



CAPACITY VS REPRESENTATION

"[Black people], You must be perfect. You do not have the luxury to be 'good'. You have the burden to be BETTER"

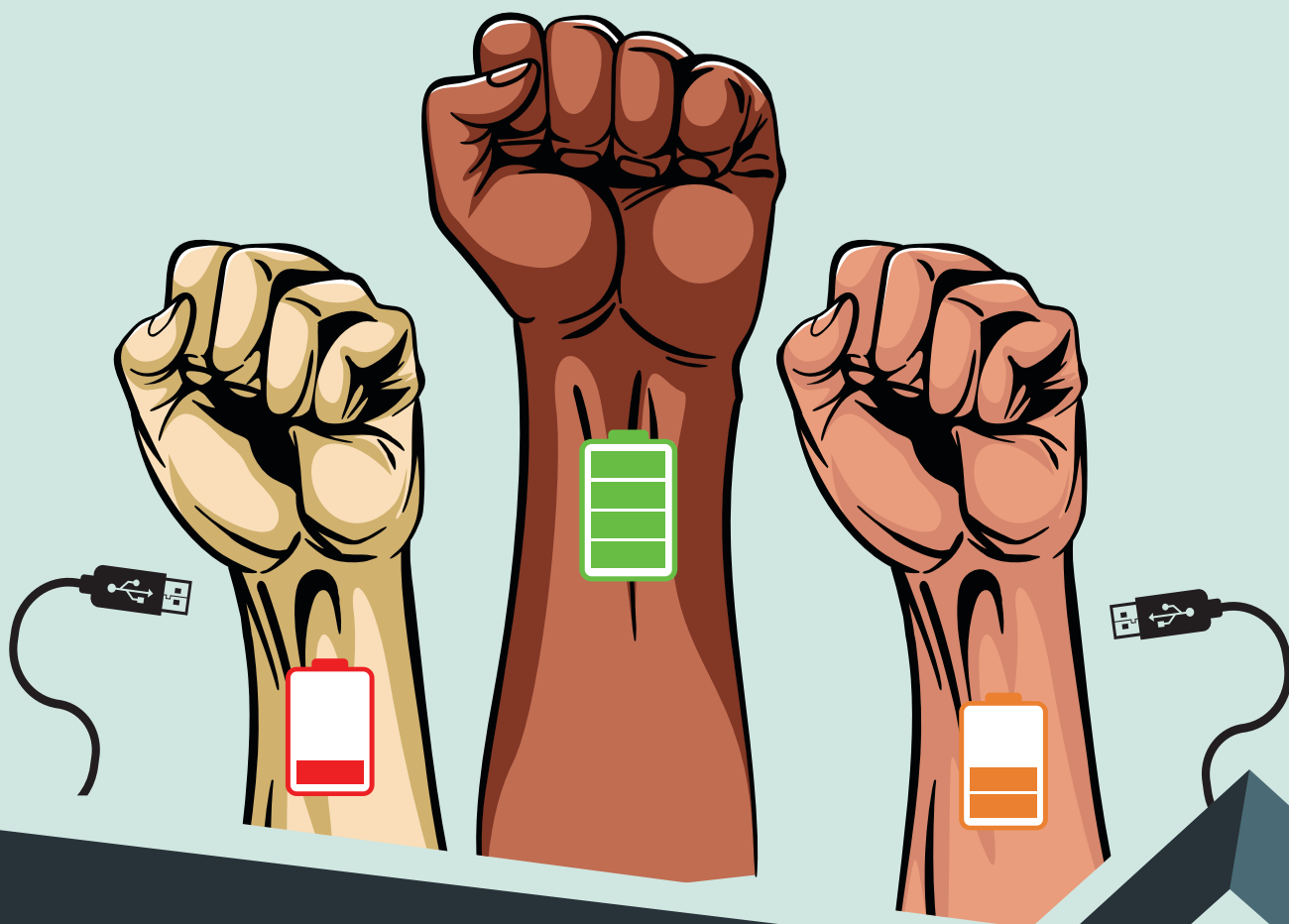
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I. Setting the Stage

Capacity and Representation are two terms that we encounter quite often in our personal and professional lives. It is now commonplace to use phrases such as “if I have capacity to do x, then I will” or “I don’t have capacity for _ _ _.”

Representation is a term used more often than not to describe specific identity matches of marginalized or underrepresented groups. Within the interpreting realm, it has become code for or understood by most to mean there is a cultural and/or racial correlation between the interpreter/consumer, the interpreter/ the service provider, or the interpreter/target audience. Given the drastically disproportionate racial, cultural, and ethnic disparities among practitioners in the field, capacity and representation have far more profound implications than the casual ways in which these terms are used.

The purpose of this conversation starter is to define capacity and representation within the interpreting field and foreground how they manifest for minoritized sign language interpreters in professional and interpersonal spaces. We refer to and expound on nuanced aspects of both these concepts; emphasizing that capacity and representation are interconnected, rather than binary, mutually distinct or arbitrary forces. In the content that follows, we explore individual layers of representation as well as levels of capacity. We use examples from the field to explore how these layers and levels intersect and overlap, as well as the impacts they frequently can and do have on interpreters, interpreting teams, as well as consumers.



II. Key Definitions

Capacity: Skills, preparation, management of cognitive/psychological/emotional load, and mental and/or physical energy required to perform a task successfully.

Representation: Inclusion based on race, gender, physical presentation, identity and shared lived experience(s) to meet community expectations, foster visibility, and/or add perceived trust or fidelity to the interpretation. Representation also means foregrounding people, images, cultures, and narratives in spaces where they were historically excluded or seen as an impossibility due to perceived insurmountable systemic barriers. It is about being seen in ways that inspire, validate, and open doors—expanding what is possible for individuals and communities who may have never envisioned themselves in those roles or spaces.

III. Representation

Though we most commonly oversimplify representation by associating it with only race and/or gender, representation has far more layers as shown in the definition we provided. Both race and gender are referenced with frequency because they are the more salient features of an individual and are habitually used to bypass more subtle forms of representation. This is especially true in the field of sign language interpretation, where race and gender stand out as the most striking disparities when analyzing the demographic makeup of practitioners. Along with race and gender, we provide more layers to consider in regards to representation and explore them in more depth.



Race

Definition: Race is a social construct which classifies people based on physical characteristics, primarily skin color

Racial identity plays a role in professional spaces, whether consciously or unconsciously; explicitly or implicitly.

The conflation of race (skin color) and ethnicity (shared culture, beliefs, language practices with others) can lead to the false assumption that race = cultural and linguistic knowledge.

- i. There is a difference between being racially Black and being culturally Black (reference It's You, Not Me)
- ii. Assuming all Black interpreters know BASL/Southern Black culture
 1. Black Deaf interpreter who doesn't know BASL and was raised by White hearing family being constantly requested (by agencies) for work that they believe is BASL(-influenced)
 2. A young hearing Black interpreter scheduled for jobs with younger strong BASL users because of race and age representation. However, the interpreter grew up in a predominantly white suburb and has never been exposed to Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to produce a good language equivalent in English.

When inclusion efforts prioritize optics rather than genuine equity, it results in representation.

- iii. Performative representation is the result of a lack of consideration of actual contribution and competency
 1. Marginalized interpreters have contributions beyond that of our marginalized identities. In other words, interpreters of color have more to offer beyond just our skin color.
 2. Many hiring entities do not take the time or invest the energy in developing relationships with interpreters of marginalized backgrounds to know what our skills are, where we excel, what our limitations are and what we can lend to various interpreted encounters (beyond those that match the superficial aspects of our identity).
Just because an interpreter looks like they "fit" in a space does not mean they are the most appropriate choice
- iv. Performative representation leads to:
 1. Underprepared interpreters being placed in positions where they are set up to fail
 2. Interpreters being put in situations to be overworked unnecessarily



Gender

Definition: Gender is a social construct which assigns norms and behaviors to people based on physical characteristics associated with their assigned/assumed sex

Interpreters are constantly navigating gendered expectations and requests.

Voice from the Field: “Blindsided”

In a team of six (four hearing and two Deaf interpreters), I was one of the two males assigned to a virtual public-facing event. The agency that hired us had established a preliminary plan that paired me with one of the Deaf interpreters as the hearing “feed” interpreter. Three of the four hearing interpreters arrived early to the event for preparation, as it involved interpreting for several Deaf individuals and signers from both the organization and the audience.

As the team began discussing the logistics, one of the male presenters told us—rather than asked—that I would be voicing for him, while the other male interpreter would voice for the other male Deaf presenter. Before we had a chance to confer with the rest of the team (who had not yet logged in), we were met with hostility when we simply requested a few minutes to get everyone on the team on the same page. We were told we had to honor the presenter's request because he wanted a male voice. What he did not realize was that we were unaware of his preferences, as the plan provided to us by the agency did not align with his wishes.



Factors for consideration:

1. The preliminary plan provided by the agency led me to prepare differently for the role of the “feed” interpreter, which is very distinct from interpreting for the lead presenter from ASL to English for 2 hours.
2. After being met with hostility for simply requesting time to coordinate as a team, I found myself not wanting to work with this individual at all.
3. Despite my frustration and me feeling disrespected, I had to push through and interpret for him, albeit with minimal prep time.
4. Of all 6 interpreters, I was the only one not local to the event making it even more challenging to adapt quickly.
5. Because of my gender, I was essentially forced into a role for which I wasn’t adequately prepared.
6. Even though we did our best in the situation, it’s worth considering: was it worth it to the Deaf presenter to have a male voice (representation) if the male interpreter wasn’t the best fit for an already confirmed team (capacity)?
7. How might this last-minute shift in assignment affect the teaming dynamic, considering everyone had prepared for their originally assigned roles? Additionally, how could it influence my team’s perception of my capabilities as an interpreter, given that I was the least familiar with the geographical area that this meeting pertained to and was now unexpectedly taking on the responsibility of interpreting for the lead presenter?



Physical Presentation

- **Definition:** Expectations based on body type, aesthetic, appearance, hair, attire, grooming, etc.

Shared Lived Experience

Definition: Common experiences that can provide unique insight into an interpreted encounter.

These can include but are not limited to:

- i. Environmental factors (e.g., growing up in similar regions)
- ii. Social factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, upward or downward social mobility)
- iii. Experiences of trauma (e.g., loss of loved ones through similar circumstances, abuse, living with chronic illness, etc)

NOTE: Even in identical circumstances, individuals may develop vastly different skill sets and distinct ways of navigating the world.

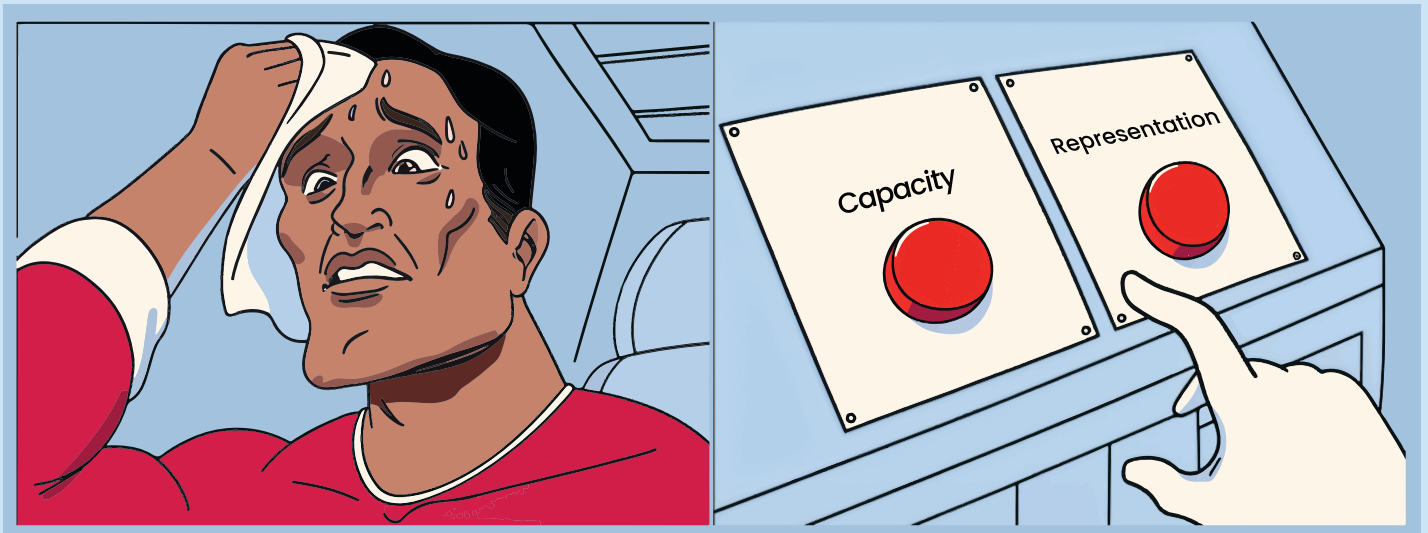
- Recognizing shared lived experience can be complex, but its relevance and impact are too often minimized or undervalued in the decision-making process as it relates to culturally responsive scheduling practices. It may require a meaningful connection, research, and time to truly understand and assess. However, it is more common that hiring entities, interpreters and consumers rely on assumptions based on perceived commonalities or public-facing presentation to identify shared lived experience.



VOICE FROM THE FIELD:

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

A survivor of intimate partner violence is Deaf and has a partner who is a well-known CODA in the community. He “interpreted” the interactions with the police when they were called to the family’s home. Later that evening, I was assigned to interpret the survivor’s formal statement to the police describing recent events that took place at the family’s home. The survivor and I knew one another from the community but felt there was no conflict of interest. The survivor was visibly upset. She struggled to recount a chronological timeline, added details later in the statement, appeared to forget what question she was responding to, and struggled to integrate information being provided to her. I took copious notes and used them to map details to support me in constructing a timeline of events. I was careful to not include names in my notes, instead codes for sign names and to keep my notes visible to the survivor to support her comfort. The officer made a comment that what she was sharing did not line up with what she told officers earlier at her home. I interpreted this to the survivor and asked the officer if an interpreter was present at the home earlier. The officer shared that the spouse (the accused perpetrator) interpreted for them. I asked permission to step out of the interpreter role and shared about why it is crucial to have an interpreter present at the scene rather than a family member. I also shared the mapped out notes to help the officer detail the events accurately and double checked the details with the survivor. I then referred the officer to Deaf advocacy agencies who might be able to support the survivor as well as educate them on the impact of trauma on survivors. I shared a list of trauma-informed interpreters in the area who were qualified to work with the department and checked with the survivor if there were any interpreters on the list who they might not feel comfortable with.





Factors for Consideration:

- An interpreter with shared experiences may be the preference of the Deaf or DeafBlind consumer, but in certain cases it can be (re)traumatizing to the interpreter. On one hand, you have the affordance or benefit of representation but it may be in direct conflict with the interpreter's capacity.
- An interpreter has to have the knowledge base (beyond the linguistic skills) for interpreting in specific environments and for certain interactions (in this case, knowledge on how trauma can impact memory recall, retention of information, and even language production).
- In addition to the knowledge base, an interpreter must have the capacity (e.g., to read the room, take notes, provide an interpretation that does not force the survivor to have to recount trauma repeatedly, suppress their own experiences of trauma to not allow it to color their interpretation, and to take on advocating and educating hearing people).
- Some capacity concerns could be mitigated by having a team present, however, in sensitive situations like these it is often less preferred to have more than one interpreter.
- An interpreter also has to navigate not becoming the knowledge-bearer that the hearing individuals rely on to connect with the survivor. Towing this line also requires capacity to recognize when that may be happening and to steer hearing people away from that behavior.
- The solution will not be black and white every time. The following must be factored in: desired outcome (of all consumers which may also be in conflict with one another) + context + interpreter capacity + representation. In some cases, an interpreter's possession of certain skills/training (such as training in trauma-informed interpreting) can fill the shared experience gap.

IV. Context

Composition of the people in the space: Who is present, and what outcome, impact or impression is desired? Whose “desired” outcome takes priority, if any? Relationship/history between the consumer(s) and interpreter(s)

Composition of the field: Given the extreme lack of diversity in the field, it is impossible for all Deaf consumers to receive the representation they desire or need. This makes it even more of a pressure to “come through” when we are placed in a position to be that desired representation (at times despite our capacity limits)

Interpreters are human: There are factors that influence an interpreter’s cognitive, emotional, psychological, and physiological capacity coming into/during the assignment

- i. Our ability—or willingness—to step beyond the traditional black and white “professionalism” and ethics is often being assessed by the consumer, whether consciously or unconsciously. In dilemmas of capacity versus representation, this dynamic is especially relevant, as interpreters may find themselves expected to move beyond conventional expectations and navigate spaces and dynamics that require more than just technical skill.



VOICE FROM THE FIELD: “The Black Interpreters Doing Black Work”

“An international conference in a specialized field was hosted in a predominantly Black country. The conference was attended by mostly white researchers from various language backgrounds. A Black Deaf male researcher was presenting for the first time on an international stage. Navigating this space with trepidation, the presenter stated it was paramount for him to be recognized as a legitimate researcher amongst his colleagues who would be accessing his presentation via the interpreters.



The only two Black female interpreters on the team were assigned to interpret his presentation into English. It was our first time attending and interpreting at this conference. I had experience interpreting this content in addition to research experience in the conference topics. On the other hand, my team interpreter had never interpreted in this content area, but had significant experience working in higher education settings. There were two other non-Black interpreters on the team who also had extensive research experience in the field and had previously interpreted at this conference. However, given the presenter’s racial identity and the geographical location of the conference, we were under the assumption that the coordinator prioritized assigning us to the presentation (even

though we both selected this presentation as one of our preferred topics knowing the topic would be based on Black Deaf peoples in a predominantly Black country). Additionally, given the presenter’s desires, we took it as a personal responsibility to be a visual (racial) representation of the presenter; thereby prioritizing representation without considering our own capacity or the capacity of others on the team. From a capacity standpoint, it would have been logical to have the more experienced interpreters assigned and/or the interpreters who had the research background to ensure that the presenter’s goals of being viewed as a legitimate researcher were achieved. However, from a purely representation standpoint, we made a decision to assume the subsequent challenges to our capacity (e.g. having to engage in dynamic teaming approaches, backchanneling and open communication with the presenter to facilitate trust, etc.) while striving to make sure he was represented in the ways he wanted to be rather than have his “voice” interpreted through a non-Black lens to a majority white audience.

Factors for Consideration:

1. As Black interpreters, we are keenly aware that when White interpreters work from ASL to English interpreting for Black Deaf individuals, their attempts to be PC (politically correct) or monitor the cultural appropriateness oftentimes has a negative impact. It results in them (unintentionally) distorting the Deaf person's message, tone, intent and/or impact and at times also portrays the Deaf person as less confident or even incompetent. When a culturally significant or controversial sign is used, White interpreters may hesitate, stammer, or soften the message in search of "neutral" language. This not only disrupts the natural flow of communication but also compromises the integrity of the message. The very language that causes hesitation for a White interpreter is often entirely appropriate and fluid when voiced by a Black interpreter. Having this in mind, becomes an additional factor that pushes Black interpreters to sometimes overvalue representation over capacity.
2. There are creative ways in achieving consumer's desired outcomes. Sometimes, interpreters become so accustomed to a routine especially when they are used to working in specific environments. However, it is important to remember flexibility is key and that when we co-create access with consumers, it may require stepping out of the "business as usual" approach.
3. Sometimes what matters for the interpreters may not be prioritized considerations for the consumers. In cases where priorities are misaligned, it is important to consider the desired outcome of the consumer and how the team can best achieve that outcome.
4. It's important to consider that sometimes consumers may not prioritize certain things if they don't know that they have the power to or are unaware of what is available to them. The interpreting team must consider the context and whether this is the appropriate time/place to advocate/educate the consumer on the range of options available to them.
5. When (if ever) would it feel okay to let go of representation in favor solely of capacity? And what would be the impact (if any) on underrepresented consumers?



True representation must address systemic issues: Avoiding tokenism, fostering genuine diversity, and centering capacity.

Capacity

Capacity Requirements

1. “Goodness of Fit” based on skill, experience, context, and/or access to prior knowledge.

NOTE: Access to prior knowledge can be both positive and negative depending on the context and the consumer.

2. Preparation (content knowledge, knowledge of context, interface with team and consumers, pre-session and debriefing).
3. Execution (delivering the work, maintaining stamina– physical, mental, cognitive, and physiological, multitasking/split attention).
4. Social Navigation (virtual and physical spaces).

For interpreters from minoritized communities, social navigation can be one of the more complex and demanding aspects of the job because of its many layers.

- Superficial assumptions are often made about our roles, responsibilities, and decisions during any given assignment. Often these assumptions place linguistic knowledge and/or interpreting skill as the foundation of “success” or “failure” in an assignment. However, interpreting is much more complex. When an interpreter’s socialization differs from the context they are working in, they must be able to identify a cognitive anchor or reference point to map what they see and hear to help provide an equivalent interpretation.
- On top of managing the actual work, we must constantly navigate perceptions of self and skill coupled with interpersonal dynamics—perceived and/or imposed. For example: egos, team hierarchy, race and gender dynamics (among others), stakes of the job, location, familiarity with content and consumers, and so much more. Before even getting into the actual interpreting, we are already maneuvering through an intricate maze of unspoken expectations and power structures.
- Ability to navigate, background, or deprioritize your own needs (physiological, psychological, emotional, etc.)

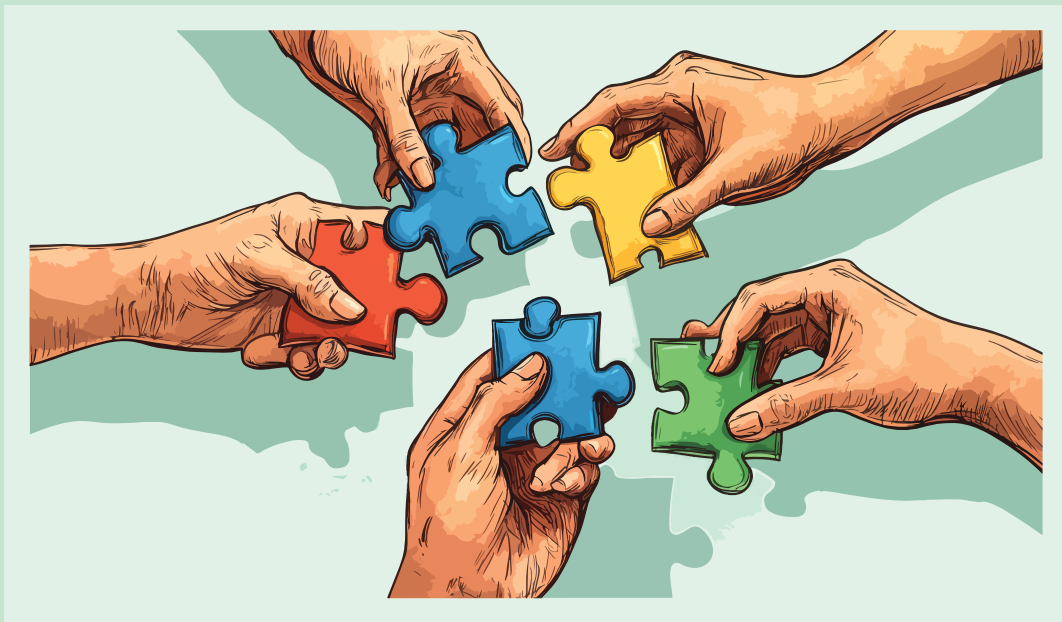


Reconsidering Team Support

- A key aspect of a strong and effective team dynamic is recognizing the capacity requirements of each team member and each assignment.
- By proactively identifying potential gaps in capacity, the team can implement the necessary support measures to address capacity concerns that could impact the team successfully achieving dynamic meaning equivalency for all consumers.
- When capacity mismatches arise, the interpreter who best meets the capacity requirements and/or representation considerations must be prepared and willing to assume additional responsibility in an attempt to counterbalance the lack of culturally (and linguistically) responsive scheduling.

What should support from the team look like?

1. Negotiating the work and the support requires active dialogue especially with unfamiliar teams
 2. Awareness of capacity requirements
 3. Flexibility and willingness to pivot
- Finding non-traditional ways to support the team (e.g., maybe the support is helping to navigate their capacity requirements while they take on more of the interpreting load)
 - Co-creating space to honor and respect consumer preferences without placing the lionshare of the workload on any team member(s). The consumer needs to be brought in on this conversation of what their ask will require of the interpreting team and how all involved parties can navigate this together.



Culturally Responsive Scheduling

- “You have been requested” often is a ploy by agencies to get marginalized interpreters to accept requests that they may be less likely to accept (sometimes because the agency has previously placed them in a less optimal position). This phrasing is now understood to be code for “the requester wanted a Black interpreter so we (finally) thought of you (with no consideration or knowledge of your actual skillset).”
- Aligning representation needs without compromising skill alignment/appropriateness. Requires knowing Black interpreters and interpreters of color beyond our skin color and actually knowing our skill sets.

Team Configurations: Building equitable, effective teams that account for capacity and representation given the nature of the request, the participants, and the people being represented.

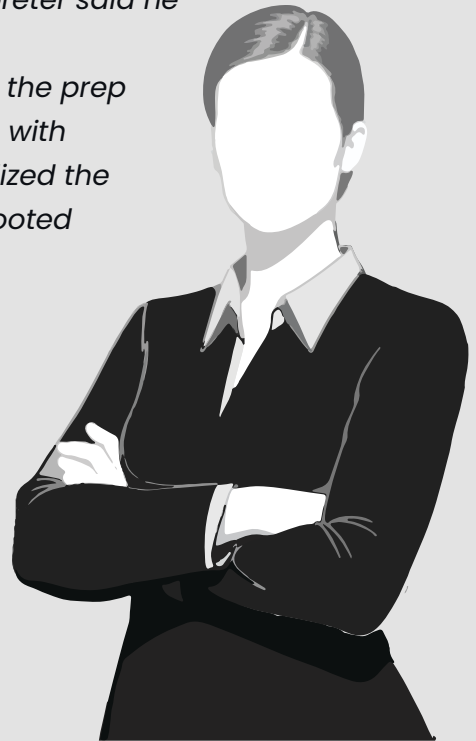


VOICE FROM THE FIELD: “The Warm Body”

Two Black Deaf interpreters were confirmed for a virtual Black joy event at a postsecondary institution. I was hired at the request of the Deaf interpreters as a last-minute sub to team with the confirmed white hearing interpreter. The department informed me that we would “feed” the Deaf interpreters. I had never met or worked with my confirmed team prior to the event. Upon logging in for the tech check, the interpreters began discussing the teaming plan and pairings. One Deaf interpreter shared that they were very seasoned and stated their preference for working with me as we had worked together in the past. The less seasoned Deaf interpreter said he was flexible to work with anyone but that he had only interpreted simultaneously for a live event a few times prior to this one. During the prep conversation, my team stated that she had no experience working with Deaf interpreters. Additionally, as we reviewed the agenda, we realized the event would start with several songs and/or spoken word pieces rooted in Black US culture.

We discussed the newfound demands of the assignment as a team. It was agreed that I would provide my team with a “quick and dirty” training on how to work with Deaf interpreters within the 10 minutes we had remaining to start. We also agreed that I would start the event supporting the seasoned Deaf interpreter first. Then I would continue for another turn with the second, less seasoned Deaf interpreter which would allow them to get comfortable with the process, while also creating an opportunity for my team to observe how the process works, prepping her to join in rotation to work with the more seasoned Deaf interpreter for the remainder of the event. However, just before the start, the more seasoned Deaf interpreter lost internet connection and was never able to re-join. We sent a message to the coordinator; however, they couldn’t get another Deaf interpreter for the session.

As a result, the team had to pivot. It was an unsigned/unspoken agreement that because she was white, my team would not come on screen to interpret. So, I ended up feeding the Deaf interpreter while also rotating on screen to relieve him until my team felt comfortable and confident enough to feed him independently– which occurred about 1 hour into the 2-hour-long assignment.



Factors for consideration:

1. Teaming approaches should always be a negotiation—a co-creation. That co-creation requires open and transparent communication. I was grateful that my team put her ego aside and shared truthfully what her limitations were. However, I was disappointed that she accepted an assignment that should have been reserved for a qualified all-Black team. Her limitations required me to pivot and unexpectedly take on more than I was prepared to.
2. If she were a cultural and linguistic fit for the assignment, the Deaf interpreter losing connection would not have left as much of a burden on me. Having a team who was an appropriate fit for the assignment would have allowed for the entire team to distribute the workload in a way that was complementary to all of our needs and abilities without jeopardizing the cultural integrity of the event. A team's lack of goodness of fit, whether because of misalignments in identity or skill, almost always result in disproportionate workload for the remaining team members.
3. Under what circumstances would my team have bowed out of the assignment once she realized she was not a skill-match, a cultural match, nor a linguistic match for the job?
4. Why did my team not know she was misaligned in so many ways prior to logging on for the assignment?
5. Marginalized interpreters often have to shoulder the burden of representation over capacity, demanding greater exertion and effort. We don't have the luxury of our work being seen as solely our own—it's inevitably a reflection of our entire communities. Therefore, when unexpected demands are placed on us, we tend to roll up our sleeves and get creative because we often feel we can't afford to "fail".



Representation + Capacity

“Representation Mathematics”

This is not just a numbers game. Substituting any configuration that does not meet the original request disregards the intent and impact of representation. In the famous words of Brandy, “Almost doesn’t count”. It is not enough to half satisfy the request—or to assume that any marginalized identity will suffice in place of another. Representation is about specificity, not just presence. When requests like these are altered, it signals that the need isn’t truly valued to begin with.

Request for 2 Black Female interpreters → 1 Black Male + 1 White Female scheduled.

VOICE FROM THE FIELD: “The Odd Man Out”

At a conference with a team of over 20 interpreters, I was the only Black male and one of only two interpreters of color. The keynote speaker, a Black woman, had specifically requested two Black female interpreters. I was originally selected and paired with a Black male who for unknown reasons was unable to attend the conference, but he was later replaced by a White female interpreter.

Due to a last-minute scheduling change, the interpreting team for the keynote expanded to four interpreters—one on each side of the stage for visibility and access. This meant the final team consisted of one Black male (me) and three White female interpreters. Because of the shifts in team composition and the timing of speaker transitions, I ended up interpreting only 15 minutes of the 45-minute keynote.

After the presentation, several Deaf attendees approached me, expressing their disappointment that I hadn’t interpreted the entire keynote. They told me they felt I should have been the sole interpreter for the session. Later, the presenter herself sought me out and shared that, while unspoken, she had expected me to be her interpreter for the duration of her speech.





Factors for Consideration:

1. The presenter specifically requested two Black female interpreters.
2. I was the only Black (male) interpreter on the team – not what she requested.
3. This was my first time working in this city and at this particular conference.
4. My last-minute team consisted entirely of White women whom I had just met an hour before the presentation. This meant that not only was there no established relationship for supporting a healthy teaming dynamic; there was no foundational relationship to navigate the capacity and representation dilemma presented to us.
5. I was consciously trying to avoid the assumption that just because I'm Black and the presenter is Black, I should be the sole interpreter.
6. How do I acknowledge that race and cultural alignment matter without reducing interpreter compatibility to a "skin-match"?
7. How do I approach this nuanced discussion with the team while considering the gender implications and the risk of being perceived as "mansplaining" team dynamics?
8. How do I navigate the cognitive, emotional and psychological demands of the situation considering that my three White female team interpreters might feel they were tokenizing me which could undermine a healthy workflow for the team?

This situation highlights the complexity of representation, compatibility, and expectations within interpreting teams, particularly in high-visibility spaces. It raises important questions about how we balance logistical decisions with cultural and interpersonal dynamics in a way that respects both the needs of the Deaf consumer and the integrity of the interpreting process. It also highlights how inequitable hiring practices place the resulting interpreting team in a position of a stalemate – where the requester could not have her needs met, even when expressed in advance.

Navigating the “Yes” and “No” Dilemma

It is an honor anytime we have the opportunity to represent individuals who are from any of our identity backgrounds or have shared lived experiences. When these types of specific requests are made, it is clear that the consumer’s desire is to be able to show up as their most authentic selves, via our interpretations, without compromising their message. These requests are also sometimes the rare instances that marginalized and underrepresented interpreters are (or should be) prioritized for opportunities or to be in spaces that we are otherwise not granted to be in. When we have multiple, intersecting identities and characteristics that align with consumers, it provides an opportunity to thin the veil of communicative barriers at the linguistic, cultural, social levels and more that often prohibit Deaf consumers from being their full selves and imparting their personality in a given space. While holding and honoring the beauty of representation, there are also considerations (i.e., capacity requirements) that should not be ignored. When choosing to accept or decline an assignment, interpreters are asked to weigh some of the following consequences:

The Consequences of Declining

1. Risk of alienation or losing professional opportunities.
2. Requester feeling like their wishes weren’t honored
3. Negative impact on trust and visibility for underrepresented professionals.

Our presence is so rare in most spaces that we’re almost always expected to step up, and if we don’t, it’s seen as a personal slight. It’s cultural. It’s an honor, but it’s also exhausting.

The Consequences of Acceptance

1. Overworking underrepresented individuals.
2. Increased emotional labor and physical/psychological exhaustion.
3. Potential capacity depletion



VOICE FROM THE FIELD: “The ‘Yes’ Man”

I was assigned to interpret for a panel/workshop featuring panelists from various countries, cultures, religions, and backgrounds—all people of color. My team consisted of a highly skilled White female interpreter who has far more experience than I do. We had worked together once before and team well. We decided, based on the demands of the job and the duration, to split the work into 15-minute intervals.

Everything was going smoothly during the presentations and discussions until my 3rd or 4th 15-minute interval was coming to an end. The next presenter was a Black man, and as my team and I were about to switch, he asked me—right in front of everyone—if I could stay and interpret for him. Without hesitation, I agreed. He presented for about 15–20 minutes. As he finished, the next speaker, a Black woman, also asked me to interpret for her—again, publicly. Naturally, I said yes. Before I knew it, I had been interpreting for nearly an hour without a break. My team was supportive and attentive, but the support they could provide was limited to feeding from the back of the room. By that point, my capacity was stretched thin, but at that moment, I felt that representation was more important than taking a break. I pushed through without thinking much about it, but it wasn’t until after the session, when the group took a break, that my team said, “You know you were up there for an hour?”. I was shocked, and only then did I realize the full impact of my drained capacity.”



Factors for consideration:

1. We had basic demographic and professional information about the panelists prior to the event, but the depth and intricacies of their personal stories only became apparent as we interpreted.
2. My team was highly qualified, and we had a good plan that was working smoothly for both of us.
3. We didn't anticipate that consumers would make spontaneous, public requests for changes to our plan.
4. What would have been the impact if I had prioritized my capacity over representation at that moment?
5. How often do you think those Black hearing consumers have access to Black interpreters for them to literally jump at the opportunity—in front of everyone—to have their words come off of Black hands?

In that moment, the weight of representation—and the need to rise to the occasion—outweighed my capacity. Yet, the experience left me with deep reflections on how our professional capacity intersects with the importance of representation, and the unique and powerful role we play in these spaces.



Microaggressions and Their Impact on Capacity

From Consumers and team members, includes but not limited to

- Assumptions
- Biases
- Disrespectful behaviors
- Undermining competence
- Exclusion
- Lack of support

VOICE FROM THE FIELD: “The Repeat Offender”

“I was one of four interpreters assigned to interpret from ASL to English for a national conference day-long board meeting that would take place over 3 days with the same team. I was the only Black interpreter on the board interpreting team. On the first day of the assignment, we met an hour prior to prep as a team and discuss how we would be working together. I explained that I felt we should work collaboratively as a team of 4 with everyone ready to support one another since we had a heavy agenda, rather than working in time intervals and only receiving support from one team member.

We sat to review the agenda for the first day and discuss how we would split the work and support one another. One of the interpreters began to state her preferences and “assign” the work based on which Deaf people would be presenting from the stage, alternating between herself and the two other white interpreters on the team. At the three hour mark of the agenda, a Black Deaf person was set to present from the stage and the interpreter pointed to me to signal that this would be the first time I got to work in our teaming rotation.

I looked at her and said “we are not doing this (the typical assumption of white interpreters that Black interpreters can only work with Black Deaf people) behavior today” and that “I can work with any Deaf person just like the rest of the team”. She was taken aback and gave an expression that she was hurt by my comment to her. To which I told her we can start from the top and divide the labor equitably. She became noticeably upset. Then stated she preferred to work as two teams of two interpreters; rather than a team of four.



We moved forward with the plan of working as teams of two, alternating between the teams at 15-minute intervals. However, every time a Black Deaf person came on stage, even though she and her team were “on”, they would look to me with questioning eyes of whether I should/would interpret. Every time my team and I were “on”, and a white Deaf person came on stage, they would preemptively yell or type feeds in our document when I was set to interpret into English. After the 7-hour day, she came to me and said “I think my behavior might have been microaggressive, but that wasn’t my intention, but if it was, I apologize.” We still had 2 more days of working on this assignment together.

Factors for consideration:

1. Microaggressions are not just in words, but also in actions. Microaggressions are still microaggressions whether they are intentional or not.
2. We are often faced with the burdens of deciding whether we will call out the actions of our colleagues, counterparts, or consumers and advocate for ourselves (our teams and/or consumers) knowing it could have a detrimental impact on the teaming dynamic.
3. We are continuously assumed incompetent by our teams until we prove ourselves to be otherwise, and sometimes that's not even enough.
4. Often, we watch our white teams stay in the bystander role, and we have to navigate our disappointment to not let it interfere with our teaming dynamic. However, it undermines our ability to trust our team will show up for us in the work if they can't show up for us outside of the work.
5. When a team is constantly indirectly challenging your work, it requires trust in yourself and your skill in order to not mentally start to question every aspect of your work, while still trying to produce your best product for the consumer(s).



Moving Forward

Balance Representation and Capacity – Consider both when assembling teams. You don't know what it took for your colleagues to show up, nor what it takes to execute the job.

Read the Room – When appropriate and feasible, collaborate with Deaf consumers to factor in:

- Desired outcomes (of all consumers)
- Context of the assignment
- Interpreter capacity
- Representation needs

Build Relationships, Not Just Rosters

Subcontracting isn't always the solution. Establish connections with trusted entities that can effectively meet needs you can't.

Transparency Matters

Have open conversations with consumers, teams, and hiring entities about representation and capacity.

Hint: this requires a baseline of self-awareness and willingness to put your ego aside.

Beyond the Surface Level

Scheduling decisions can't be reduced to a single factor – neither skill nor cultural competence alone is enough. Both must work in tandem, alongside other considerations to ensure effective, equitable outcomes. The presence of a “representation match” does not diminish the responsibility of non-BIPOC interpreters. Shared identity or culture is not a substitute for shared accountability– every team member must contribute fully.

Labor Ain't Free

Educating non-BIPOC teams on the job takes time and energy. If you're not willing to compensate for that labor, don't put it on your team to school you.

Action Over Optics

Implement practical strategies to create inclusive, effective spaces that prioritize skills, support, and authentic representation.

