about roles of social structures. Special attention to the needs of those we serve, as professionals providing a service, is vital. These needs are a part of an overarching holistic understanding, not solely based on communication exchanges, because majority members (yes, even sign language interpreters) lack full awareness of experiences of Deaf community members.

So, while sign language interpreters work, they permeate participants' experiences during the communication exchange. Working between two or more people communicating makes the use of status and its social roots (that are often unfamiliar to the parties involved) visible to the interpreter. All injustices are social in nature, even those within political situations, and are based on the relationships among those involved. This makes interpreter's positions in the interaction between people useful in working toward social justice (e.g., addressing, supporting, opposing). Again, most injustices experienced by Deaf people are types that interpreters will never fully 'get', because as hearing individuals, hearing interpreters may only have secondary experiences to associate with individuals who experience our world differently.

Social justice emphasizes that privileged majority members do not have full understanding of minorities. This makes minority groups' involvement, guidance, and support with professionals serving them imperative.

Community Involvement

Of course both social and political justice need to occur under the eyes of the law, but we are far from achieving equality; social justice exposes social deficits and injustices that bring Deaf people's experiences to the center. The social injustices experienced by the Deaf community create a call to action for *everyone*, reminding us that we are all part of a much larger battle. Liberating actions cannot be successful without true community involvement because no one can liberate themselves by their own efforts or solely by the efforts of others (Freire, 1971). Interpreters' community involvement should include being a part of a force attacking the social injustices experienced by Deaf community members.

This support is pertinent in the lives of those we serve, and for most interpreters, this is as personal as it gets.

The Examination of Power

A multitude of personal and institutional concerns surround a fear that the behaviors of sign language interpreters' will remain static despite the shifting needs of the Deaf community. One example may be the identified need to establish ASL as the language used at interpreting-related conferences as a norm and the historic struggle to achieve it. In the big picture, static and indifferent stances can stymie efforts to overcome systemic injustices (not that they *need* interpreters, but working both with and beside them supports their efforts tremendously). This makes social justice even more important. A position of indifference creates a critical need to examine the power, inequality, and transformational opportunities central to our work as interpreters in mastering language

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and culture.

This examination allows for the formation of a bridge between the need of social justice in the lives of minority groups and the practice of sign language interpreting (a significant influence within Deaf people's lives). This bridge only holds if stakeholders are involved in its design. Grassroots reform movements have historically relied on strong collaborations among members of various groups that come and go from the lives of minority groups. Unfortunately for the Deaf community, interpreters' involvement in grassroots reform movements are not a given; views of such involvement differ widely from interpreter to interpreter. Even interpreter organizations and educators vary widely in their stance on such involvement.



Dave Coyne

Both the positive and negative affects relationships have on experiences dictate one's unique understanding of the world (Fairclough, 2001). Thus, the relationships that sign language interpreters maintain make their positions on issues of social justice even more vital because power struggles are bound to arise among participants who require negotiations through interpreters (this includes relationships between Deaf individuals and interpreters).

Therefore, an interpreter's understanding of the Deaf community must extend beyond their own experiences, thoughts, and actions (majority-centric) in a way to support their overall wellbeing based on their understanding (minority-centric). The potential to build the bicultural attributes needed to promote the wellbeing of others lies within the social rules, experiences, and signed language of Deaf people, especially in matters highlighting social justice itself. Social justice begins by upholding the belief of minority groups on matters of equality.

A Conscious Choice

Exploring a sign language interpreter's cultural competencies challenges them to understand their own position within situations as well as the positions of those involved. Critical language study expert Fairclough (2001) indicated that for groups to make real progress toward their liberation, social emancipation of minority cultures is essential. The first step for interpreters to support the progress of the Deaf Community toward equality is to openly evaluate and strengthen their own behaviors. Locations are already being created and discussions are taking place all over the country: [Jean Miller's TerpTalk](#) or as suggested by Damita Boyd in her article, [Cooperation Strengthens Sign Language Interpreter Education Programs](#).

The need to change the collective stance of interpreters has become a moral imperative today more than ever—this change begins individually. Sign language interpreters cannot expect those we serve to believe that change can occur for the Deaf community if we are not sure ourselves that such change is actually possible. We must ask ourselves what we truly believe and understand that social justice leaves us with a choice.

We have to choose to do something about how we position ourselves as professionals.

How can Deaf individuals trust that there is a modest level of integrity in interpreters if they do not see us learning and emulating models that aim to eradicate stereotypes, prejudices, and the discrimination of Deaf people? Exploring the dynamics of relationships among all ages, abilities, religions, races, ethnicities, social classes, sexualities, and genders is more crucial than ever to tackle the current injustices these members face; simply put, *we should do this because it is the right thing to do.*

Social justice moves us toward supporting autonomy and allows people to one day live in

a world that provides unique spaces for minority groups to flourish. Understanding how Deaf individuals view social justice issues allows for majority members to begin looking at the unique needs of individuals, rather than viewing the whole community as another alternative group based on memorized knowledge about minorities in general (although important parallels between minority groups do exist).

The Prism of Social Justice

The concept of social justice wills interpreters to address current social challenges posed by policy, growing inequality, and social exclusion. Many sign language interpreters strive for social justice because of our unique position to witness injustices experienced by Deaf individuals. Examples of how unfair and avoidable differences lead to disparities in the lives of those we serve include how insufficient support and education in our country affects those who use sign language. I sometimes feel we fail to truly recognize and account for how Deaf people experience the world.

Delivering actions through a prism of social justice creates opportunities for positive change. When interpreters lack personal understanding—experience *with* and knowledge *of* Deaf culture—they tend to perpetuate, normalize, and widen the divide between hearing and Deaf communities. To avoid this, a framework of social justice minimizes disconnects between communities and positively influences the relationships between Deaf Community members and sign language interpreters.

If interpreters work in a dysfunctional manner (i.e., working passively and remaining unconcerned about personal involvement with Deaf individuals), they are likely to block the grassroots collaborations necessary for change to occur. *If this happens, it means interpreters can become a social justice issue themselves.* This brings the need for individuals in the interpreting field, and its organizations, to advocate for the equal treatment of Deaf Community members, and recognize their impact on the lives of Deaf Community members: civic, academic, and otherwise.

Continue the Discussion

Social justice is a part of on-going discussions about shifts in our work as scholars, practitioners, teachers, and policy makers. These shifts, in turn, will improve the lives of oppressed people—in this case the Deaf Community. Scholar Rabbi Tarfon perhaps best articulates the nature of this call to action, our task to join Deaf people in a wider battle toward equality for all communities, “you are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it”.

Let’s work together to get rid of structures of hearing supremacy (e.g., stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination) by ensuring professionals in our field uphold Deaf Community members’ beliefs and thoughts surrounding their own self-empowerment.

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About the Author

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Dr. Dave J. Coyne is an Assistant Professor in the American Sign Language Interpreting Studies program for the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville. His research focuses on social justice leadership and allyship behaviors in the interpreting field. More specifically, he is interested in promoting critical thinking, community-building, and principles of social justice; linking interpreters' ability to reestablish connections with community members and Deaf individuals' autonomy.

17 Enlightened Replies

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SHELLY HANSEN
May 20, 2014 at 1:28 PM

Hi Mr. Coyne! Thanks for posting. I was just thinking about a situation I recently encountered and how I have handled it and how I should handle it. I am a freelancer who occasionally substitute interprets in a school district that has a high Hispanic population. The elementary schools especially are more of a bi-lingual environment with Spanish being spoken as often as English and with Spanish being the language of instruction in order to support the mono-lingual Spanish students. The heavily Spanish interactions in my community are also found in medical situations, counseling sessions, courtrooms, etc... As an English speaking person, I have wanted to honor the Spanish speakers and have tried to learn some Spanish to be mildly conversational with the Spanish speaking family members/friends/support people of D/HH clients. Here is my challenge. There are times when people do not use English and only use Spanish. I do request "I'm sorry, can you please use English so that I can interpret"...etc... but there can be so many times it comes up with various different speakers that I am finding there are times I just "miss" the info and can't interpret. I've let it go in deference to Spanish interactions even though, and here is the weird part, we are in an English speaking country/educational system. I am truly out of the loop in my native country. I offer it as another example of the challenges faced in a diverse country that can even have competing minority populations and how interpreters have to navigate those situations with tact and respect as well. Thanks! Could talk on and on about the subject of interpreters and social justice. Here is a quote I love: "Don't ever let an injustice go by unchallenged."

[REPLY](#)



EILEEN PAUL
May 20, 2014 at 2:50 PM

obviously what is needed is an interpreter fluent in Spanish and English as well as ASL. It isn't fair to you to be in that situation. You should make the case that they must identify an interpreter who can provide what the people need.

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE
May 20, 2014 at 8:34 PM

Shelly,

Thank you for sharing your story. It appears your experiences are multicultural, multilingual and hold many intersectional relationships; multiple lenses to view our world.

This story seems to emphasize our ever-changing world; our educational environments are simply no longer monolingual. You are working in an environment that appears to have demands that past efforts did not successfully navigate (e.g., requesting others to speak in English). These are indeed conversations about what others want from you and what you want from others. As the interpreter, you perhaps had one of the first reactions to the injustice experienced. I'm glad you are able to articulate it and I hope stakeholders were able to assist you.

As reflected in my work, finding a home for social justice in our professional lives, I feel many oversimplify the power of dialogue with stakeholders about recognizing the complexity we find ourselves working within.

Perhaps other individuals reading this have shared or are currently in similar experiences as you and will offer their experiences, thoughts, and ideas. I imagine there are many Deaf students very similar to those you work with, some perhaps that have grown into adults and have thought of ideas that would provide a sense of equity, a distinctive fit to allow for success in such a unique, complex environment.

Thanks again for contributing and sharing,

Dave

REPLY



SHELLY HANSEN
May 20, 2014 at 1:44 PM

Just for fun: Here is something I learned yesterday, because why not ask?!!!

;o):

"Yo soy interprete de signes" (may have misspelled)
pronounced : yo soy interpretay dey say-n-yas

;oD

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
May 20, 2014 at 8:39 PM

Thanks for sharing! 😊

REPLY



ADINAK
May 20, 2014 at 2:16 PM

Hello, and thank you for this article. A fellow interpreter and I were just discussing this very thing last night. Your last line really encapsulates the overarching theme of our conversation:

"If interpreters work in a dysfunctional manner (i.e., working passively and remaining unconcerned about personal involvement with Deaf individuals), they are likely to block the grassroots collaborations necessary for change to occur. If this happens, it means interpreters can become a social justice issue themselves."

In particular we were discussing working in K-12 settings, where the parents typically don't have the wherewithal to challenge the system their child is in (they don't have the knowledge or the time to fight), and the teachers are either are too overwhelmed with paperwork and bureaucracy or are simply unaware of the big picture themselves. As interpreters who DO know the forest from the trees, the question we were discussing was this – should interpreters who accept work in K-12 settings also see as part of their role being an advocate for the child's Deaf identity? Does our role go beyond the scope of providing meaningful access and education around appropriate accommodations? If the parents don't know, and the teachers don't know, and we DO know, is it morally and ethically responsible for us to draw the line of professional boundary and NOT get involved?

These are children – who will be their voice if no one making the decisions has any insight about what that voice could possibly be? Obviously, we cannot be that voice, but we can speak from a place of awareness...

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE
May 20, 2014 at 8:44 PM

Hi there,

Thank you for contributing to this discussion. I hope more conversations surface about our work and about the strongest force affecting our future leaders: our educational system and those who work within it. Of course, we don't want to assume people want us to be an ally, but at the same time, we need to be lead by Deaf leaders who we work with and who we SHOULD be working with. We create more questions than answers (which is not a bad thing) and, often, we lack places where we may redefine our work – it makes us want to scream.

I feel that we must share our knowledge at least, and then allow others to decide what they would like to do with it (like in the situation you described, the consequence can truly affect someone's overall well-being). To constantly evaluate and gauge our professional boundaries is indeed a moral and ethical responsibility (I could not agree with you more). This is due to the affects we have on other's lives. Speaking up based on our awareness may direct those we work with to Deaf community members that have the impact needed for change.

I am support your view that doing nothing is no longer an option (especially when we CAN see the forest from the trees first). I hope our field and other professionals take this call to action to seek Deaf professionals wanting to work with us again; if it's not too late for them to get to the front of the line.

Dave

[REPLY](#)



EILEEN PAUL
May 20, 2014 at 2:46 PM

Important to understand that audism, like racism and other isms is structural. It is built into our society and how it works. And our society is structured to support the superiority of white people, and of hearing people. It is a question of power relationships and changing or shifting those

relationships. The interpreter is hearing (so already superior in our structure) and then in a very powerful position. How can I as an interpreter do my job in a way that minimizes the power relationship, equalizes the power distribution and actually powers the Deaf person(s). It has to start with my own awareness and understanding of the structured oppression and re-educating myself to really respect Deaf people and learn from the Deaf community. The sad thing is that the efforts at justice take place inside of a basically unjust and skewed system. We must constantly learn and see how that system works, in order to work against it. Like Martin Luther King we have to believe that the arc of the universe bends toward justice, and then we have to act on this belief. It's pretty painful sometimes to discover in oneself an assumption of superiority or acting from that power place, even though unaware. We need each other to cross boundaries and tell each other the truth. I hope more Deaf people will be honest with interpreters and call them on attitudes as well as on proper ASL. We can only work for this justice together.

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
May 22, 2014 at 4:12 PM

Hi Eileen, I agree that the myth of any sort of actual "level playing field" needs to be eradicated – we are indeed working within a skewed system and our attempts may be toward equity but that does not have to mean that its results will be the same as privileged folk. Only those experiencing the injustice can define it but where there is oppression there can be decisions surrounding social justice: oppression vs. social justice, adequacy vs. equity, equality of opportunity vs. equality of result.

Your statement "How can I as an interpreter do my job in a way that minimizes the power relationship, equalizes the power distribution and actually powers the Deaf person(s)." should be in printed on certification cards, ingrained in interpreters practices, and used as a daily mantra. I too believe the process of becoming aware is extremely humbling and can be extremely painful – especially during those times we thought we were aware and we were actually contributing to oppression (it comes with the baggage of being privileged). I hope more conversations begin to happen so more can explore their behaviors.

Further, I hope more locations arise so we can indeed, how you eloquently put it, "...cross boundaries and tell each other the truth. I hope more Deaf people will be honest with interpreters and call them on attitudes as well as on proper ASL. We can only work for this justice together." It may sting for many (I know it has for me, time and time again), but we will be stronger because of it.

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts.

Dave

REPLY



ROBYN DEAN
May 22, 2014 at 6:05 AM

Hello Dave, I feel I am well-acquainted with (and advocate for) the ideals of social justice. I have an MA in theology from a school which claims to be a forerunner in social justice theology or the social gospel (e.g., Rauschenbusch). Indeed, social justice is usually a construct of social policy and social activism. As such, it is a macro-moral issue.

Interpreters, in their day-to-day work attend to issues mostly based in micro-

morality. In part, the contexts that we work in come with their own definitions of justice (often based on egalitarian, Kantian, utilitarian). As an example of such, in medicine the specified principle of justice is articulated in many ethical values in the profession such as 'informed consent'. In my work, I often suggest that interpreters consider the values of that setting (e.g., their definition of justice in that context) as prima facie in their decision-making.

Since reading your article, I have been trying to figure out in what context social justice issues would conflict with justice-based values of the context. In which case, give your article, interpreters would seek to trump these with a decision grounded in social justice.

Can you give me such an example?

Robyn Dean

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
May 22, 2014 at 8:35 PM

Hi Robyn,

Thanks for posting. I have been thinking about your post today and keep coming back to your comment about hearing individuals' approaches to injustices concerning Deaf individuals' issues based in micro-morality. I feel that without the consensus of Deaf people regarding how it should be approached, we (hearing interpreters) may not be supporting their (Deaf individuals) aims surrounding macro-moral issues. I hope more locations, conversations, and acceptance of change occurs surrounding how Deaf individuals prefer interpreters to behave.

In regards to your question, I feel that it is not about what they do, but how it is done. At least this is where I am at with this process but open to alternative facets. I know you requested a specific example of an action but my thought process is interrupted by fear that many justice-context decisions made for others' efforts toward equality, by privileged people, are often only short-term "wins" and do not tackle the larger battle for their equal treatment.

I feel that how interpreters go about their decision making process is an important component to think about (as you know). Some of these questions often come to mind: are hearing interpreters (even CODAs) assuming they know what Deaf people want to make a situation just? Are we basing our decisions (and context analysis) too heavily on our own cultural assumptions? Are we a social justice issue by minimizing Deaf people's autonomy by making decisions without them (or for them)? - Which is often done in the interpreting process, but I am thinking about our more general behaviors as professionals.

I feel Deaf leaders (and Deaf organizations) need to reassess all interpreters' behaviors and construct a professional role that carries a type of consensus regarding preferred actions of interpreters. I hope this type of support will become essential by interpreters and their own organizations.

I have more questions than answers (as many of us do) but I hope we can make room for these discussions with Deaf leaders at the center, determining what equality looks like for Deaf individuals.

Dave

REPLY



CARON WOLFENDEN
[May 23, 2014 at 1:15 AM](#)

Hi Dave

Waking up in the UK this morning and watching the results of our Council elections coming in, seeing the rise in power (in my opinion) of a political party whose underlying ethos borderlines on, I have grave concerns about the current climate of social justice and therefore equality. We are already working within increasing constraints of governmental cuts and starting to see very clever wording using the very framework of our political construct to work against equality... interpreters are being classed as support workers and thereby employment terms and conditions are being eroded to insist that ours should be the same as any support worker irrespective of skills or training.

Deaf professionals, the very individuals who could make a difference and who are at the heart of the battle, are constantly being challenged by uninformed 'advisors' trying to cut their access budgets for communication. Indeed one said to me recently, what's the point of education if you can't get a job or flourish in your chosen career. That's the saddest thing I've seen in the 25 years I've been involved with this community.

Thank you for your article. It's why I do the job I do and your words give us the words to challenge and help channel the anger I feel into positive action. Thank you.

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE
[May 27, 2014 at 7:47 AM](#)

Hi Caron,

Years ago, I first started conversations surrounding these topics by calling what I saw happening (others' experiences and political influences) "the ugly truths". These "ugly truths" are real though, and take the form of positions becoming more like support workers (in the UK and here in the US). One current truth is that companies are seeing this trend in changing how they view our positions. Some companies are implementing the change by discussing our positions like support workers and changing titles/roles. It is already happening!

Your example of the uninformed 'advisor' perhaps disturbs me the most, but emphasizes one of the hardest questions we may face: how can we truly expect others to believe that change can happen when we are not sure ourselves that it can? I fear if interpreters (and Deaf people) stay in the back seat for much longer, we won't be able to develop into the force needed to create just experiences and therefore others will not believe it is possible any longer.

Perhaps because of things like self-interest and the fact that companies/governments are caring more about the process than people, the desire to help others get ahead falls off people's agendas.

Indeed, I hope we can work with Deaf individuals (and stakeholders) to channel our energy into positive change. Thanks for taking the time to share your experiences and thoughts.

Dave

[REPLY](#)



GINA OLIVA
 May 25, 2014 at 5:54 PM

I have been thinking about Dave's article (and this being his second or third on this topic – Thanks Dave!)... I am also thinking about Eileen Forestal's workshop at Street Leverage Live where she provided a role play in which there were four individuals: An M.D., a deaf "patient", a Deaf interpreter, and a "regular" (eg, hearing) interpreter. Watching this role play I was struck by how it shifted the power from the "hearing side" to the "deaf side," or at minimum made the situation more of a level playing field. It made me ask myself:

When interpreters are on the job, who do they primarily think they are serving? Do they think of themselves as serving the hearing person/entity (eg, an M.D., a college professor, a teacher in a 5th grade classroom, a pastor in a church) or do they think of themselves as serving the deaf "consumer" be this person a young student, a college student, a parishioner, or a doctor's patient?

My answer: In most situations (remember, I am deaf), I have frequently felt that the interpreter is "allied with" the hearing individual or entity. The power is always in the hands of the hearing person and since the interpreter is hearing, they sort of get, by default if for no other reason, allied with the hearing person. Most of the time, it is the hearing individual or entity who has done the "hiring." I have rarely (if ever) felt that an interpreter was their as MY ally, as my supporter, as my "server."

Eileen was puzzled by my seeing this whole thing as an issue of alliance. Interpreters may feel they are "supposed to be" "neutral." But the truth is, it is the deaf people who are subject to injustices, so it would seem to be logical that interpreters need to be part of the solution, they really ought to not be "neutral."

I would like to see the social justice issue discussed without so much jargon. Can we speak in plain terms??? Can we talk about real life situations and less about theory?

Two respondents mentioned situations — people talking in Spanish and a K-12 situation. Why don't we discuss specific social justice-related responses to the specific situations? K-12 is a whole other ball game from interpreting for adults. Yes, interpreters in K-12, I believe, do have a moral responsibility to educate those who know less (or nothing) about the issues the deaf child is facing. They can do this by talking one-on-one, by suggesting books, articles, and other resources, and by offering to spend time with the family. I would say if this gets you fired, so be it — it would give more fodder for our fight with "the system." Better to be fired than "complicit in a Devils' Bargain."

Oh my. Well let's see what you all have to say.

Thanks to all for participating in the dialogue and Dave for getting it started.

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
 May 28, 2014 at 4:22 PM

Thanks for contributing, Gina. The experiences of the switch of power that you (and Eileen Forestal) described (and probably represent experiences of Deaf people everywhere) are perhaps are becoming some sort of new norm for hearing folk: some unspoken rule that at the end of arguments, hearing people have the final say and Deaf people need to follow rules to get through the system. If the interpreter doesn't support or follow it, they can find one or many who will (is that the current definition of being neutral?). A scary thought is one where those who stay working in the field will know their preferred place in the communication exchange, ruled by hearing standards, i.e., to merely facilitate the dominant culture's rules and ways of being and, with that, they won't speak up, speak out, or reach out. I fear the results of current practices are becoming the new norm for interpreters: they won't speak up, speak out, or reach out!

Yes Gina, I agree – we need real examples of just/unjust experiences. I have read articles and books that mentioned Deaf people’s “daily struggles” but fail to provide enough examples of what these real frustrations, or experiences are – we know they shape people’s perceptions of themselves, and our world! But we lack these very important experiences so hearing people (interpreters included) can learn from and work towards correcting our behaviors (and even keeping some!).

Like many interpreters, I have witnessed many forms of oppression against Deaf people. Perhaps the harder truth is that we are at times involved with the marginalization and disenfranchisement of the Deaf community. There was a time were I didn’t know how to speak up, or speak out, or reach out (in some ways, I still struggle with this). I must wonder how those social justice traits could impact Deaf people and shake professionals’ thoughts regarding how they view the strength of interpreters’ allyship efforts (goodbye neutrality).

I too I hope others will share their stories and experiences to contribute to the two examples here and offer many others about how people/systems affect people’s lives.

Dave

REPLY



SHELLY HANSEN
May 30, 2014 at 9:59 AM

Hello all~ Many issues were raised in comments above. I wanted to respond to some of them.

1. I think there is never a time without hope...as long as people are interacting and love one another and can tell the truth, there is hope for justice. Justice is based on truth and what we need is the truth: Deaf people have needs, have dreams, have abilities etc... and deserve the opportunity to live out those potentialities.
2. Interpreting as a profession in a broad sense is a quest for social justice. Our entire career is about providing access. A good interpreter provides as commensurate an experience of genuine access as is possible thru a third party. That is a good thing. Deaf people have had the conversations they need to get the things needed for the specific situation. For example: Getting a driver’s license. Getting a HS diploma. Having a job interview. Getting work training to maintain employment. Having questions answered about SSA. Getting needed treatment at the Drs office. Getting legal counsel as needed. Getting answers as to why something happened and what to do about it now, etc... etc... Access is a good thing and is the purpose of our job as an interpreter.
3. We do get as hearing interpreters aligned with the hearing majority and there are times this is an advantage when providing access and times this is a disadvantage. Our goal is to minimize the disadvantaged times and that is part of why we have an RID/NAD Code of Prof Conduct to help guide us to neutral zones (with input from the Deaf community via NAD). This is the part where we need to stay open to feedback from D/HH/DB consumers and make changes even when we are veteran interpreters.
4. As far as micro and macro social justice issues...one thing I can do as an interpreter is to stay optimistic and project optimism in my work. Yes a person has struggled to find a job for years. Yes the process is slow and repetitive at times (VR office again...), yes there are generational welfare situations, yes there is a repeated lack of/weak parental involvement with many D/HH kids, yes there are still many very minimally skilled interpreters and mis-communication through interpreters, yes employers continue to discriminate against disabled workers including D/HH/DB individuals but I can choose to be optimistic, share that optimism and faith in D/HH/DB people’s competence and show up on time

ready to make the best of this appointment.

Thanks for the article!
SH

REPLY



JULIANNE BONTA
June 3, 2014 at 3:22 PM

I was very gratified to see this article, which prompted many thoughts for me. Thank you, Dr. Coyne, for putting it out there.

My first thought was that social justice should be a concern for everyone. I would hope that any of us, witnessing social injustice, act to change it. In doing so smartly/well, context matters. In the context of an interpreting job, I believe the proper response of an interpreter is to facilitate communication, period. Doing so promotes social justice by setting an environment where language and communication presumably free parties to engage in higher level interactions. I prefer interpreters to NOT step outside that role – no matter what. Doing so robs me of my own expression and reinforces a picture to hearing parties that I have little/no power of my own. I feel interpreters do have a place for expression – just not on the job, except to make communication clear and complete. This may be different for other deaf folks, but I think it's generally good policy and practice for all. Surprised to see myself say that, as I am usually a strong believer that people should speak up. However, interpreting is not that same kind of situation as direct communication between individuals is.

I have an unusual perspective on interpreting, in that I believe an interpreter is there for ALL parties in the language equation. I say this, even knowing that my place in that equation is almost always as the party with the least access generally. in the situation. I believe interpreters should only interpret on the job, with as little bias as possible and with the goal of ensuring everyone in a venue gets full information. It is NOT enough for deaf to have access. Hearies need real connection to the deaf and hoh folks with whom they have contact. May mean a bit of on-the-spot educating.

Having said this, does this mean I (or others) don't welcome interpreter support in terms of social justice? Of course not. I prefer that it show itself by interpreters taking care of their own biases first – always being aware of being in a privileged place of access and knowledge and therefore must behave in ways that have ethical integrity. You have a responsibility to know the communities you interpret for and this can NEVER be purely intellectual/academic. If you are not present at deaf events, you are not doing your job – let alone promoting social justice. We cannot build grassroots movements without >interaction< between all stakeholders.

Interpreters DO need to speak out and reach out. I gain invaluable info from you when you and I have conversations after a job (in which you might provide social cues I don't readily get) and/or when I see you at a deaf event and we communicate. You hold social information I and deaf peers could be made aware of outside of job situations. I am not talking about gossip. I mean It would be valuable to know how hearing people view power in organizations and how that gets transmitted, affects how things do or don't get done, etc. Do not know if I am making sense here. a lot to think about 😊

Last year I had the privilege of attending a celebration to fundraise for a film documentary about a deaf child. I experienced something that was a first for me in that context. The parents of the deaf child (both CODA) were having a conversation by voice – until they saw me looking in their direction. They switched to sign and voice both – even though it was clearly what hearing folks would have considered a private conversation. In that moment, something in me became "mended" and I was able to look away to other things, knowing that I had experienced parity in a social situation. These folks knew they were not in a private social situation by deaf standards and acted appropriately. This is so rare in my experience, and we need this to be

the NORM. This is a small and crucial part of social justice.

The much bigger issue is social justice and deaf leadership. We aren't quite some aboriginal tribe with no access to "civilization". However, we do tend to have very limited access to (and social awareness of) the type of social skills needed to build communities with power to effect change. Deaf leadership is still quite rare, but it is evolving. This will not reach a critical tipping point unless those of us who are deaf (and hoh) do the work of gaining the knowledge and practicing the skills needed to shape community into action. We have to learn to work together and work with allies- which is not easy considering the in-fighting among certain groups and language issues. Interpreters are critical to this and not just because you are service providers. You are the true power centers of intersectionality between deaf and hearing worlds. Your own professional organizations have got to actively solicit and welcome deaf users of your services. We should be in positions of authority. DO NOT wait for deaf people to show up. We cannot act on what we do not know or experience. There is NO periphery of social knowledge with us. If we can't see you - you do not exist.

My answer to your question Dave, is YES, interpreters have an obligation to practice social justice because ALL people ought to be concerned with it. HOW to do this in relation to interpreting and deaf culture is a question that needs to be asked and debated constantly. I know this: none of us can do so in isolation. Lots to think about and act on. 😊

REPLY

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