

Considering the Professionalization of American Sign Language Interpreting

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Professionalization: what is it, and why does it matter? Briefly, it is an occupation that has gone through a theoretical process that social scientists refer to as professionalization, resulting in better services to consumers. Following professionalization, the public can trust that they will receive a minimum standard of quality from practitioners of an occupation. Practitioners also benefit from the potential for greater autonomy in determining the profession's direction, and the specialist knowledge they have attained is generally recognized and respected, resulting in their services being sought for assured effectiveness and quality.

The hallmarks differentiating a professionalized occupation are part of what has been an evolving area of study. Evetts (2013) reports that the current line of thinking in sociology is a shift away from setting a firm delineation between a profession and other expert occupations, and Watson (2002) explores the potentially problematic facets of the term. However, Evetts (2013) also concedes that the concept of professionalization and approaches toward conceptualizing it "continues to be important in the analysis of newly emerging occupations" (p.782). American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting may no longer be in its infancy, but it could be argued that it remains an evolving profession, and as such, it is worth exploring and evaluating where we currently stand. Considering the current state of the professionalization of ASL interpreting through the application of established theoretical conceptualizations of professionalization processes is an interesting exercise into thinking about the quality of interpreting services currently available now and in the future as well as examining evolving working realities faced by interpreters.

A "trait theory" of professionalization was originally posited (Gbric, 2010; Mikkelsen, 1996), which identifies a profession by the inclusion of a body of theoretical, formal knowledge; credentials, such as licensure or registration; adherence to a code of ethics; and salaried work. The field



of ASL interpreting--with interpreter training programs throughout the country, RID, the Code of Professional Conduct, and practitioners earning a living from their wages--certainly seems to check all these boxes. Other theories, however, allow us to delve a bit deeper into the layers that constitute professionalization, and while they don't necessarily derail the premise that ASL interpreting currently qualifies as having undergone the professionalization process, they do offer some interesting points to ponder.

One model is the Theory of Control (Mikkelsen, 1996), which explains that the degree to which an occupation is considered professionalized is at least partly informed by how much control practitioners have over their work and the market in which they work. This means control over establishing market standards, and control over working conditions. One might think of areas in which ASL interpreters have limited control over their working conditions, such as Video Relay Service (VRS). With set targets that potentially lead to Repetitive Stress Injuries (RSI) and decreasing rates of pay, it can be effectively argued that practitioners of sign language interpreting in the United States have little control over this market.

Mikkelsen (1996) also explains that occupations that have undergone professionalization define the needs of the profession instead of allowing others to define it for them. This statement is applicable and interesting to this discussion

of sign language interpreting when one considers that within the VRS industry, we see neither the professionals nor the consumers setting the agenda. Rather, the agenda is set by large corporations and government. Despite specialist knowledge about best practices for both personal health and optimum interpreting, interpreters do not set the interpreting agenda. Due to pressures to meet minutes logged into a call and minimal rejected or transferred calls, the interpreter is under immense pressure to accept whatever calls may come in, potentially compromising the discretion that normally exercised when accepting interpreting assignments under other conditions. VRS interpreters also have limited time to gain pertinent 'prep' knowledge prior to placing a call.

This situation is particularly interesting because it could be argued to be a manifestation of what Evetts (2013) cites McClelland (1990) as referring to as professionalism being constructed "from above" as opposed to "from within." According to this concept, professionalism created "from within" is characterized by controls "operationalized by practitioners themselves who are guided by codes of professional ethics which are monitored by professional institutes and associations" (Evetts, 2013, p.787). This is what we have in RID, and it is precisely why RID has been lauded and exemplified for the professionalization of interpreters in general and particularly for signed language interpreters. However, Evetts (2013) defines professionalism created "from above" as the following:

Organizational objectives...define practitioner-client relationships, set achievement targets and performance indicators. In these ways organizational objectives regulate and replace occupational control of the practitioner-client work interactions, thereby limiting the exercise of discretionary decision-making and preventing the ethic that has been so important in professional work (p.787).

This is precisely what we have in VRS. Clearly, within at least one realm of ASL interpreting, we are seeing shifts from professionalism "from within" to "from above." In this case it not only alters the dynamic of the interpreting situation, but it also drastically changes the dynamic of control over the profession. Furthermore, if the ultimate benefit of professionalization of an occupation is a higher quality service for consumers, then Shane Feldman's recent letter on behalf of RID to the FCC concerning proposed changes to VRS mentioning the potential "degradation of the consumer experience" is quite telling as to what the field of ASL interpreting may be facing in the context of a professionalization process.

While the example of VRS is a comparative critique of the field in general to a reality within just one specialized domain, it is remiss to assume that there is no potential for it to eventually influence the field in general, particularly considering a national training center and training programs established by the VRS companies. The intent here is not to vilify an industry but to simply invite reflection on implications

that current circumstances may or may not have for the further professionalization of ASL interpreting.

Mikkelsen (1996) explains that the incidence of self-regulation within professions is higher than that of occupations and that such autonomy leads to greater trust by the public in the profession. RID embodies just this type of self-regulation. In fact, when exploring a later model of professionalization, Tseng's Model, Mikkelsen (1996) cites "control of admission into the profession," and in contrast to other associations for interpreters and translators, mentions RID as exemplifying the finalized transitional stage to professionalization in this regard due to the fact that it administers its own certification program that is both legally-recognized and enforced (p.5). Indeed, when discussing the issue of certification in regards to standards in the field of interpreting at large, Pochhacker (2004) states in his book, *Introducing Interpreting Studies*, that RID is "the model case" with its testing and performance assessment leading to certification (p.165). The various iterations of the RID certification test and discussions surrounding that notwithstanding, RID has undeniably made significant advancements toward professionalization with the establishment of such a system.

Although Evetts (2013) concedes that some scholars have criticized "control of admission into the profession" as establishing a market to protect the self-interests of the practitioners and their own wages by shutting out competition, avenues such as certification that are aimed at defining a professional practitioner assure clients of a minimum standard. This, in turn, leads to greater trust by the public in the profession. Mikkelsen (1996) reports that in Tseng's Model, one of the early stages of successful professionalization is dependent on the continued practice of those who are qualified under a system (such as certification), despite market encroachment from those who practice without it. Relatedly, a further requisite toward professionalization is that "practitioners cannot operate without being members of a professional association" (Mikkelsen, 1996, p.7) A recent article at www.streetleverage.com explores the phenomenon of certified interpreters facing limited work opportunities because agencies routinely send uncertified interpreters to fill a great deal of the work that is available (Keller, 2013).

Another Street Leverage article questioned if agencies should require certification in order to invite greater scrutiny and reflection of how interpreters are chosen to fulfill assignments (Feyne, 2012). The recent standard practice paper RID released for feedback on Professional Sign Language Interpreting Agencies takes steps toward addressing this issue to some degree, although there is currently no regulatory power to enforce it.

While it is important to note that "qualified" may not necessarily mean certified, the fact that these types of discussions are occurring indicate that certification and membership in a professional association are not necessary to successfully operate as a practitioner in the field. Furthermore, in such a market, if alignment with a professional body and the image that it collectively projects to the public is not always effective in attracting practitioners to become certified and

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does not necessarily garner sufficient work for those who are, we must examine the incentives for uncertified practitioners to gain certification and what we can do to make the prospect more attractive. We also need to explore how the profession at large can regulate those who are not qualified and protect against market domination by such practitioners in an effort to maintain quality services and consumer expectations.

The point of this article is not to undermine the significant strides that we have made toward professionalization or dispute that we have “arrived.” RID has been upheld by some scholars (Mikkelsen, 1996; Pochhacker, 2004) as an exemplar for integral steps toward professionalization. Grbic (2010), however, reminds us that professionalization is not something that, once achieved, is set in stone. This article simply invites thoughts about our current status as a profession and to remind us all that, as participants in a still burgeoning field, it is our responsibility to remain vigilant and stalwart supporters in setting and maintaining the standards that will define ASL interpreting profession in years to come. ■

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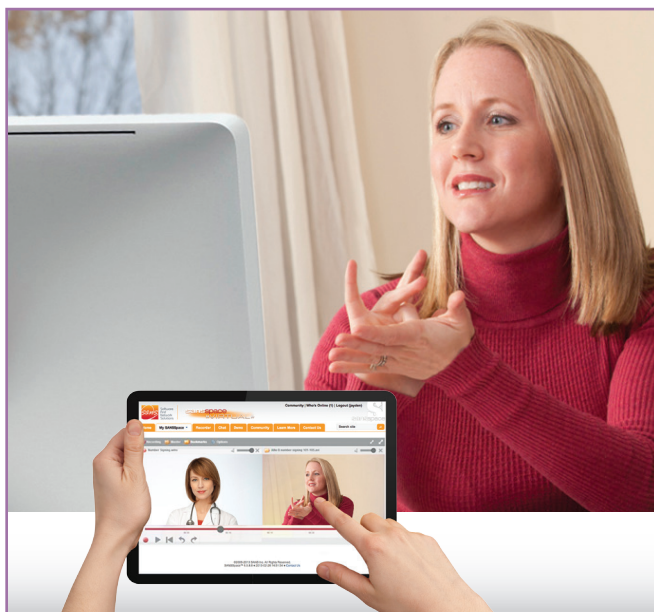
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