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Dave Coyne | Social Justice: A New Model of Practice for Sign Language Interpreters?

DAVE COYNE | SEPTEMBER 17, 2013 | STREETLEVERAGE - LIVE TALKS, TALKS & INTERVIEWS | 20 REPLIES

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Dave presented, Social Justice: A New Model of Practice for Sign Language Interpreters?, at [StreetLeverage – Live 2013 | Atlanta](#). His talk explored how sign language interpreters, acting on the basis of social justice work, can better align themselves with the Deaf Community and their plight for autonomy.

You can find the PPT deck for is presentation [here](#).

Interpreters and Social Justice

Today I will be discussing Social Justice and its connection to interpreters. Many people are not sure about this association. Regardless, we must not let fear prohibit discussions – truly open discussions – because it is those conversations that are at the heart of a social justice lens, which is achieved via leadership.

I would like to start by asking how many of you present would call yourself leaders? Raise your hands. I have asked this question to numerous groups of sign language interpreters and there never seems to be enough answering that they do. For me, I am not satisfied with these numbers and this lack actually increases my own work towards, and my motivation towards urging interpreters because now is the time to step up into leadership roles.

“We must be the change we want to see in the world.” – Mahatma Gandhi

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This has been a recurring, inspirational theme, at Street Leverage – Live. And I'm glad it has been. Indeed, we must be the change, we must think that "I am change", and that "we are change."

Lets look at why a social justice lens works. I know that when I first started working as an interpreter, I witnessed oppression of various types, even marginalization. Lets get a show of hands if you too have seen such types of oppression. We feel helpless while we witness these experiences. We are at a loss for what to do. We feel confined by professional boundaries, we take in each of these experiences, and the impact takes its toll on us. Answers to what actions interpreters could take and appropriate approach comes from this lens.

Social Justice and Leadership

A Social Justice Lens can be attained via leadership. It allows us to partner once again with Deaf community members. The bridge between the sign language interpreting community and the Deaf community fell apart long ago. We are aware of this disconnect. We feel its impact and we deal with its consequences while we are on the job. How can we correct this disconnect and start rebuilding this bridge to reconnect with the Deaf community? Some may say the answer is to have a "Deaf heart." However, it alone is not enough. Interpreters need to know what behaviors to showcase while we work. A social justice lens offers such specific social justice behaviors that we can implement while we work; interpreters *finally can* be more involved.



As interpreters we often navigate two truths: hearing perspectives and Deaf perspectives within situations. Social Justice is defined based on groups' experiences regarding more burdens or fewer privileges than another groups. Interpreters are indeed working within these unjust situations (e.g., educational systems, legal systems, healthcare). Systematic oppression exists and can further marginalize people. Oppression through ignorance occurs and unfortunately interpreters too have been known to add to oppression and marginalization experienced by Deaf individuals as well. So what do we do? Do we remove ourselves and remain uninvolved in such situations? Not any more, not with knowledge of a tool like leadership to achieve a social justice lens.

Social Justice Theory

Many conceptions related to social justice have been formulated over the years, e.g., criminal justice, retributive justice, and others. David Miller created a theory of social justice that is pluralistic in nature, allowing for multiple truths (i.e., perspectives) within situations – allowing for unique views to co-exist, i.e., multiple worldviews within situations. Sign language interpreters typically work with two worldviews: auditory understandings of the world and visual understandings of the world. Both being right, both very unique, but how are interpreters navigating these world-views? We find ourselves in the middle of situations, navigating – juggling – these overlapping ideologies.

Relationships

A social justice lens is correlated with relationships. It actually is *dependent* upon relationships. This fact parallels with interpreting, because the art of interpreting is very much dependent upon relationships. Interpreters' relationships with hearing participants are navigated in addition to relationships with Deaf participants. Interpreters' relationships with team interpreters are involved; though it should not take priority. Relationships with Deaf individuals should take precedence. These examples parallel the same level of importance as a social justice lens has between majority and minority members' relationships.

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Social justice theory recognized that people do have experiences that include more burdens and that groups do have more privileges than other groups. Finally we have something that recognizes these differences. We can begin discussions that offer vocabulary for behaviors, as well as our observations.

Exchanges between individuals need not be monetary with a social justice lens but recognizes people's values and beliefs; their experiences are valued. These intangible things (values and beliefs) all have a home within a social justice model. Also, cultural capital: As interpreters we navigate two sets of cultural capitals that don't always hold mutual respect for one another. Do we fully respect these non-monetary items? To answer, we must further investigate ourselves and apply our findings to our role.

Locations of Social Justice

Social justice can be found within three locations. Do you remember the Green Book series? Let's revisit the three avenues to membership of the Deaf community. Not the fourth avenue to Deaf community membership, and not meaning membership to the core of the Deaf community. I am discussing general membership. The fourth avenue is living as a Deaf individual or the actual experience of being Deaf in our world. As hearing interpreters we don't have that fourth avenue, so we can keep focus on the first three. You can see that the first three align well within the three locations of social justice theory. And it is within these locations where interpreters can begin dialogue about our work, and learn what behaviors are deemed important. Preferred social-related [solidaristic] behaviors can be attained and can mirror what behaviors Deaf people actually want from interpreters. Behaviors at work [instrumental] are those that occur at work, or in places such that lead to our employment, such as our ITP and events such as workshops. Again, the first location is where you find social behaviors, the second is related to our education, and the third is political behaviors [citizenship]. We are quick to think "what are those?" and they are indeed something we need to listen more to and learn how we as interpreters can be involved with political activities like being on a board, what voting can lead to, and what political power we have. As interpreters, we have a kind of privilege that we bring to the table and Deaf individuals want to see interpreters use privilege, i.e., hearing privilege, to benefit their forward movement [towards achieving equality], not to hinder it: this can be done by working together more closely, more so now than ever before.

Social Justice Learning

A social justice model is not inherently known but is rather learned based on other's experiences. Interpreters do so by listening/learning during those discussions with those we work with. These conversations can occur one-on-one by simply asking stakeholders questions, or perhaps establishing a meeting at your agency and inviting Deaf community members to come in and share their opinions and experiences. Note these experiences and allow them to guide your role as an interpreter. This can also be done on a national level. A community forum offers those who are invited into conversations, a type of empowerment. Often people are misled, believing leadership cannot be learned and it is for others to do. It is thought that leaders are aiming to change the world today, but this is simply not true. Unfortunately this type of change doesn't happen the day of. Change is a long process that we contribute to, adding towards a goal. Leaders sleep knowing they contributed to a process in a good way, no longer worried they caused negative effects on others. This is because leaders take a close look at who they are, at their own specific behaviors (within specific areas that we are talking about: social, employment, and political behaviors).



Dave Coyne

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Leadership

There are various forms of leadership out there. Social justice theory goes with one of them and on the other end of the continuum (far from supporting social justice) there is a type that is seen plenty of within our field.

Transactional leadership in the interpreting field has been borrowed directly from business models. This type of leadership has immediate consequences and impacts those involved. An example of transactional leadership would be if two partners enter into mutually agreed upon transactions; they seek to simply finish their task and that is the end of their collaboration. Past the completion of the task, there is not any further investment of one's time; it is not needed because the task coming to an end was what they wanted.

I want to discuss what leads to a social justice lens, how one achieves a social justice lens, and how it serves as an end by means of transformational leadership. The key to this type of leadership is having true collaboration as the main priority, where much empowerment occurs, and everything achieved is done so through discussions. The transformational leader listens to others. Those involved must support the leader's behavior and if they do not, this type of leadership fails.

Transactional Leadership

First, I would like to further discuss transactional leadership. A significant amount of interpreting situations has this type of leadership. This type holds many positive attributes with business transactions. However, when working with people who have a significant amount of daily struggles, this type of leadership hinders forward movement and furthers misunderstandings. People who go into situations with their own set agendas are found in this model, e.g., interpreters who work simply to get paid and no further thought about others happens after the encounter.

For the individuals who are under a transactional leadership model, perhaps even unaware that their behaviors are more transactional in nature, they don't necessarily have to share any organizational goals nor do they need to for exchanges to occur under a transactional leadership model. For example, if we look at two similar businesses, perhaps they are a chain within a franchise, each have different owners but may have different priorities within their business and different goals than their sister stores. They have the same type of exchanges, based on money, selling the same products; however, they may serve people very differently. This parallels with the business of providing interpreting services. Interpreters are not obligated to follow organizational goals/values to guide their work; in lieu of, you may find self-interest that guides them.

People working within a transactional leadership model operate by holding control. They provide praises, rewards, and punishments to those working with them (traits of transactional leadership).

There are some transactional leadership traits considered positive. These include having fast results and immediate closure with tasks. As long as set goals by those involved are achieved within situations, they can consider the task completed. There are people out there who want that set up.

Transactional leaders encourage others involved through controlling methods; setting clear steps for people to follow, deeming an assignment successful if they merely follow A, B, and C (not leaving set parameters). This set up lends for transactional leaders to be very strict. If you do not follow their set protocol, they may retaliate, e.g., may not hire you again, they may withhold pay, they may challenge to the point of furthering any type of resolve regarding concerns you have with them. The transactional model also fosters the mindset of 'I merely work for compensation.' Those involved in this model are told to accept set circumstances created by transactional leaders and this process contributes to colonialism (in general) and specifically toward the colonization of those involved.

Transformational Leadership

Now I will be shifting gears to the other end of the spectrum: transformational leadership. Much research has been conducted over the years and has noted that transformational leaders typically display four types of characteristics; known as the four Is of transformational leadership. The first today, [individual considerations], interpreters do quite frequently. Interpreters have been known to already incorporate these components of transformational leadership within their work but are yet to use the vocabulary to employ these concepts to their work.

Trait One – Analysis

First, lets talk about individual considerations. As interpreters we analyze various language modes, attempt to identify educational levels, and match others where they are at regarding language use (both hearing and Deaf participants). Interpreters navigate situations mainly within this trait, and we do it well.

Trait Two – Intellectual Stimulation

The second transformational leadership trait is intellectual stimulation. If we believe that everyone in the world brings value, then we can be open to others to problem solve. Let's not think that we, as interpreters, have better ideas to problem solve than Deaf community members. What interpreters can do is to collaborate with Deaf members regarding what they think are better approaches to problems and ask Deaf people what they feel should be done in situations. And listen to them; listen more than taking action independently. Deaf people have ideas and answers that interpreters need to value.

Trait three: Inspirational Motivation

The third transformational leadership trait is inspirational motivation. Interpreters must be able to share field goals and visions with others to the point where it draws others in and they incorporate them too. Negative behaviors, e.g. gossip, pessimism, blame, complaining, do not warrant other's investment in our work. Those negative behaviors do not shine well on the field's goals and visions. Interpreters must manipulate those negative behaviors to work more optimistically.

Trait four: Idealized Influence

The fourth, and last transformational trait is idealized influence. This is the ability to influence as well as shape our vision and to lead us to actually achieving our vision, our shared vision. Currently, as a field, we do not have the four transformational traits and, to note, they are usually ordered and discussed in a different order. I flipped their usual ordering in todays discuss because the fourth, idealized influence, i.e., shared vision, isn't something established in our field yet. We have been more focused on individuals, and have mastered skill-sets within the first trait, individualized considerations; however, we haven't come to attaining a shared idealized influence.

Empower

Transformational leadership can promote participants' goals and wants. It can be a humbling experience. It's humbling because we have our degrees, we hold the knowledge, and we attained certification. We 'know what is best in situations', but now I am to inquire about wants such as where you want the interpreter to sit? With transformational leadership, we aim to empower and remove control. Lets think of the word control, I really hate that word. People can *control* cars; we do so by first turning it on. We *control* its features. We *control* all the functions of the car. Now, we cannot *control* the city though. But we do *navigate* through the city. Interpreters navigate through job assignments; we navigate through the interpreting process. We don't control anything. We must surrender any control we think we have. We must surrender control; we never had it anyways nor will we ever have it.

Through discussions, through listening to others – to other’s valuable stories – we can begin to identify defects in the status quo. We do this by truly listening to others. We cannot assume we know. My privilege may not allow me to see much. Many experiences continue to be overlooked. This ignorance may continue until we are truly able to live in other’s shoes. But I know I can’t. I am not Deaf. So what I am able to do is to take time to listen to their experiences, as many as you can.

The Pros

Transformational leadership has positive attributes. A pro for this leadership style is that if an organization needs change, transformational leadership has actions that can offer change. It does this by its grassroots approach and allows the people involved taking back control and it requires us interpreters to step back and empower others. Secondly, transformational leadership is focused on satisfying the needs and wants of stakeholders, this continuous collaborating and navigating ensures their needs and wants are being met. It is about interpreters thinking less about themselves.

The Cons

A con: transformational leadership does not offer fast results. It requires time. Change requires time. I may not see it in my lifetime, but I do hope that my vision will happen. I believe that my vision of equality will happen. It may take a long time; I realize it will not any time soon. Additionally, transformational leadership does not have a roadmap to follow. If the end is for true equality, we will not know how to specifically achieve that goal, but – we move towards our goals by working together, have creative solutions, and work toward true collaboration. I do not know how it will all unfold. Not having a roadmap is unsettling for many; they must have an A, B and C to follow. People like to be told how to get the things that they want. But I can’t ask for such a thing within this model, we simple can’t ask.

Conclusion

We work within unjust situations that are simply unfair at times. We are within situations that a social justice lens, via transformational leadership, would do well in. The goal of transformational leadership is to empower others. If the goal of like-minded groups of people is working together then it is possible to overcome barriers, such as political agendas. Just as gay and lesbian individuals are together fighting a larger battle with other people, e.g., straight allies, their parents, their children, come together and have the power to change political agendas. This is the same with the Deaf community. We shouldn’t think the Deaf community should fight battles alone. Where are interpreters in all this? We need to continually listen, to learn how we can be involved, e.g., support.

With this, the bridge between the Deaf community and the interpreting community can begin to be mended. We can re-connect once again, but to do so sign language interpreters must empower others. First, it must begin with conversations. We must inquire from outside of our field. It can begin now when you all leave today and arrive home. Ask your Deaf friends and ask those you work with (hearing and Deaf). Ask them “what do you think our job should look like?” and “what would you want from an interpreter?.” We are not seeking to please every request of interpreters but the inquiry is a start; start these discussions and brainstorm ideas with stakeholders.

“Transformational leaders don’t start by denying the world around them. Instead, they describe a future they’d like to create instead.” –Seth Godin

Transformational leaders do not deny what is around them. They take the world as is, and evaluate it, acknowledging, and assessing one’s own involvement. Interpreters must be able to describe what kind of future they want. Can you describe to your neighbors, friends, and Deaf community members your vision? Can you think how behaviors, specific behaviors, may get you to that vision?

Today’s presentation was regarding social justice lens via leadership, this afternoon’s workshop will be more about leadership and specific behaviors based on the 4 Is of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership traits, some that interpreters already show within their work, can surface vocabulary to be applied to our professional role. Again, it starts with having discussions with Deaf individuals. This can be done locally, in your own area, but this involvement also can be done on a national level. RID’s Deaf Caucus will have a national forum this year. We can sit in and learn from the experiences that will be shared and then begin forward momentum, together.

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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.

20 Enlightened Replies

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- 3. [Perception Conflicts: The Role of Sign Language Interpreters in Court | Street Leverage](#) | July 29, 2014



KEVIN
[September 17, 2013 at 9:14 AM](#)

Dave,
 Thank you for your very logical presentation. Living with someone who is Deaf and having access to the community, I get a very different perspective on social norms and the community’s concept of justice. Consulting them and getting their perspective is how we understand and support our consumer(s). Helping them to understand the hearing world’s worldview (judgment aside) is also important for my Deaf clients to know so that they can “get into their headspace.” And, I try to facilitate the Deaf person having that kind of discussion with the hearing client, when possible. All three of our

realities are not the same and it is an important aspect of our work.

REPLY



DAVE COYNE

September 17, 2013 at 10:41 AM

Hi, Kevin,

You are more in between these world-views than perhaps many interpreters! Thank you for contributing to this discussion. I also agree that, indeed, many people get conflicting arguments regarding social norms with those involved with our work and create purpose that lies in what Marshall and Oliva (2010) refer to in their book Leadership for Social Justice: Making Revolutions in Education as "...improving the lives of all individuals involved, and then [leaders] can function as 'bridge people' in the fullest sense" (p. 121). Hopefully we may further a social justice lens by first seeking and attaining agreement/support of interpreters' behaviors by those who are subject to injustices rather than aligning with the dominating class/majority.

REPLY



ANN BOYD

September 17, 2013 at 10:31 AM

Using the term Social Justice makes this idea of leadership – listening etc. Very difficult to grasp because of the intrusion of the more general and political meaning. It appears you are trying to re-frame the bi-cultural/bilingual model back to the advocacy model of the past with this work.

The quote "Be the change you want to see" has a lot of impact, but using your vocabulary of social justice it doesn't seem to come to much. Listen more and adapt to you clients' needs is pretty basic. Be politically active and aware – fine. It's that pesky term "social justice" that is so nebulous and (for me) political that isn't working. Do you want us to go back to the advocacy model again?

REPLY



DAVE COYNE

September 17, 2013 at 11:23 AM

Hi Ann, Thanks for your interest and comments. Personally, I am not a fan of the term bilingual/bicultural because it lends to interpretation that the two terms can be separated. If one would humor the possibility that they could, then perhaps we have many bi-lingual/mono-cultural interpreters, favoring the dominating culture within situations (this may happen regardless simply by our own ideologies, living as hearing people). But I digress, in regards to past interpreting models; my caveat is that interpreters may find themselves changing between them within the assignments – meaning they are not the model, but their behaviors mirror traits within those labels, e.g., advancing, helping, ally, etc. I like to think that interpreters are aiming to meet participants' needs and wants (Deaf and hearing) within any model. However, disconnects between interpreters and Deaf community members still exist. A concept of social justice (and I agree, not an easy one to define within a 20 minute discussion) that is based on experiences of others can begin with daily achievable acts, e.g., truly listening and adapting our professional behaviors (that may appear basic to some) may need to be revisited. I believe interpreters'

behaviors are still a concern to those working with interpreters. Without these first steps, interpreters may continue to be unaware of participant identified issues/defects within the status quo. This lens may also prompt for stakeholders to define and guide the future development of interpreters.

[REPLY](#)



EVE DICKER EISEMAN
September 17, 2013 at 12:04 PM

I am very familiar with this concept. I had a good friend who was an assistant DA and brought it into the school system where it worked extremely well with teenagers. It makes a lot of sense to me

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE
September 17, 2013 at 2:34 PM

Hi Eve, Thank you for leaving a comment. I am not surprised that you had, and may share, similar experiences regarding these concepts within school systems. Many research efforts within school contexts have deemed the role of transformational leadership to do extremely well regarding systematic change (including relationships with those involved). As our field calls for greater involvement with stakeholders – specifically with Deaf community members – in decision-making processes and in the process of defining what is to be expected of interpreters, transformational leadership may offer such needed interactive approach to our work. Further inquiries of interpreters applying transformational leadership in their professional roles are definitely worth pursuing.

[REPLY](#)



DOUG BOWEN-BAILEY
September 19, 2013 at 8:34 AM

Thanks for the thoughtful application of social justice theory (and the experience of working for it) to the interpreting field. One strand of this that I have been thinking about is how to assist interpreters (and myself) in becoming more effective in analyzing the power dynamics of a given settings. In your presentation, you mentioned discussion of “control” and your perspective that this is unhelpful.

To me, thinking about being a part of empowerment toward social justice requires us to have a good sense of the larger picture of how power is currently distributed. What thoughts do you have on the role of power dynamics have in impacting the work of interpreters? What should we be considering as practitioners in assessing our own power – as well as the relative power of the others present in the interaction?

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE
September 19, 2013 at 10:35 AM

Doug, hello and thanks for taking the time to contribute on such an

important topic: power dynamics. I agree that how any proposed change in our field unfolds is still yet to be decided. I continually struggle with how to navigate situations surrounding the term power (and even the term leadership) because both hold connotations of being one-sided actions, bilateral agreements – those who have it, those who wield from it, those who seek it – and constant comparison to others. Redefining such traditional thought around these concepts is much needed in the field, and is a part of my work and many others working within social justice efforts. This is why I work with a specific type of leadership that aims toward working with behaviors that prompt for multilateral agreements, mutually-agreed upon behaviors, and proactive attempts toward involving others in the decision-making process.

I too believe that the larger picture is important (it's the fourth I in transformational leadership traits: idealized influence), it is very hard to move forward without an end in mind and without behaviors to get you to that end. I am learning that interpreters may begin to learn what kind of power is currently in play within situations and which are of concern to those experiencing injustices by establishing practices of inquiry and taking ownership of their actions, all with the support of those working with interpreters (Deaf and hearing, all stockholders, this is vital). The reality is that interpreters do influence those working with them and aiming to support the needs and wants of others can be further explored. This is indeed a social justice issue because the alternative may pause or increase barriers in other groups' forward movement for equality, and I am, like many are, alarmed that any professional would halt movement toward equality, but it happens by some that are aware and by some that are unaware of such behaviors. So, collaborative efforts won't work until traditional approaches are re-examined.

This leads me to believe that the role of power dynamics is finally coming to the surface more so now than ever before in our field. Interpreters work within highly interacting groups (e.g., interpreters plus Deaf and hearing individuals) and interpreters literally rely on relationships (e.g., with interpreting team members, plus Deaf and hearing individuals) to be able to provide quality service to others (Deaf and hearing). When you have relationships though, you inherently will have power dynamics. The role of power dynamics impacts the work of interpreters because how one acknowledges it and navigates it will prompt their behavior; that is something we can change: our professional behaviors. I believe this process begins to show interpreters' influence in supporting the needs and wants of others, and this process starts with taking ownership of their behaviors and aligning them with behaviors supported by the communities we serve.

[REPLY](#)



GINA OLIVA
[September 19, 2013 at 5:40 PM](#)

I recently had an experience in an emergency room. I fell off my bicycle avoiding what would have been an extremely disastrous collision with an automobile. Long story short, several things happened that I realized days later. One, the local police never took a statement from me and did not attempt to contact me to get my statement (I ended up going to the police station on my own accord to give it). Secondly, the ER Xray technician xrayed the wrong part of my hip. I fell on my sacrum, a little to the left side of the sacrum. They took xrays of my right hip.

Now.. I am ok (I was very lucky!!) And I did have an interpreter at the hospital, an interpreter I requested, like, and respect. But somehow, either I was not asked the right questions, or my answers were ignored or disregarded.

What comes to mind is that an interpreter in a medical situation or legal situation especially, can ask herself .. If this patient/consumer were hearing, would this (whatever) be happening? How is what is happening an indicator of unequal power? Interpreters should be schooled in some creative, transformational way to deal with such – not just in a case by case situation but in an overall sense that would influence the expectation hearing

individuals have for encounters with DHH people that are mediated by interpreters.

Hope this makes sense!! Thanks for provoking some important thinking, Dave!!

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
September 19, 2013 at 7:32 PM

Gina – I am glad you are now okay and it wasn't worse! Thank you for contributing. I think I understand and agree with you. You bring up several important points in your message. To me, the interpreter's bigger obligation, beyond facilitating communication, is the responsibility that comes with being a part of interactions with the medical team and the DHH patient. This makes their presence very unique and your suggested questions are perfect examples that should guide interpreters' work. Perhaps over time, with the input of Deaf and hearing participants, explicit expectations may come about pertaining to the role of interpreters and how these expectations can be carried out in a professional manner. I very much agree with your comments about interpreter education: how interpreters behave, what they should address, and most importantly, how they should address it should most definitely be discussed, practiced, and ready to implement prior to it actually occurring. Thanks for sharing your experience!

REPLY



ANONYMOUS
October 3, 2013 at 1:14 PM

Why is it the responsibility of the interpreter to make sure that the correct body part is X-rayed for the patient? The patient is receiving the service from the technician and in the position to question him/her, state concerns, as well as view the image before leaving the x-ray room. Whatever the communication was between the two parties, interpreted clearly by the interpreter left the responsibility on them, the patient and the technician. Unless what you are actually saying is that the interpreter should have assumed a more assertive role, during the interpreting process or after, by making statements or voicing concerns that the two parties did not consider?

It is good that everything worked out well in this situation. No disrespect to Ms. Olivia or you is intended by these questions.

REPLY



DAVE COYNE
October 9, 2013 at 8:13 AM

Hi there, Thanks for bringing up the topic of responsibility surrounding the role of interpreters within medical settings. No disrespect taken and thank you for contributing to this conversation – it is a springboard for many other considerations. Many conversations and beliefs about this topic are still on the table regarding interpreters' involvement within various situations. I believe this topic has a significant place within a social justice model because here, just like many other locations, interpreters face the decision of taking action outside of traditional expectations (i.e., being

'neutral' or 'invisible'). I do not believe anyone in this discussion is referencing that it is the interpreter's responsibility of ensuring the correct body part is x-rayed for the patient. But we may still learn from this situation by making hypotheticals based on its context, e.g., the interpreter became aware of the mistake during the assignment or perhaps everyone involved was truly unaware that the wrong hip was x-rayed.

The latter would be a serious unfortunate event and because nobody was aware, the interpreter could not have been expected to intervene. However, the former consideration offers much to be discussed. First of all, interpreters do have an ethical obligation within medical situations to maintain transparency while upholding the health and well-being (social, emotional and physical) of patients, as well as not withholding information that will result in harm to the patient. This situation would cause reason for the interpreter to speak out (handled in the utmost care and respect for those involved).

The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care offers some stellar resources regarding interpreters in health care (I will add their website to the bottom of this post). In their National Code of Ethics for Interpreters in Health Care (July, 2004) discusses the dilemma we face.

"...interpreters have the ethical obligation – like any other professional in the same situation – to take action and advocate on behalf of the wronged individual or individuals. Essentially, they have an obligation to “bear witness,” that is, to bring forth evidence of the wrongdoing to the appropriate parties in order to redress the wrong that has been done.

Assuming an advocacy stance, however, should never be taken lightly. Interpreters should undertake this action only after careful and thoughtful analysis of the situation. In coming to this decision – to advocate or not – they may want to seek the advice of supervisors and colleagues in the field, remembering, however, to preserve the anonymity of the parties involved when seeking such advice. In some cases, they may want to consult an ethicist. In every case, they need to find out what the appropriate mechanisms and protocols are for such action in the institution in which they are interpreting and follow them. In every case, interpreters should conduct themselves in ways that respect the privacy and rights of the parties involved” (p.20).

<http://www.ncihc.org/ethics-and-standards-of-practice>

REPLY



MERA KELLEY-YURDIN
September 24, 2013 at 12:41 AM

Hi Dave-

I am wondering if you have any thoughts about talking about privilege as a person with privileges yourself? I certainly think it's important for people with privilege to work to be allies with marginalized groups when appropriate, and to help spread education to other people with privilege(s). I am just wondering about your thoughts on that. I am also curious about your sign choice. I have seen Deaf social justice workers and advocates using the sign for “benefit” and/or “to take advantage of” (both signs) and moving away from this one. What were your choices around using that sign?

Lastly, I would also love to see way more intersections involved here than only Deaf and hearing. We interpret for people with tons more identities

than “just” Deaf, for lack of a better way to describe it. I feel like it’s too much to maybe type all out here, I just think that sometimes we (as white people, myself included in that) forget that there are multiple intersectionalities in almost every situation we encounter.

Thanks!

[REPLY](#)



DAVE COYNE

September 24, 2013 at 10:47 AM

Hi Mera, Thank you for contributing such important topics; I will do my best to address them! Indeed, interpreters should be taught about the myriad privileges found within interpreting spaces (and yes, also the multiple intersectionalities that many people hold) – a social justice lens recognizes and is modified by these findings. Interpreters should seek to evaluate their own identification and analysis of these privileges to expose the power relations that may be used to keep the upper hand in situations. My initial thoughts on this topic surround the gaps identified by Deaf individuals concerning the education of interpreters and the need to further shift programs’ emphasis from psycholinguistic processing skills to navigating co-constructed social interactions, which many programs are taking actions to do, but this topic still needs much more attention.

This leads me to think of potential results from increased co-constructed social interactions: more opportunities to acquire shared values, involvement of coalitions, actively seeking out networking possibilities, and aiming to gain mutual support by stakeholders. These opportunities come with the power of increasing the size of groups in social movements (and those involved can discuss ideas of interpreters’ place/role in these movements), which results in the accumulation of social capital (respecting groups’ values, wants, and needs) and, eventually, political power (re-creating how things are done). There’s power in numbers!

The continued use of a social justice lens can promote discussions surrounding the topic within educational opportunities, interactions, and daily conversations (just to name a few). This discussion process adds to dynamic relationships and even interpretations, by carefully monitoring interpreting practices with Deaf individuals – toward social justice with, not for, Deaf community members.

Sign choices: I have seen many signs for concepts regarding social justice (e.g., power, empower, cultural capital, benefits, and even social justice itself) and I use signs that I have seen Deaf community members use surrounding these topics (it varies between individuals and groups though). I am continually changing and learning, as a hearing person – from Deaf community members – adapting my language use to best express my thoughts/understandings – especially as someone who has more auditory/English understandings of the world than visual/ASL. I am even aware of some preferred sign choices since this presentation, such as to fingerspell empower rather than use the sign that comes from the body (arm) and moves outward. I am thrilled that an increased number of conversations are emerging in and outside of the interpreting field, specifically surrounding social justice concepts/signs that may best convey these types of topics, determined by Deaf community members, that may soon surface and emerge into all types of daily discussions.

Could you share sign choices you have seen for “benefit” and “take advantage of”? So much to learn!

[REPLY](#)



TRACEY

December 12, 2013 at 5:53 AM

Hi Dave,

I have come across you while researching on-line for my Essay on Ethical Decisions...I have to refer to Interpreting theory models among other things. I am currently on my Interpreters course and the recent 2 day block was on psychology/ethics/roles etc. I struggle with some opinions on the role of an Interpreter possibly coming from a large Deaf family where the hearing members (including myself) were a minority. I saw (and personally felt) huge marginalization and oppression as you mention. I feel, like you that we should see things through a social justice lens and be leaders – sympathetically in both our empathy and in our actions, taking into account the social environment we may be in at the time. I will include this opinion in my essay but what is a pity is I fear that I will be seen as blurring boundaries/over-using the Helper Model/mis-using my role as an Interpreter. There is a real difference of opinion I have discovered. I see it as a subtle almost un-noticeable action...Not some sort of obvious 'right on' campaign. I have always in my professional field been an 'ally' or 'subtle leader' in situations. However strong and capable a Deaf person is, they have a forced vulnerability that I see I can potentially eradicate with some subtle (I keep using that word!!) careful input. This means you stand tall for the Deaf person you are representing without dis-empowering them...You are doing it 'on their behalf' because they do not have the voice. This is why, I completely, wholeheartedly agree that the Interpreter/Deaf person's relationship is of utmost importance and I agree we have a responsibility to lead appropriately and respectfully. Thank you for making my day!

[REPLY](#)


DAVE COYNE

December 12, 2013 at 10:06 AM

Hi Tracey,

Thanks for taking the time to share your story and support. I too feel it is time to do something about those feelings we, as interpreters, have surrounding marginalization and oppression (plus the other types of oppressive mechanisms). You are right, others who view it as blurring boundaries can easily dismiss a social justice lens; it challenges our traditional approaches to interpreters' work and challenges traditional professional boundaries. This can be down right terrifying for some. I never liked the 'right on' campaign (clever title for those types of remarks by the way, thank you for that) because it often doesn't actively involve the interpreter past uttering the words themselves. It makes me think (and worry) that those who are not involved in our communities may subscribe to those 'right on' type approaches, which talks the talk but does not model actual behaviors that support further movement towards liberation (which I believe professionals working with the Deaf community should model). What the 'right on' approach does is acknowledges others' efforts but ultimately perpetuates the status quo. I feel interpreters can wear our support on our sleeves – figuratively of course because Deaf community members can already identify the different types of interpreters out there (the transactional versus transformational types) – signing and non-signing groups of people need to see more true collaborative relationships daily to be able to infuse society with support, acceptance, and seeking of differing world-views and lives of Deaf community members.

These Deaf lives are our children, family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. A social justice lens will stray from a dangerous path of thoughts and behaviors surrounding "this group of Deaf people, over there, far from our experiences, that should have equal rights of course, but they are probably well on their way to get their recognition, themselves; I support you, but you are on your own."

Some feel that a social justice lens is too much to tackle on the day-to-day as well as concerns of interpreters easily slipping into superman (superpeople) alter egos to save those who suffer. But again, I don't see a need to focus on extreme possibilities where so much positive progress and forward movement toward liberation can happen within the margins of the extremes of not doing anything and putting on the red cape. A social justice model can work toward explaining, discovering, and exploring how to professionally assist, guide, and model behaviors of professional interpreters while they navigate the most challenging relationships on earth, those relationships between majority and minority members. This lens can create a new sense of solidarity with everyone interpreters work with.

I don't know you (but I do hope our paths cross one day), but I am hopeful for change within our field because of colleagues like you. I am confident that a social justice lens can rebuild bridges between interpreters and Deaf community members and allow for the field of interpreters to confidently stand beside the Deaf community. Thanks for participating in this discussion. -Dave

REPLY



TRACEY PARFITT
 December 13, 2013 at 3:33 AM

Hi Dave,

I have forwarded your words to Native signer friends of mine and will continue to spread your empowering stance to the teachers and Interpreters in London. I love your choice of words with 'I support you but you are on your own'...I squirm when I hear that sort of thing. We have a responsibility to stand for that person and be 'with' them. I agree with all you say. Wearing the support, figuratively on our sleeves is so right. I feel I wear it every day..It's always there. As for your clever referral to 'Superman' - This is what some Interpreters think when we talk of Leadership and talk of making more of the 'relationship' side of things. It is so wrong, the psychology assumed is wrong. Re-building bridges is definitely necessary. Statistics on Mental Health within the Deaf community is still far to high in relation to hearing Mental Health. There is not enough being done. Anyway...I could go on for hours!! Please feel free to get in touch if you ever need any support or contacts in the UK.
 Tracey.

REPLY

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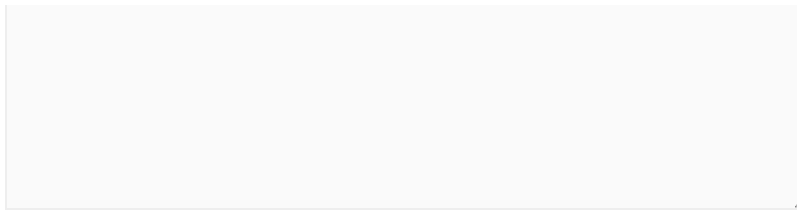
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