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IRIS — Improving Rural Interpreter Skills

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Module 7: Power and Privilege in Interpreting

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Overview: Participants in this module will explore topics related to how systems enable power, privilege, and oppression in the sign language interpreting profession.

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

Upon completion of this module participants will be able to:

1. Define the following concepts: system, power, privilege, and oppression.
2. Distinguish between equality and equity.
3. Describe how conversations about power and privilege are relevant to the sign language interpreting profession.
4. Summarize how interpreting models are problematic for the sign language interpreting profession.

Pre-Test, Part I

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this pre-test

Answer the following four questions:

1. How does understanding systems of power and privilege apply to your work as an interpreter?

2. What is the implication of an interpreter-centric view of the work of an interpreter?
   A. An interpreter-centric view of our work limits our access to important strategies for improved decision-making and job satisfaction.
   B. An interpreter-centric view of our work promotes greater regard for our colleagues and enhances the team interpreting process.
   C. An interpreter-centric view of our work excludes the perspective of consumers and contributes to a lack of trust and misunderstanding.

3. What is an institutional or system barrier?

A.   An intentionally established rule or practice that repeatedly and regularly puts a specific group of people with a common feature or trait at a disadvantage versus others.

B.   An unintentionally established rule or practice that repeatedly and regularly puts a specific group of people with a common feature or trait at a disadvantage versus others.

C.   An illegally established rule or practice that repeatedly and regularly puts a specific group of people with a common feature or trait at a disadvantage versus others.

4. In analyzing a system, the processes account for which of the following?

A.   Processes are the framework—and hierarchy—within a system and how it arranges or organizes its functions, its lines of authority, and communication flow.

B.   Processes are the recognized and approved procedures, policies, practices and acts that allow the people within the system to move forward in implementing the intention of the system.

C.   Processes allow us to identify and interpret patterns and events within systems, to gain appreciation for the interrelatedness of the various parts, and to better appreciate the social conditions that exist.

Extra Support

Trigger Warning

In this module, you will examine and unpack systematic power and privilege and how those are relevant to our work as interpreters. At times, this might be uncomfortable and challenging. However, these discussions impact you; IRIS is here to support you. You can connect with your facilitator(s), mentor, and IRIS leadership. If you are ever in a space where you feel you need to talk to someone other than IRIS staff for personalized and private support, please contact the UNC Counseling Center. They can support you in finding someone to talk to or provide assistance with connecting to local resources.

Introduction

Traditionally the sign language interpreting profession has been dominated by hearing, white, straight women, and this dominance has had repercussions that have impacted both our deaf communities and the interpreting profession. This dominance is slowly shifting as we begin to unpack our power and privileges. This module offers a roadmap for starting the process. Some interpreters have begun this difficult work, however, it is not a process that will end, but rather continue for the rest of our lives as we explore ways to move towards collective liberation for all, namely a society based on mutual understanding and support.

It is important that we analyze interpreting situations to ensure that the communication access we are providing is not causing undue harm to the participants. Again, we understand that these discussions can be difficult and at times traumatizing for the participants. We ask that you keep an open dialogue with your fellow COL members, facilitators, and mentors as we work together through this topic.

We ask that you move through this module with open minds and hearts. Conversations about social justice issues are often difficult and uncomfortable, yet those are sorely needed, not only in our profession but in society as a whole.

What is a System?

Very simply, a system is a collection of parts (or subsystems) integrated to accomplish an overall goal. Systems range from very simple (mechanical system of riding a bike) to very complex (nature).

Examples

A pile of sand is not a system. If one removes a sand particle, you've still got a pile of sand.

A system of people is an organization.

A functioning car is a system. Remove the carburetor and you've no longer got a working car.

Human Systems

For the purposes of the IRIS Project, we are interested in *human systems* represented by organizations that are socio-political in nature.

- *Socio* = of society, serving the interests of society
- *Political* = negotiated standards, often government regulated, relating to social relationships involving authority or power

Implications for interpreters

- Systems thinking allows us to identify and interpret patterns and events in systems, to understand the inter-relatedness of the various parts of the system, and to better appreciate the social conditions that exist and impact our work.

Is a system really "broken"?, Part I

System by Design

Internet disparity in rural areas is real. As rural interpreters, we all know too well the impacts of the digital divide. Inequities in accessing the internet impact our ability to engage in online learning opportunities (for some that includes IRIS), work from home while providing interpreting services remotely, and benefit from 24/7 VRS services via a video phone.

The video Why Many Rural Americans Still Don't Have Reliable Internet by the Wall Street Journal (2020) provides insight into how U.S. governmental systems and broadband policies have fallen short for many rural Americans. The video provides a number of examples of how ordinary citizens have tried to navigate systems only to be met with numerous roadblocks.

Is a system really "broken"?, Part II

When watching this video do your recognize these systems at work?

Larger System	Parts of that System
Federal government	Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policies and employees Federal Bankruptcy Court policies and procedures
Corporate businesses	Frontier Communications contracts and policies
State government	West Virginia Governor's Office policies and employees
Local municipalities	School District COVID policies
Communities	Residents/taxpayers directly impacted by lack of internet Students unable to receive schooling online

Human Systems, Part II

Human systems consist of people, structures, and processes,
that work together to make an organization function as effectively as possible.

Human Systems, Part III

| People	Structures	Process
• Carry out the processes (procedures, practices, and acts)	• The framework, typically hierarchical, within which an organization/system arranges its lines of authority and communications, and allocates rights and duties	• The recognized and approved procedures, policies, practices, and acts that allow the people within the system to move forward in implementing the intention of the system
• Typically well-trained to carry out the processes in accordance with the particular structure in which they work	• Organizational structure determines the manner and extent to which roles, power, and responsibilities are delegated, controlled and coordinated, and how information flows between levels of the system	• As new standards are developed/adopted, processes can change
• Within large systems, people often change. This changing of people has significant implications for the effectiveness of the system		• Changing processes can impact the predictability of some systems

Human Systems, Part IV

Structures may be centralized or decentralized.

Centralized

The decision-making power is concentrated in the top layer of the management and tight control is exercised over departments/divisions
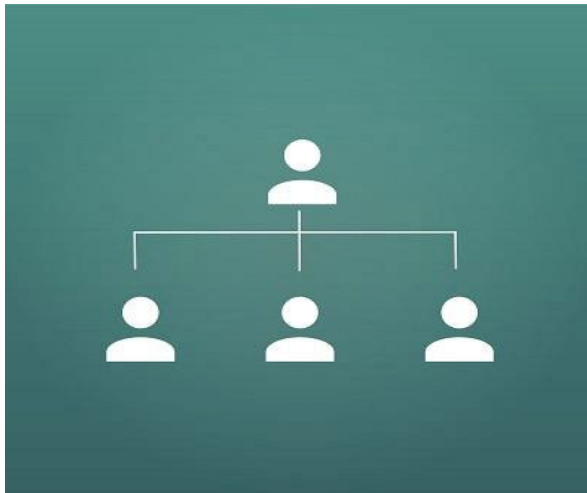
Decentralized

The decision-making power is distributed, and departments/divisions/workers have varying degrees of autonomy

© Jacob Morgan *(thefutureorganization.com)*
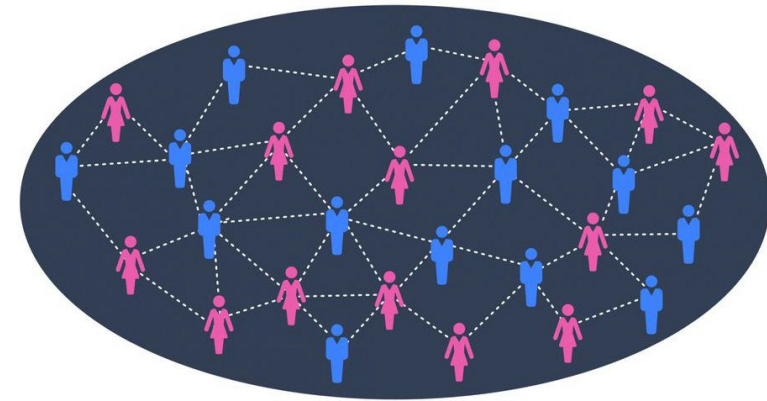
Interpreters in the System

Social Construction

Our role as interpreters is socially constructed because it is embedded in human interactions. Our ability to exercise decision latitude is relational - it is context-bound and dependent on how we "fit" both conceptually and pragmatically into the system.
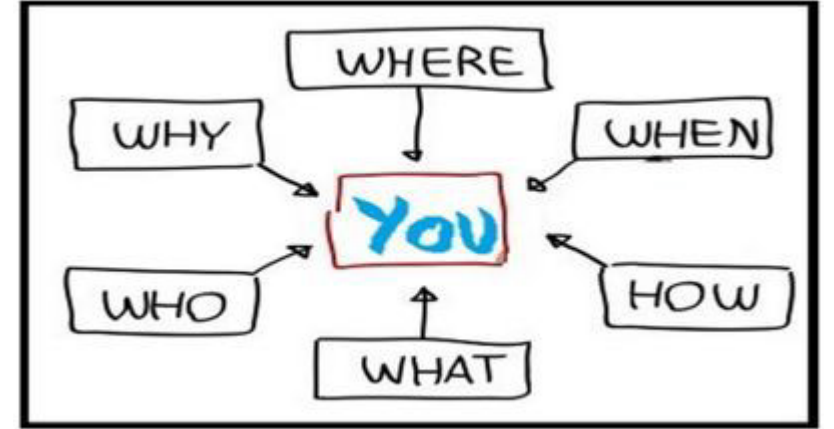
Contextual factors that impact decision latitude include:

- Where are you working?
- How often do you work there? (Do you have established relationships with other players in the system or not?)
- Are you meeting the deaf person for the first time? (How much familiarity/trust/etc. between you and the deaf client?)
- Are you staff or freelance? (What can/can't you do given your role?)
- Is it a small office, or a big hospital? Is it community work or VRS? (Are there policies you must follow, or do you follow your own or the general profession's policies?)
- Is it a one-time appointment like a doctor's appointment or are you following a Ph.D. candidate through their doctoral program?

**Example of autonomy based on context in two different systems…**

- Video Relay Service (VRS)
  - The VRS system limits the autonomy of the interpreter due in large part to FCC regulation that governs the system.

- Courts
  - The court system, conversely, views the interpreter as an officer-of-the-court, with a primary duty to function in the best interest of the system. With this duty comes a much higher degree of autonomy to let the court know about boundaries, when things are working, when they are not, and what is required to make them work.

System Principles

- The system's overall behavior depends on its entire structure

- A circular relationship exists between the overall system and its parts.

There are often circular relationships or patterns that exist within a system that makes it run, or make the different parts have effects on each other. There is interrelatedness and interdependence among the different system parts. In our work as interpreters, this happens all the time.
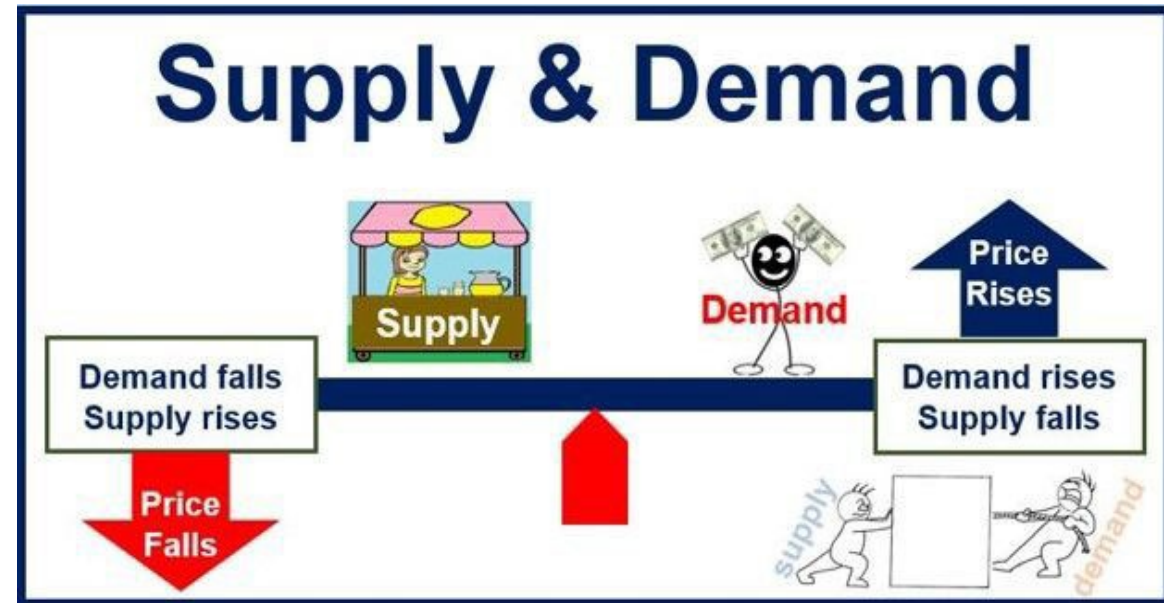
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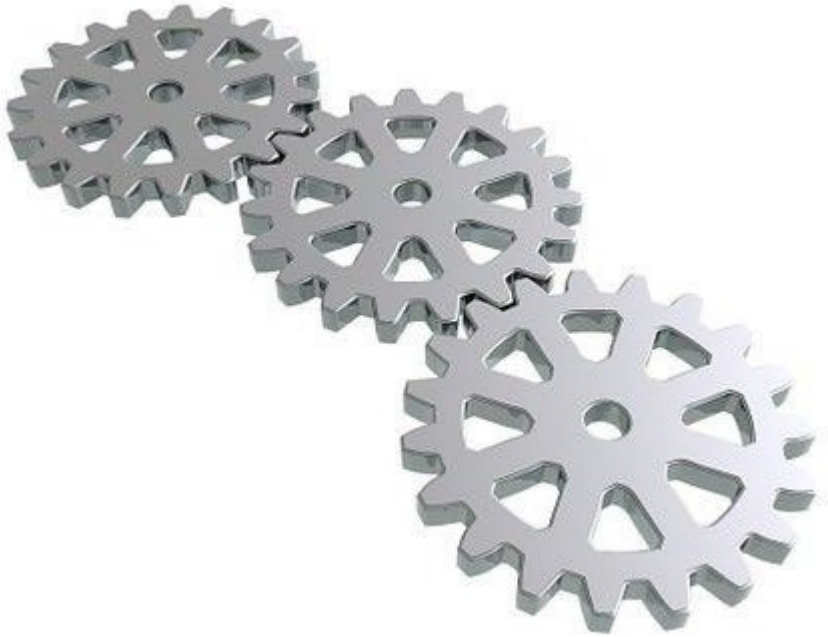
The Circular Nature of Systems

Think of supply and demand in our economic system and how that affects our work:

- When the supply of interpreters is small (e.g. legal interpreters), and the demand is high (true for legal interpreters), then the interpreter can stipulate a higher fee and entities are more willing to pay for things like travel time compensation, mileage, hotel, etc.

- When the supply is high and the demand is lower, that will bring down the hourly rates of pay, eliminate or limit mileage reimbursement, etc.

Supply & Demand

Supply

Demand

Price Rises

Demand falls
Supply rises

Demand rises
Supply falls

Price Falls

supply   demand

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Watch the [New Hampshire Governor COVID-19 Briefing from June 5, 2020](#) (*up to* minute 6:41) and respond to the following questions below to explore your understanding of systems. You can refer back to the previous example of the unreliable rural internet for guidance. While reviewing the video please attend to the context of the scenario and how systems knowledge could impact the interpretation.

Original post directions:

1. What systems are involved in this scenario?
2. What possible power imbalances are inherent in these systems?
3. What else do you notice about the people, structures, and processes that might impact the interpretation decisions in this scenario?

Response post directions:
Review and respond to another participants' postings by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.
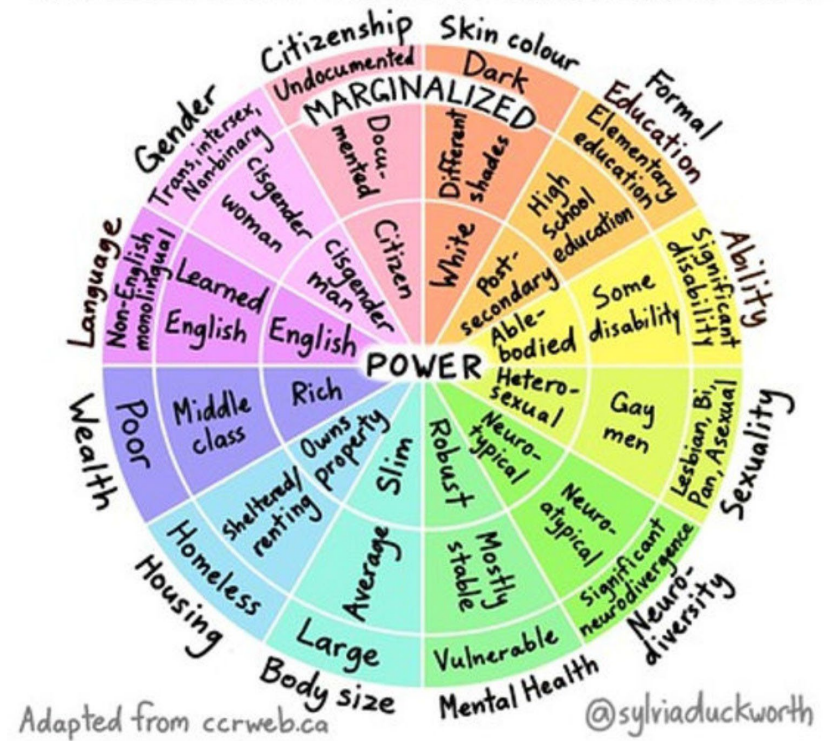
Why does this matter?

As an interpreter, it is important to understand systems, their nature, and our role/place within them. We need to understand the implications of our actions within a particular situation as well as the effects our actions might have on the larger system.

In these next few pages, we will explore further nuances inherent within systems and how we, as interpreters, operate within them.

What is Power?

- As we learned previously human systems are constructed of people, structures and processes.

- Human systems have inherent power *between* people, structures and processes.

- Understanding how power works can be nuanced. View this video on How to understand power by Eric Liu to gain a better understanding of how power operates in our daily lives.

WHEEL OF POWER/PRIVILEGE

Adapted from ccrweb.ca   @sylviaduckworth

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- Privilege is defined as the unearned power that is afforded to some but not others based on status rather than earned merit; such power may come in the form of rights, benefits, social comfort, opportunities, or the ability to define what is normative or valued (Bailey, 1998; Johnson, 2018; McIntosh, 1989).

- Privilege arises in relation to systems of oppression.

- A person has privilege not because they desire to have privilege or promote inequity but because they exist within a system where biased values, attitudes, and behaviors have become integrated and normalized (APA, 2021).

- View the What is Privilege? video to further enhance your understanding of how privilege impacts all of us.

What is Privilege?, Part II

View the following two videos before moving forward:

1. Carla García-Fernández on Unpacking Privilege

2. Privilege is power. How you can use it to do some good!

Thinking About Privilege

These checklists below allow you to think about and understand your positionality and levels of privilege. The resources listed are not exhaustive, however, they strive to reveal the aspects of our lives and identities that we don't need to think about and how they affect our daily experiences within the United States.

Before going further please **choose one** of the resources below that most interests you to review. You will refer to that review for a future assignment in this module.

- Able-Bodied Privilege Checklist The Invisible Crutch (Riolriri, 2009)
- Christian Privilege Checklist 33 Examples of Christian Privilege (Arizona State University, n.d.)
- Cisgender Privilege Checklist 30+ Examples of Cisgender Privileges (Killermann, n.d.)
- Citizenship Privilege Checklist 30+ Examples of US Citizenship Privilege (University of Michigan, n.d.)
- Class Privilege Checklist 30+ Examples of Middle-to-Upper Class Privileges (Killerman, n.d.)
- Hearing Privilege Checklist Hearing Privilege Is One Many People Take for Granted (Kohli, 2016)
- Linguistic Privilege Checklist Language (The Privilege Project, n.d)
- Male Privilege Checklist 160+ Examples of Male Privilege in All Areas of Life (Johnson, 2016)
- Straight Privilege Checklist 30+ Examples of Heterosexual (Straight) Privileges (Killermann, n.d.)
- Sight Privilege Checklist Sight Privilege and You (Butler, 2014)
- Thin Privilege Checklist 22 Examples of Thin Privilege (Ridgway, 2012)

Individuals often experience some feelings of confusion and discomfort when they start to learn that the values they had previously been taught as truth are in fact from systems of ideals. Unpacking one's privilege can produce a flood of emotions, including anger, guilt, shame, and sadness.

These feelings can lead to us becoming defensive or saying things we do not mean during collegial conversations. Some of these types of responses are outlined below.

Privilege Unpacked, Part II

Common responses to learning about privilege	What these responses mean
"I don't feel privileged, my life is hard too!"	This is an example of minimizing or denying privilege. We often shift the focus as a means of ignoring our privilege.
"I treat everyone the same!"	This type of response shifts the focus away from introspection and allows us to ignore systemic oppression and privilege.
"We need to move on! If we would just stop talking about it, it wouldn't be such a big problem!"	This response further perpetuates harm as systemic inequalities exist and ignoring them will not make them go away.
"I am just one person, I can't change anything!"	Seeing oneself as incapable of creating change is a means of excusing oneself from accepting any responsibility. Individuals often think social inequalities are too large to tackle, and thus rationalize their lack of action.

(Ferber & Samuels, 2010)

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Privileged Mind (2022) by Jeremy Quiroga illustrates the *impact* of the common responses outlined above.

Privilege Unpacked, Part IV

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After viewing the impacts of a *Privileged Mind* on the previous slide, consider intent versus impact.

View this video here by Rosa Lee Timm (2020) who reminds us to:

1. Listen
2. Be accountable
3. Take action

Intent vs Impact

GoReact Discussion: Exploring Privileges

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original post directions:

After reviewing the previous resources, post on GoReact addressing the following questions:
- What new understandings did you gain from those resources?
- What did you learn about your own privileges?

Response post directions:

Review and respond to at least two other participants' postings by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Equality and Equity

- Equality is defined as providing resources to ensure everyone has the means to achieve their fullest potential (S. Gibbs & N. Sheneman, personal communication October 7, 2023).

- Equity is an ongoing process of assessing needs, correcting historical inequities, and creating conditions for optimal outcomes by members of all social identity groups (APA, 2021).

How is equality and equity different?

What is oppression?

- Oppression occurs when one group has more access to power and privilege than another group, and when that power and privilege are used to dominate the other to maintain the status quo (S. Gibbs & N. Sheneman, personal communication October 7, 2023).

- Thus, oppression is both a state and a process, with the state of oppression being unequal group access to power and privilege, and the process of oppression being the ways in which that inequality is maintained (APA, 2021).

- The Four I's of Oppression with Luna Malbroux outlines the forms of oppression that arise when working with multicultural communities.
    1. Ideological
    2. Interpersonal
    3. Institutional
    4. Internalized

Exploring Oppression

Review the following resource

Image: © NMAAHC. Data Source: Christopher Hughbanks, Oregon State University

What is an ally?

- An ally or allies are people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society's patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns.
- Being an ally is more than being sympathetic and feeling bad for those who experience discrimination.
- An ally is willing to act with, and for, others in pursuit of ending oppression and creating equality. Real allies are willing to step out of their comfort zones.
- Those who decide to undertake the ally role must recognize and understand the power and privileges that one receives, accepts, and experiences and they use that position to act for justice (APA, 2021).

What is Allyship?

LEAN IN

like privately recommending a colleague with a traditionally marginalized identity for a promotion.

Are interpreters allies or oppressors?

In recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in discussions about whether interpreters are allies or oppressors (or both). Some of those discussions are highlighted in various resources below.

Of the five resources shared here, _choose two_ to focus on for the next assignment.

- The Interpreter: Machine, Advocate or Ally? (Baker-Shenk, 2014)
- Sign Language Interpreters and the Quest for a Deaf Heart (Colonomos, 2013)
- Interpreter power, privilege and oppression (CATIE Center, 2018)
- The Field of Sign Language Interpreting Needs an Accomplice Not an Ally (Street Leverage, 2021)
- Toxic Ableism Among Interpreters: Impeding deaf people's linguistic rights through pathological posturing (Robinson, Sheneman & Henner, 2020) & ASL Summary (Robinson, 2022)

Once you have reviewed the two resources, consider the question again, "Are interpreters allies or oppressors (or both)?"

The problem with interpreting service models

The interpreting field has seen various interpreting models over the years. It is important for us to consider the potential pitfalls of adhering to any particular model. As we learned from Llewellyn-Jones and Lee's Role-Space framework in Module 5, we should not approach each interpreting interaction exactly the same way. Our interpretation shifts based on the needs of each particular situation, especially considering the ways that we might best align with each participant and how we can monitor the communication process.

Watch Interpreting Models by Dr. Naomi Sheneman (CATIE Center) to further unpack your thinking about historical approaches to interpreting including the helper, machine, communication facilitator, bilingual/bicultural and ally models.

GoReact Discussion: Interpreters- allies or oppressors

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original post directions:

Based on your review of the various resources included in this module, create an original post addressing the following questions:

- What are your key takeaways from those resources?
- What questions do you still have about those resources that you want your COL to address?
- What are your thoughts about whether interpreters are allies or oppressors?
- What are your thoughts now regarding interpreting service models?
- How might you as an interpreter mitigate the impact of power dynamics on deaf consumers?
- What different choices would you make going forward?

Response post directions:

Review and respond to at least two other participants by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Synchronous Session: Unpacking Together

This module **requires your attendance** at a synchronous session. Your facilitator(s) will share the exact details of the date and time of this session.

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Post-Test, Part I

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this post-test

Answer the following four questions:

1. How does understanding systems of power and privilege apply to your work as an interpreter?

2. What is the implication of an interpreter-centric view of the work of an interpreter?
   A.   An interpreter-centric view of our work limits our access to important strategies for improved decision-making and job satisfaction.
   B.   An interpreter-centric view of our work promotes greater regard for our colleagues and enhances the team interpreting process.
   C.   An interpreter-centric view of our work excludes the perspective of consumers and contributes to a lack of trust and misunderstanding.

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A. Processes are the framework—and hierarchy—within a system and how it arranges or organizes its functions, its lines of authority, and communication flow.

B. Processes are the recognized and approved procedures, policies, practices and acts that allow the people within the system to move forward in implementing the intention of the system.

C. Processes allow us to identify and interpret patterns and events within systems, to gain appreciation for the interrelatedness of the various parts, and to better appreciate the social conditions that exist.

Correct responses: 1. Answers will vary, 2.A, 3.A, 4.B

Additional Resources

National Association of the Deaf *Real Talk, Good Action* webinar series:

- [The Healing Process Part I](#) (January 27, 2022)

- [Black Deaf Excellence](#) (February 24, 2022)

- [The Healing Process Part II](#) (March 24, 2022)

- [The Other Side](#) (April 21, 2022)

- [Interrupting and Dismantling the Institutional Racism](#) (June 9, 2022)

- [Intersecting LGBTQIA2S+ Identities and Anti-Racism Work](#) (June 16, 2022)

- [What is Invisible Racism?](#) (August 18, 2022)

- [Indigenous Deaf Community](#) (November 17, 2022)

- [Black Deaf Perspectives](#) (February 23, 2023)

- [Deaf Women's Journey: Obstacles and Successes](#) (April 27, 2023)

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