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Toward the Intentional Development of Interpreter Specialization: An Examination of Two Case Studies

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Abstract

A notable event in the professionalization of ASL-English interpreting is the development of specializations—the narrowing of practice based on specific settings, populations, or functions. At present, interpreting specialization occurs through either *de facto* (self-designation) or *de jure* (specific training or credentialing) processes. This article addresses the implications of both approaches by examining the history of two specialties existing in distinct work settings—educational (K-12) and legal interpreting. Although these settings are different on multiple levels, it is argued that a variety of factors—the influence of legislative mandates, the status of the profession-at-large, and the practitioner's degree of relational autonomy—has shaped the evolution of each specialization and influenced their patterns of practice. Further, this examination provides sound rationale for the establishment of structured mechanisms to guide the intentional development of specializations within signed language interpreting.

Introduction

Specialization is a topic that warrants attention from both interpreter education and the profession-at-large. Among other factors driving specialization, Deaf citizens have heightened opportunities for involvement in American society due to federal legislation guaranteeing linguistic rights and the development of technological advancements. As Deaf individuals access a broader range of societal institutions, the need for interpreters with specialized knowledge has increased as well. In order to meet this demand, generalist practitioners are seeking specialized training in order to work effectively within specialized venues.

When considering the progression of specialization within signed language interpreting, several questions arise. How do specializations generally emerge within a profession? What internal and external factors play a role in their development? How does autonomous decision-making—a characteristic of professions—manifest in interpreter specialization? What are the social conditions that contribute to—or restrict—the effective decision-making of practitioners? What are the outcomes of intentional—and unintentional—development of specialization in interpreting? What are potential unintended consequences that may occur as specializations develop?

These questions are addressed by first providing a background on specialization as a general phenomenon within professions, followed by examples of *de facto* and *de jure* approaches to specialization within ASL-English interpreting. Two case studies of interpreter specialization are compared, particularly in terms of patterns of practice and autonomous decision-making. Further, the potential unintended consequences of developing specializations in signed language interpreting are considered. Finally, based on existing evidence, the argument is made that the intentional process of forming specializations within interpreting serves the best interests of society, consumers, and practitioners.

The Origin and Nature of Specialization

How do specializations emerge within a profession? Historically, as professions grow in stature, they evolve towards developing areas of specialization within their discipline. *Specialization* is the deliberate narrowing of practice requiring didactic and experiential preparation (Council of Credentialing

Organizations in Professional Psychology, 2008). The goal of this preparation is to provide the basis for competent service delivery with respect to distinctive patterns of practice in essential domains. *Patterns of practice* refer to the unique and reoccurring professional acts of specialists that are based on defined standards of practice and involve a high degree of problem-solving expertise (Kasher, 2005). Distinctive patterns of practice may be exemplified in the knowledge of a specialized system, its unique terminology and discourse features, and its norms of professional protocol. As a result, a *specialist* is viewed as a practitioner who, through advanced training, acquisition of specialized skills, knowledge, and experience, distinguishes him or herself as being uniquely qualified for the demands of the specialized interpreting work.

Typically, specialists narrow practice toward the goal of working exclusively or semi-exclusively in a specific setting, with a specific population, or within a unique function. The assumption is that because professions are ever changing due to new consumers, knowledge, and technologies, specialization offers practitioners the opportunity to gain the highest levels of competence possible in a specific area of practice. At its heart, protection of the public is what specialization is all about (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002).

Developing specialized competence of interpreting practitioners is challenging for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the ongoing concern about the capabilities of interpreters who are trained to hold generalist competence. This concern about generalist competence is evidenced by the lack of readiness of graduates from interpreter education programs to meet the minimum professional standards of certification set by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID) (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004; 2005). Another issue regarding specialized competence is the absence of agreed-upon standards in many of the recognized specialty areas. For example, assessment measures of specialized competence have not been developed by the RID for many areas that require abilities beyond that of a certified generalist interpreter. Despite these pressing issues, specialist practice does exist in ASL-English interpreting and, given market trends, specialization within interpreting is likely to increase.

De Facto versus De Jure Specialization Processes

One means for interpreters to specialize is to do so by *de facto* processes, that is, the self-designation of holding specialized knowledge in certain settings—such as education, health care, and legal venues. Interpreters may also self-identify as specialists in working with certain populations—including deaf-blind individuals or immigrants. Further, interpreters may lay claim to specialization by function, such as interpreting in a video relay context. In this way, the process of self-designation is internally determined rather than being based on any externally established criteria. Ideally, *de facto* specialization will include factors such as concentrated practice in an area, additional training, and/or mentoring in a specific setting or population. Interpreters may declare a specialization via business cards or websites, but official documentation of specialized skills or certifications are not a part of a *de facto* approach to specialization.

In contrast, *de jure* processes of specialization occur by participation in external measures, including the attainment of specific certifications and the successful completion of educational programs. For example, formalized training may be accessed at several universities in the United States with advanced sequences of interpreting study in specific settings such as legal, health care, and public school education. Additionally, standardized specialist certification systems for signed language interpreters are offered by nationally recognized entities, including the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Boys Town National Research Hospital. *De jure* specialization is marked by evidentiary documents, such as college transcripts, certificates of completion, or membership cards showing certifications.

Should individual practitioners receive recognition for their self-designation of specialization? The literature on specialization emphasizes the responsibility of the profession itself to regulate their specialties as a means of recognizing and promoting advanced knowledge and skills; ensuring orderly development of the field (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002; Sandstrom, 2007; Seago, 2006). One critical measure of the status of a professional specialization is an assessment of the professional autonomy that is afforded, and exercised by, its practitioners. Professional autonomy refers to

the degree to which individuals—in this case interpreters—have genuine opportunities for informed and transparent decision-making while performing their work.

Relational Autonomy as a Paradigm for Interpreting Specialists

The status of professionals is frequently gauged by the degree of autonomy they are permitted to exercise within their work environment. The concept of professional autonomy may be misinterpreted as the right of individuals to have total freedom in decision-making based on their personal preferences. It may also evoke more traditional images of the lone individual who acts without consulting colleagues or participants in the decision-making process. Both perspectives are problematic for interpreting because they do not acknowledge the perspectives of all of the participants within the interpreted event.

Relational autonomy is a paradigm that highlights decision-making as being “socially constructed; that is, the capacity and opportunity for autonomous action is dependent upon our particular social relationships and power structures in which professional practice is embedded” (MacDonald, 2002, p. 197). Relational autonomy is the result of a profession’s deep conceptualization of professional acts and practices, which are a critical aspect of professional maturity. It is the agreement of practitioners to act in a manner that is similar to one another (Kasher, 2005), rather than to make decisions arbitrarily or based on personal inclinations. It is adherence to agreed-upon professional practices within a social context that results in effective decision-making and assures the public that standards exist within a profession. Put another way, relational autonomy is focused on the “social embeddedness of the self within social organizations” (Westlund, 2009, p. 1). Within this framework, effective decisions can be made when social conditions are in place to support and allow the practitioner (and the public) to have confidence in the decision latitude available to them. Using this paradigm, both interpreters and the participants are encouraged to take charge of their choices.

What factors influence the adoption of relational autonomy as a framework for professional practice as both a generalist and a specialist? Understanding the conditions that foster informed and transparent decision-making by interpreters, as

well as those conditions that restrict it, involves recognition of both *internal* elements (i.e., how the interpreter perceives his or her role and work, how each participant views themselves) and *external* elements (i.e., how the work of interpreters is perceived by others). An examination of these internal and external factors provides insights into how specialization in signed language interpreting in the U.S. has evolved to date.

What follows is the analysis of two specialization efforts in the United States - interpreting in the public school and legal settings. Each case addresses the contribution of several elements towards the evolution of specialization, including legislative mandates, national standards, academic programs geared towards specialized practice, and specialized testing and certification. Each case will be examined for the impact of these elements on professional standing of practitioners, specifically, the degree that relational autonomy can be practiced within the specialization.

Case Study 1 — Interpreting in the Public School Setting

Legislative Mandate

In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act), codified in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In order to receive federal funds, states are required to develop and implement policies that assure a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities. Essentially, when applied to Deaf and hard-of-hearing children, this means placement in a public school in the child's home community, often with an interpreter and the possibility of other related services.

Prior to the implementation of this law, the majority of Deaf and hard-of-hearing children were educated in Schools for the Deaf or other educational programs specifically designed for deaf students. This is no longer the case. Data from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs in 2004 indicated that "of all students, ages 6 to 21 years and being under IDEA due to hearing loss, over 85 percent attended regular public schools for all or part of the school day" (Marschark, 2007, p. 139). As a result, some of the functions assigned to education professionals within Schools for the Deaf shifted to

interpreters and classroom teachers who typically have limited or no experience in the education of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. For example, some interpreting positions require knowledge of and participation in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, reporting functions and tutoring. These unique functions, coupled with the need for practitioners to possess subject matter expertise, knowledge and skills associated with child development, language acquisition and teaching and learning processes, underscore the importance of standard setting.

Efforts to Set a National Standard

The National Task Force on Interpreting in Public School Settings was established in 1985 for the purpose of examining and clarifying the roles and responsibilities, training, certification, and other related areas of potential standard-setting (Stuckless, Avery & Hurwitz, 1989). Forty individuals representing seven national organizations served on this task force (Hurwitz, 1991). At the conclusion of their work, the National Task Force submitted a report to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Council on Education of the Deaf (CED) proposing the exploration of a joint certification system for public school interpreters. Relying heavily on standards articulated by the National Task Force, the ad hoc RID/CED committee recommended educational standards commensurate with a scope and sequence of undergraduate baccalaureate study that included emphasis in school interpreting and several possible paths to certification—including generalist certification from RID and specialized certification adopted by state education authorities. The unique patterns of practice, articulated in proposed standards, made it evident that advanced and specialized training and certification was needed. Although the proposal was initially well received, it was never funded by either the RID or CED. As a result, the high standards recommended by the National Task Force and the RID/CED ad hoc committee nearly two decades ago have not been adopted in the majority of state standards. The consequence of this is a lack of standardization regarding who is qualified to provide interpreting services in this setting.

Preparation of Public School Interpreters

During 1990-1995, the U.S. Department of Education,

Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) funded a national grant for the purpose of providing technical assistance to programs and schools hiring and/or training persons to work as interpreters in educational and rehabilitation settings. As a result of this funding, the *Professional Development Endorsement System for Educational Interpreters (PDES)* curriculum was developed.

One of the first formal academic programs targeting a public school interpreter audience was a thirty-credit hour, in-service training program—the Educational Interpreter Certificate Program (EICP). Established in 1995, this program was initially built around the PDES materials and translated into a scope and sequence of college-based coursework. Because the audience for this program is working interpreters, it assumes a basic generalist foundation in interpreting as a prerequisite. This program is currently located at the University of Northern Colorado DO IT Center and is funded by state education authorities in primarily rural states. To date, 22 states have supported over 350 interpreters through this program.

Also in 1995, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) began awarding federal funds to train public school personnel—including interpreters—and continues this funding today. As of January 2001, a service obligation of two years of work for every year of funding is required, or the scholarship funds must be repaid. There are a number of baccalaureate programs offering the OSEP funding. Generally, these programs provide a generalist foundation in ASL and interpreting followed by a sequence of courses that create an emphasis in interpreting in a school setting. The emphasis courses typically focus on classroom discourse, teaching and learning processes, child development, language acquisition, and role and ethics. In recognition of the dual-roles performed by some interpreters in this setting, coursework in tutoring is also often included. Yet, possessing a bachelor's degree is not part of the state standards in the majority of states, nor is it a pre-requisite for EIPA assessment (DO IT Center, 2007). As a result, significant differences exist between what the field of interpreter education recommends as the appropriate entry-to-practice pathway for practitioners in educational interpreting and what state education authorities require.

Assessment and Certification of Public School Interpreters

The prevailing assessment tool for K-12 interpreters is the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA). Implemented in 1991, the written and performance portions of this tool underscore the specialized work of interpreters in the school setting. According to the EIPA website (See <http://www.classroominterpreting.org/eipa/standards/index.asp>) the knowledge test measures specialized knowledge of child development, language acquisition, teaching-learning processes, and linguistic knowledge, among other topics. The performance assessment focuses strictly on interpreting for specific age groups and language users, narrowing the practice of interpreters in this setting even further.

At least 38 states use the EIPA as a standard of competence, with the majority requiring an assessment score from 3.0 to 3.5 as the minimum standard for employment (Schick & Williams, 2004). A 3.5 or above rating indicates the interpreter has broad competencies in grammar, vocabulary, and textual processing. However, only about a third of the EIPA test-takers achieve a 3.5 or above. This suggests that the majority of interpreters in the educational setting are still making a number of errors, particularly with more complex language and discourse (Schick, Williams, & Bolster, 2000). What is not clear from existing data is how many interpreters working in this setting have met state standards versus how many have been granted provisional standing in order to allow them time to meet the state standard.

The RID recognizes certain EIPA holders as being certified. If an individual passes the written portion of the EIPA, achieves a score of 4.0 or above, joins the RID as a certified member and participates in the certification maintenance program, they will receive the designation of Ed:K-12 certified. According to the RID membership database (www.rid.org), 349 of the 8,619 certified members hold this status. Of the 349 individuals with the Ed:K-12 designation, 200 also hold some other RID certification. The remaining 149 hold only the Ed:K-12, representing less than 2 % of the certified membership of RID.

Professional Standing and Relational Autonomy

The increase in the demand for interpreters in the public school setting occurred at such a rapid and dramatic rate that the profession was not prepared to respond. Lacking a formal certification process, having few training options, and limited induction into the field, these early public school interpreters were left to carve out their individual patterns of practice without an organized collective to verify and shape their decisions. Further, the concerns that exist within the Deaf Community and Deaf education around the implications of interpreted versus direct instruction have delayed the interpreting profession's acceptance of public school interpreting practitioners.

As *de facto* specialists, the external directives often drive the work of educational interpreters from school policies and/or practices. Their standing within the public school system is often lacking—many state standards are set relatively low in terms of academic and certification requirements. Interpreting positions are often part of the para-professional versus professional salary schema. Frequently interpreters have supervisors who can't provide meaningful evaluations of their interpreting work, guide their development as practitioners, or recognize their potential and contributions as language specialists. Additionally, some interpreters in this setting do not have a recognized position on the educational team of the student who receives interpreting services.

During 2007-2009, the RID's Educational Interpreter Committee (EIC) and Interpreter in Educational and Instructional Settings (IEIS) Member Section conducted two surveys¹ targeting public school interpreters. One was directed to RID affiliate chapters with the objective of learning what services they were providing to educational interpreters; the second was designed to collect basic demographic information from educational interpreters in order to determine perceived benefits provided by the RID at the local, state, and national level.

The results of the latter survey offer meaningful insights into the experiences and standing of interpreters in the educational setting. Of the 955 respondents, 33% reported a lack of membership in the national RID and 39% indicated

1 These survey results are available at the RID website at <http://www.rid.org> under the RID Initiatives tab, at the For Educational Interpreters link.

they were not members of a state affiliate. An additional 3-4% of the respondents did not answer the question of membership. Forty-eight percent (48%) reported holding no certification—either by RID or the EIPA. When asked to identify the most critical issues in their work, 63% indicated a need for increased pay, professional development, and direction in resolving ethical issues. The results suggest that even interpreters who do not possess certification or professional membership seek the benefits accompanying professional standing. Further, these results imply that applying and sustaining professional autonomy is difficult for interpreters in the educational setting due to a lack of collective social conditions that promote it.

Case Study 2 — Interpreting in the Legal Setting

Legislative Mandate

At the federal level, Public Law 95-539, known as the Federal Court Interpreters Act, establishes a statutory right to an interpreter for any party or witness in an action initiated by the federal government. The court is responsible for determining that the individual requesting the interpreter uses a language other than English as a primary language. This act, passed in 1978, was the first regulation of the quality of interpretation in federal courts. ASL-English interpreters who possess the RID Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L) are determined to be qualified to interpret in federal court.

As of January 26, 1992, all state and local court systems, regardless of receipt of federal funds, were prohibited from discrimination based on disability. This federal mandate is found in Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 42 U.S.C. §§12131-12134 (). The U.S. Department of Justice has issued regulations explaining the requirements of that act. Under the ADA and the associated regulations, local and state courts are required to provide qualified ASL-English interpreters, and other auxiliary aids, to ensure effective communication with deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals (www.ada.gov).

The 2000 U.S. Census reported that 47 million individuals speak a language other than English—a full 18% of the population. Notably, this figure is double the number cited in the 1980 census (U.S. Census website, 2010). Unfortunately,

determining the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals within the population who use signed language is difficult for a wide range of reasons. The National Census of the Deaf Population (NCDP) is the only comprehensive census of this population conducted in the United States and was done over 30 years ago. According to one account, if the proportion of Deaf signers has remained roughly the same over time, then an estimate of Deaf signers would fall between 360,000-517,000 (Mitchell, Young, Bachleda, & Karchmer, 2006).

In a 2009 survey of 168 interpreters specializing in legal interpreting, 72% indicate that at least one-fourth of their practice involves interpreting in the legal setting. Sixty (60%) percent report an increase in the frequency and severity of cases to which they are exposed—including cases that involve foreign-born Deaf individuals (Witter-Merithew, 2010). The combination of the estimates of the Deaf signing population and survey responses from ASL-English interpreters demonstrates the need for specialized interpreters to fulfill the legislative mandate for language access in the courts.

Efforts to Set a National Standard

When the Federal Court Interpreters Act was passed in 1978, the national qualification standard for ASL-English interpreters was set as the specialty legal certification implemented by RID in 1974. This standard remains intact and serves as an example of the field addressing an identified need and having a standard in place prior to the passage of the federal mandate. At the state level, what constitutes qualified interpreters under the Americans with Disabilities Act is subject to a wider range of interpretation than at the federal level. The RID Standard Practice Paper for Legal Interpreting (2007) promotes the following standard:

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires the use of 'qualified interpreters.' The implementing regulations define a qualified interpreter as one 'who is able to interpret effectively, accurately and impartially both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary'. Additionally, legal interpreters are governed by the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct. The Code requires that interpreters "possess the professional skills and knowledge

required for the specific interpreting situation." In the context of legal interpreting, 'necessary specialized vocabulary' and 'professional skills and knowledge' are obtained through specialized interpreter training.

As with other professions, the field of sign language interpretation has developed specific credentials that indicate minimum levels of competency to interpret in legal settings. RID awards the Specialist Certificate: Legal ('SC: L') to interpreters who meet specific criteria regarding prior certification, education and experience. While the number of interpreters holding the SC: L has increased, not enough interpreters hold this credential to fully satisfy the demand for legal interpreters. As a result, much legal interpreting is done by individuals certified as generalist practitioners to interpret in the language used by the deaf person and who also have successfully completed legal interpreter training in order to understand and use the necessary specialized vocabulary associated with legal settings (p. 1).

This standard of using an individual with a Specialist Certificate: Legal or an RID generalist certified practitioner who has completed appropriate training is recognized by most states. This standard is also reinforced by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) Consortium—which is comprised of 40 state administrative offices of the court responsible for the management of interpreting services. This consortium recognizes the Specialist Certificate: Legal as the standard for court interpreters in their member states (Mathers, 2007). Further, the patterns of practice associated with interpreting in this setting have been identified and documented in various publications—most recently in a document entitled *Best Practices: American Sign Language and English Interpretation within Legal Settings*, resulting from the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) legal interpreting workgroup (Stewart, Witter-Merithew & Cobb, 2009).

Preparation of Legal Interpreters

The first formal training of ASL-English interpreters for the legal setting was during 1974-1976 through the Center for

the Administration of Justice at Wayne State University Law School. The Center received a federal grant from the Office of Deafness and Communicative Disorders. In 1974 the National Interpreter Training Consortium (NITC) was also established and funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. This consortium resulted in the creation of several regional centers—several of which took on the role of continuing the training of interpreters to work in the legal setting when the Wayne State grant ended. Specifically, two centers—Gallaudet University and California State University at Northridge—offered regular trainings during 1976-1988 modelled after the Wayne State program. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf provided training during a three-week intensive session open to individuals possessing generalist certification for the Deaf.

In 1986, Montclair College received a small federal grant to pilot a joint training of 50 Spanish-English and 50 ASL-English interpreters. This was an unprecedented initiative in that all 100 students participated in the same lectures on the legal system, legal terminology, role and function, and ethical standards of practice, and worked separately on interpreting skills development. In 1988, California State University at Northridge received a five-year grant of national significance from the Rehabilitation Services Administration to train interpreters to work in the legal setting. The annual training included completion of a series of pre-readings followed by a five-week intensive onsite session and the inclusion of mock trials. It is noteworthy that this was the first training of its kind that included Deaf interpreters as part of the student base.

In 2001, the University of Northern Colorado DO IT Center expanded the scope and sequence of coursework and began offering a series of four courses distributed over four semesters and leading to a specialty certificate. In 2008 this program began extending a graduate certificate in legal interpreting. It is an online program that includes the requirement of a supervised practicum under the direction of a practitioner with specialist certification in legal interpreting.

Certification of Legal Interpreters

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf has been awarding the Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L) since 1974. Funds to

develop the initial exam were provided through Wayne State University, which had received a federal grant. In 1991, the RID underwrote a major revision to the legal certification assessment. Eligibility for this examination requires satisfaction of multiple criteria, including possession of a degree, generalist certification, evidence of completion of specialized training and supervised work experience. Additionally, a minimum of three years of established practice as a generalist practitioner is strongly recommended. The examination consists of both a written and performance component.

Currently, there are 260 interpreters in the RID membership database with the SC:L designation (www.rid.org). All of these individuals also hold generalist certification from RID. This represents approximately 3% of the total certified membership of RID.

Professional Standing and Relational Autonomy

Interpreting in the legal setting is a long-recognized area of specialization in the field of ASL-English interpreting. As more scholarship and research emerge, patterns of practice continue to evolve, improve, and change. Interpreters who specialize in court interpreting and achieve the designation of Specialist Certificate: Legal from RID experience a high degree of professional standing when working within the legal system. Interpreters in this setting are viewed as officers of the court and therefore have the accompanying duty of serving the interests of the court (Mathers, 2007). In this role, the interpreter can request to approach the bench to discuss issues impacting the interpretation, request correction to the court record, request assistance of other practitioners and/or experts, and a variety of other practices that constitute patterns of practice unique to legal interpreters. The court considers these practitioners as experts, expecting them to possess a thorough knowledge of the legal system and its procedures, terminology, discourse, along with a high degree of competence and reliability in their interpreting performance. Further, the court expects legal interpreters to report to the court any barriers to effective performance and consumer understanding, and to collaborate with the court in resolving issues that may arise.

These structures provide interpreters with social conditions that promote relational autonomy. Further, the interpreting field-at-large confers a high degree of respect

and professional standing to interpreters working in the legal setting. Additional evidence of the professional standing of legal interpreters is the professional network that exists—which serves to bring together both spoken language and signed language interpreters. The Court Interpreters and Translators Association (CITA) was established in 1978 and changed its name to the National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) in 1988. The 2010 NAJIT conference schedule included presentations by ASL-English legal interpreting specialists, among many other spoken language experts. As well, the RID established a member section for legal interpreters in 2007. These external factors have created an environment in which legal interpreters have been able to develop patterns of practice that keep within the defined structures of the legal system. Further, these factors have enhanced the condition of relational autonomy as interpreters do their work in the context of legal professionals with defined roles and responsibilities.

In Support of the Intentional Development of Specialization

Access to both public educational institutions and legal counsel are critical human rights for individuals in a democratic society (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Both rights have developed highly structured institutions, are protected by legislative mandates, and are regarded as specialty professions requiring higher education and credentialing to practice in society-at-large. Within the profession of signed language interpreting, the development of specialization has varied significantly between the two areas.

A retrospective view of these case studies provides insights into two distinct ways that specializations can unfold. While both legal and public school interpreting continue to develop professional maturity by standardizing patterns of practice, the process has been less orderly for public school interpreters. *De jure* processes were in place for legal interpreting when legislative mandates were passed; however, the same foundational structure was not in place for educational interpreters when faced with changes in the law. The interpreting profession was simply unprepared for the impact of legislative action that mandated the provision

of educational interpreters across the country. Additionally, the early grounding of certification and training for legal interpreters as well as the status of the law profession within society, have served to underscore the professional autonomy under which these interpreters work. Further, the openness, support and assistance of the profession-at-large and the Deaf Community in furthering the work of legal interpreters was not available—and in many instances is still not available—for interpreters working in the public school setting.

Professions are marked by the degree of autonomy in decision making that reflect society's trust that practitioners share common values and practices. In the U.S., signed language interpreters share common values and practices in a variety of formal and informal ways; including the RID Code of Professional Conduct, standard practice papers, conference presentations, listserv discussions and blogs. The question of how these mechanisms lead to codification and standardization of profession autonomy is still largely unexplored.

To insure the successful development of specializations within signed language interpreting, both external and internal issues should be addressed proactively, rather than in reaction to legislative mandates. Establishing an intentional stance for the education and credentialing of specialists will lead to more effective and trustworthy practices within the field. Professional autonomy can be limited and weakened over time by the relationship of one profession to another or the influence of other social institutions, by the internal disposition or insularity of the profession itself (Sandstrom, 2007). It is essential that—while considering market demand and available supply—specializations in interpreting be developed intentionally and with an understanding of the factors and processes that shape its development and maintain its viability.

Unintended Consequences of Specialization

While promoting the intentional development of interpreter specialization, it is also essential to consider potential consequences that may impact stakeholders. For example, administering a specialist credentialing system is a costly and labor-intensive process. It is important, therefore, that a sufficient need and a critical mass of interpreters for specialized practice are evident. There is also merit in exploring

more efficient ways of creating designation of specialist competence—such as completion of training, supervised induction, and portfolio assessment.

Another possible downside of practitioners making the investment of time and fiscal resources to specialize is the potential for them to find themselves in a market that cannot support their expertise. Further, specialization may reduce the availability of generalist practitioners in the community. If interpreters work strictly in their area of specialization, the result may be creating shortages in qualified personnel in some areas.

Increased cost of interpreting services is another possible effect of specialization. With more training, expertise, and credentials, interpreters may charge more for their services. Increased costs can result in a barrier to access, particularly when tight economic conditions impact public funding. A potential repercussion could be the tension between the right of individual practitioners to receive fair and equitable wages against the rights of individuals to have communication access. With this potential consequence in mind, it is crucial to seek cost-effective ways of delivering quality services in order to maintain the common good.

Although these and other potential negative consequences of specialization exist, there are also possible positive consequences. One consequence is increasing scholarship in areas of specialization, a circumstance borne out in educational and legal interpreting (Swabey & Nicodemus, in process). Further, individuals may better serve the unique needs of deaf consumers with specialized competence. Additionally, specialization can result in greater numbers of interpreters remaining in the field because of greater interest and commitment to a particular speciality area.

Despite positive and negative consequences, it is unlikely that further specialization by practitioners will cease. Specialization is a natural result of new knowledge, technologies, and advancement of a profession, as well as shifting demands in the marketplace. Therefore, it is critical to consider the field's perception of itself and the level of maturity needed to address the implications associated with these consequences.

Conclusion

This article provides an examination of how specializations emerge within the professions as well as the internal and external factors that play a role in their development. Relational autonomy is proposed as a framework that promotes collaborative decision-making by signed language interpreters as part of their work as specialists. A historical analysis suggests that specialization exists in signed language interpreting and it is likely to continue given the need for advanced knowledge in certain settings (e.g., healthcare) and the new functions that are surfacing (e.g., video relay services).

As illustrated through the case studies, the path towards specialization can manifest in distinct ways based on their intentional—and unintentional—development. Using the legal system as an example, the current status of interpreters working within this setting indicates there have been benefits from the early creation of specialized training and a specific credentialing system. As the result, patterns of practice emerged in legal interpreting in which roles are clearly defined for the participants who must then interface with one another for success in moving cases forward. On the other hand, the proliferation of deaf mainstreamed students in the public school system found the interpreting profession unprepared to provide a sufficient number of trained and certified interpreters. Further, once the demand existed, the field of interpreting failed to promulgate a national standard for interpreters in this setting. This inaction contributed to a lack of standardization among educational interpreters and a significant number of individuals working outside the norms of the profession-at-large. These case studies illustrate that social conditions can contribute to—or restrict—the effective application of autonomy by practitioners. Further, these divergent histories present sound rationale for the establishment of structured mechanisms to guide the intentional development of specializations within signed language interpreting.

In summary, the evidence to date suggests that without the intentional development of specialization and the ability of specialists to capture the unique patterns of practice that define specialization in interpreting, it will remain difficult—perhaps impossible—to protect the interest of consumers who rely on the services of interpreters with specialized competence.

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