"I don't think we're supposed to be talking about this:"
Case Conferencing and Supervision for Interpreters

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There is a quintessential scene in *Seinfeld* where George and Elaine are at the coffee shop talking about a topic many would consider taboo. Elaine's latest love interest appears to not be Caucasian but his exact ethnicity is unknown. As George and Elaine navigate this hyper-sensitive subject, speculating about what he "might be," their discomfort visibly mounts. The conversation ends abruptly when Elaine declares, "I don't think we're supposed to be talking about this."

For interpreters, conversations with colleagues about interpreting assignments often create similar conflicting feelings – recognition of the value of talking about *un-talked-about* things, mixed with nagging discomfort, even guilt. The *perceived* prohibition of talking about the work (Dean & Pollard, 2001) constrains such conversations and renders the resulting dialogue unhelpful. Essential assignment details are withheld in favor of vague generalities, restricting the listener's comprehension of the full context and ultimately preventing a helpful evaluation of the decisions made.

Most interpreters desire opportunities to talk about their work. While a few do so for unprofessional reasons (e.g., gossiping), this is not the norm. Most interpreters want to improve their work (to benefit consumers), and seeking advice from colleagues is the most direct and beneficial way to accomplish that goal. Talking about one's work for the express purpose of professional development and work improvement clearly is consistent with the highest ethical standards. For many practice professions, these *reflective learning practices* have many names – *peer consultation, case conferencing, supervision* and are a formally mandated ethical practice.

A Practice Profession Expectation

We have consistently referred to interpreting as a *practice profession* (Dean & Pollard, 2004, 2005) where complex, social context judgments and skills are crucial supplements to one's technical abilities. While being observed by colleagues allows for critique of one's technical skills, only by talking about our work decisions can we obtain feedback regarding contextualized ethical decision-making.

Cokely (2000) describes the import of such judgment examinations:

"The choices that we make, and the actions that follow from those choices, can uphold or deny the dignity of other people, can advocate or violate the rights of other people, can affirm or disavow the humanity of other people. Given the potential consequences of our choices and the resultant actions, it is reasonable to expect that we constantly re-examine those values, principles, and beliefs that underscore and shape the decisions we make and the actions we undertake."

The most effective way to "constantly re-examine those values, principles, and beliefs" is not by ourselves (no matter what the ethical framework employed anyone can justify a decision in their own mind) but by obtaining specific input from the professional community, vis-à-vis the ethical standards adopted by that community.

Practice professions develop their skill sets and standards of practice over time, based on the developing research and scholarship of the field (Witter-Merithew, 2008) which further emphasizes the need for on-going, formal and collegial discussions of interpreting work. These discussions are the most beneficial and generalizable to future work assignments when they are anchored, not in abstracted, hypothetical scenarios, but in the tangible and practical experiences of daily work. Palmer (1998) echoes this idea: "The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it." In essence, a profession's growth and development will be stunted unless practitioners openly examine the practice of their colleagues.

Challenges

Notice the qualifier in Palmer's quote: the dialogue must be *honest*. This is the first challenge if reflective learning practices, such as case-conferencing or supervision, are to be employed within the interpreting profession. Research suggests that interpreters work amidst a dichotomy between what they profess they do and what they really do (Angelelli, 2004, Dean & Pollard, 2005, 2006). Ethicists describe this as a conflict between rhetoric and *de facto* practice.

We have suggested that this ethical problem exists in the profession due to the misperception that interpreting is a technical profession rather than a practice profession. This misperception leads some interpreters to perceive decision-making as a ubiquitous rule-based approach, often formulating or justifying decisions from a hypothetical, "What would happen if I weren't here." We have critiqued the profession's valuation of invisibility and the insufficient focus on profes-

sional responsibility which it creates, and alternatively, offered a paradigm for conceptualizing interpreting work (Dean, 2007; Dean & Pollard, 2005, 2006). This paradigm, *the demand control schema* (DC-S), offers constructs that delineate the contextualized factors interpreters recognize as underlying the complex nature of their work. Familiarity with DC-S helps interpreters engage in the honest dialogue recommended by Palmer.

Another challenge to engaging in reflective learning practices is a common misunderstanding about the nature of *confidentiality*. The ASL signs for confidentiality (e.g., HOLD on the lips or PRIVATE) convey how most interpreters understand the confidentiality concept, whereas other practice professions base their understanding on the root of this word – to confide – meaning to *tell someone something in confidence*. Remarkably, our field's use of the term communicates the very opposite: do not confide.

On the topic of confidentiality, the Hippocratic Oath states "whatever I shall hear concerning the lives of my patients *which shall not be talked about*, I will keep forever secret" (italics added). Consistent with this, in the reflective learning practices we advocate, that *which shall not be talked about* concerning the lives of consumers is kept private but that which is necessary to talk about for effective work is shared but is kept in strictest confidence by those entrusted with that information. Breaches of confidentiality are committed not by persons who request the confidence of their colleagues but by persons who spread information beyond the confines of the entrusted circle, with no intention of benefiting the consumer.

Another challenge – probably the hardest to overcome – is also well-characterized by Palmer (1998) who writes about reflective learning practices in teacher education:

"Our tendency to reduce teaching to questions of technique is one reason we lack collegial conversation of much duration or depth. Though technique-talk promises the practical solutions that we think we want and need, the conversation is stunted when technique is the only topic: the human issues in teaching get ignored so the human beings who teach feel ignored as well. When teaching is reduced to technique, we shrink teachers as well as their craft – and people do not willingly return to a conversation that diminishes them."

Many interpreters find the experience of talking about work decisions with colleagues unhelpful, unpleasant, even harmful. Per Palmer, the experience has diminished them. Accordingly, many interpreters talk about their work only with people who they trust will agree with their views or not be too critical. Yet, the desired benefit of supervision and case conferencing is hearing thoughts and ideas from those who think differently so that one's practice can be challenged and ultimately improved.

New Topic of Conversation and Ground Rules

Palmer offers a way for to forge ahead despite these challenges. He recommends beginning a *new topic of conversation*, structuring that conversation with *ground rules* and providing leadership for this honest dialogue to happen.

Since 2006, we have been exploring the use of supervision and case conferencing with interpreters. Our new topic of conversation is based on four principles: 1) Interpreting is a practice profession where the dynamics of the relationships matter greatly and, therefore, our impact on deaf and hearing consumers must be attended to; 2) There are multiple ethical and effective decisions in response to any given assignment *demand* which fall along a liberal-to-conservative spectrum (Dean & Pollard, 2004, 2005); 3) Behavioral and translation decisions must be considered from a *teleological* or consequences-based viewpoint where positive and negative consequences are identified and evaluated; 4) An interpreter's *role* is always understood in conjunction with *responsibility* and, accordingly, professionals must continually respond to the consequences of their decisions – even if that decision was to do nothing (Dean & Pollard, 2004, 2006, Dean 2007).

The *ground rules* we follow in supervision and case conferencing are based on DC schema's *dialogic work analysis* method (Dean & Pollard, 2006, 2008). We use this conceptual structure to frame the work context and evaluate the decisions made by the interpreter. Keeping the conversation within this structure has been the most challenging for interpreters – many of us have old habits of *casually* discussing our work or evaluating another's – but we have found that this structured approach has multiple benefits. Most notably, the ensuing discussion is more objective, fostering less defensiveness and more effective collegial exchange.

Leadership

Evaluations and reports from our participants in our supervision and case conferencing trials consistently yield favorable responses and enthusiasm for this professional development approach. A number of cities in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom have formed supervision groups after we provided them with DC-S facilitator training. We do not recommend that supervision or case conferencing be conducted without education and training for facilitators. There are many concepts

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and skills that must be learned prior to this undertaking, including how to nurture the development of critical thinking (versus tell someone how to behave), how to restructure work discussions in accordance with the ground rules, how to present cases in a way that maintains confidentiality and at the same time includes all salient aspects of the case, and most notably, how to operationalize this new topic of conversation so that interpreters "willingly return to the conversation." Convincing interpreters to return to the conversation is a hard, first step but for the sake of our consumers as well as the profession, it is vital. Our project has been funded by the Community Interpreter Grant of New York, Genesee Valley Region RID and, most recently, the RID/NCIEC mentoring grant. We look forward to reporting back to the interpreter community regarding our continued findings in this new professional endeavor.

Future Directions

It is our hope that the interpreting profession will continue to evolve practices known to be effective in other practice professions. Specifically, we would like to see reflective learning practices such as case conferencing and supervision: a) employed routinely with students in interpreting preparation programs; b) codified by requiring a specific number of supervision hours before sitting for certification (common in other practice professions); and c) highly desired and available formally and widely throughout interpreters' careers. ■

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