



# COGNITIVE DISSONANCE + ALLYSHIP

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“Do the best you can,  
until you know better.  
Then, when you know,  
better, do better.”

- Maya Angelou

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By now, we (interpreters, advocates for/in the interpreting field, interpreter agencies, and hiring entities) should in fact know better and be doing better collectively by instituting systemic changes for the betterment of the field of sign language interpreting. Despite extensive dialogues, publications, workshops, webinars, and conferences, it is apparent that the concept of true allyship in the field of interpreting remains inconcrete frequently resulting in performative realization. One example of the pervasive performativity is evident in the selection and assignment of interpreters. The notion that any interpreter is better than none is no longer a sufficient excuse, especially when the very process of selecting interpreters can perpetuate harm to practitioners and the communities we serve. As Black interpreters, we can only imagine the sense of privilege that accompanies the ability to readily accept any job under the presumption of possessing the “necessary skill set”. It prompts the question: when will we transcend mere skills and availability to genuinely account for and incorporate considerations such as culture, representation, optics, and opportunities for marginalized communities into our decision-making processes?

# COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

A psychological phenomenon characterized by the discomfort a person feels from the tension, clash or misalignment of values or beliefs with their behaviors. Oftentimes, a person will resort to altering either their behavior, values, or beliefs in an attempt to alleviate this discomfort.

Examples of Cognitive Dissonance in the field of Sign Language Interpreting:

A non-Black interpreter accepts a job about unmasking racism within professional standards presented by a racially and culturally southern Black presenter (behavior), clearly unaware about what it means to be Black in the United States (cognition)

A self-proclaimed interpreter ally witnesses harm/oppression (e.g., poor business practices, deprioritization of minoritized interpreters/groups, etc.) perpetuated by a "friend" (behavior) knowing that said behavior is wrong, harmful, and that they should address it and/or intervene (cognition)

An interpreter accepts a job working with Deaf + hearing people from specific non-US countries (behavior) with no background knowledge or experience of those countries and demonstrates xenophobic beliefs evident in comments such as "foreigners have accents and I can't understand them" (cognition)

An interpreting agency says they believe in uplifting 'marginalized' interpreters (cognition) yet continues to only send job requests to non-BIPOC or to a privileged group of interpreters regardless of qualifications or fitness failing to foster meaningful relationships with interpreters from marginalized communities outside of culturally specific "holidays" (behavior)





**It is disheartening to witness contradictory behavior behind closed doors where purported allies exhibit feigned public support at the discourse level which primarily serves their own interests, while simultaneously failing to contribute meaningfully to the cause they claim to champion.**

Hiring entities are not immune to cognitive dissonance. The intersection of overlooking consumer experience and cultural sensitivity for financial gain underlies haphazard and inattentive scheduling practices. These entities bear equal responsibility when they fail to proactively schedule interpreters for requests that pertain to specific cultural, linguistic, and/or racial groups. Resorting to last-minute arrangements for interpreters carries detrimental consequences, including but not limited to:

1. Constraints on the time available for a BIPOC interpreter to assess suitability and thoroughly prepare significantly compromises their performance since these opportunities have not traditionally been afforded to BIPOC interpreters. This results in considerably higher stakes than those of their non-BIPOC peers.
2. Exploitation of the time constraints by schedulers to justify pitiable efforts often accompanied by phrases like, "There are no BIPOC interpreters available" in order to mask a weak or non-existent pool, further marginalizing these interpreters and relegating them to an "as needed" status.
3. Failure to invest thoughtful consideration beyond surface-level factors like skin color, gender, or identity alignment.
4. The significant emotional and psychological toll on affected communities when they repeatedly encounter such practices, which in turn impacts their trust and engagement with interpreters from all backgrounds including those who were never even considered for the assignment.



Addressing these issues goes beyond mere scheduling; it entails recognizing the broader implications and responsibilities associated with interpreter selection processes.

As the interpreting field continues to shift towards professionalization, we have been striving to dismantle and unlearn entrenched systems and behaviors. In this regard, uncomfortable conversations are necessary but are merely a first step. Beyond articulating our concerns, it remains imperative for us to take proactive actions when we witness injustices. These actions become essential in cultivating a more harmonious work environment that embraces diversity within its workforce.

Essentially, the problem with cognitive dissonance in the field of sign language interpreting stems from the gap between knowing better and doing better and its disproportionate impact on marginalized communities. If you think your efforts have been good enough, we challenge you to do better by acting proactively to prevent harm rather than reactively to rectify it. We seek to rise to that challenge, as well. In the meantime... stop playing in our faces!

