

A publication of the  
Conference of Interpreter Trainers

---



# International Journal of Interpreter Education

*Volume 4, Number 1*  
*May 2012*



CONFERENCE OF INTERPRETER TRAINERS  
[www.cit-asl.org](http://www.cit-asl.org)

ISSN - 2150-5772

# Contents

## Editorial

- Putting Interpreter Educators to the TEST: Testing, Ethics, and Technology* 1–4  
Jemina Napier

## Research Articles

- Bilingual Dual-Role Staff Interpreters in the Health Care Setting: Factors Associated With Passing a Language Competency Test* 5–20  
Lisa Diamond, Maria Moreno, Christy Soto, & Regina Otero-Sabogal
- Intake Tests for a Short Interpreter-Training Course: Design, Implementation, Feedback* 21–45  
Jim Hlavac, Marc Orlando, & Shani Tobias
- Supervision and the Interpreting Profession: Support and Accountability Through Reflective Practice* 46–57  
Ali Hetherington
- Thinking Through Ethics: The Processes of Ethical Decision Making by Novice and Expert American Sign Language Interpreters* 58–72  
Elizabeth Mendoza

## Commentary

- Do You See What I See? Using ELAN for Self-Analysis and Reflection* 73–82  
Della Goswell
- A Translation Studies Approach to Glossing Using ELAN* 83–91  
Judith Collins, Granville Tate, & Paul Hann
- Broadcast Yourself: YouTube as a Tool for Interpreter Education* 92–99  
Tom Cox

## Open Forum

- Moving Interpreter Education Online: A Conversation with Sherry Shaw* 100–110  
Doug Bowen-Bailey & Sherry Shaw

## Student Work Section

- Exploring Remote Interpreting* 111–119  
Erica Alley

## Dissertation Abstracts

120–122

# Thinking Through Ethics: The Processes of Ethical Decision Making by Novice and Expert American Sign Language Interpreters

Elizabeth Mendoza<sup>1</sup>

*Palomar College*

## Abstract

In the course of their work, interpreters face ethical dilemmas that require prioritizing competing moral beliefs and views on professional practice. Although several decision-making models exist, little research has been done on how interpreters learn to identify and make ethical decisions. Through surveys and interviews on ethical decision making, the author investigated how expert and novice American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters discuss their ethical decision-making processes and prioritize *prima facie* duties, or meta-ethical principles (Ross, 1930/2002). The survey participants included 225 novice interpreters with 3 or fewer years of experience as nationally certified interpreters and 168 expert interpreters with 10 or more years' experience. Three novice and three expert interpreters were chosen to participate in the face-to-face interviews. The findings show that both novices and experts similarly prioritize the *prima facie* duties of "fidelity," "do good," and "reparation," although there was variability between the groups. To explain their responses, novice interpreters cited their professional ethical code and rubric decision-making guidelines, and they used low-context discourse to analyze individual-focused responses. Expert interpreters, conversely, drew upon tacit knowledge built upon a foundation of the *Code of Professional Conduct* and used high-context discourse to develop a collective-focused response.

Keywords: ethical decision making, ethics, sign language, interpreters, novice, expert

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: [mendozaliz@cox.net](mailto:mendozaliz@cox.net)

# Thinking Through Ethics: The Processes of Ethical Decision Making by Novice and Expert Interpreters

## 1. Introduction

The interpreting process gives interpreters access to a large amount of private and personal information. In the context of signed language interpreting, interpreters typically work most assignments without other interpreters (Humphrey, 1999; Metzger, 1999), with the communication triad consisting of the deaf consumer, hearing consumer, and interpreter. During their work, interpreters make logistical decisions, such as where to sit or stand so that both participants can clearly see and hear the interpreter. They also continuously and autonomously make ethical decisions (Dean & Pollard, 2001; Gish, 1990; Hoza, 2003), such as whether or not they should report spousal abuse they discover in an interpreting situation. Because signed language interpreters are the only participants in the discourse triad who are knowledgeable about both languages and cultures (typically hearing culture and deaf culture), it is incumbent upon them to make an ethical decision that is fair for all parties. This mixed-methods study provides insight into how expert and novice signed language interpreters make ethical decisions, with implications for wider interpreter training and assistance for those interpreters who need support in making ethical decisions.

## 2. Review of the Literature

My research with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters was guided by an overarching question: How do novice interpreters develop expertise in making ethical decisions? To explore this issue, I sought to answer the following subquestions:

1. How do interpreters define an ethical situation, and what kind of knowledge is required for interpreters to make ethical decisions?
2. How do expert and novice interpreters differ in making ethical decisions?
3. How do expert and novice interpreters prioritize competing meta-ethical principles when making ethical decisions?

I started by discovering what is already known about ethical decision making, expert–novice differences, and signed language interpreters. I wished to situate the questions in research about ethical decision making in general,

in research about ethical decision making among interpreters, and in research into other service-providing professionals. During the literature search, I found that the following areas of research relate to signed language interpreters' ethical decision making: (a) signed language interpreting and ethical codes, (b) expert–novice differences, (c) ethical decision-making models, and (d) signed language interpreting and decision making.

### *2.1 Signed Language Interpreting and Ethical Codes*

When signed language interpreting was first established in the United States as a profession in 1964 (Smith, 1964), its founders strived to ensure that interpreters would be of high moral standards. Within this requirement, however, it was not clear if high moral behavior was expected only in the role of interpreting or also when interpreters were conducting their lives outside of interpreting. The original document from the Workshop on Interpreting for the Deaf (Quigley, 1965) describes the qualifications of signed language interpreters. Interpreters were expected to possess the following characteristics:

1. A proficiency in manual and/or oral communication.
2. A high moral character.
3. A professional attitude which will insure ethical conduct.
4. An understanding of Deaf people.
5. An education sufficient to embrace the problems of life and a sophistication to cope with its variations.
6. Special skills for specific situations. (pp. 1–2)

Many signed language interpreter organizations have ethical codes that their members must follow. The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (2008) lists several signed language interpreters' ethical codes. Finnish, Australian, Kenyan, Irish, Canadian, and Philippine sign language interpreters' codes of ethics all include themes of confidentiality, business practices, appropriate compensation, interpreting accuracy, respect for consumers, discretion in accepting jobs, and impartiality. These concepts are foundational for making ethical decisions because they all include, but are not limited to, meta-ethical themes of do no harm, autonomy for the consumer, justice and equality, and protection of the vulnerable (Humphrey, 1999).

### *2.2 Expert–Novice Differences*

The research on experts and novices attempts to describe how professionals who have been in a given field for a period of time differ in complex cognitive tasks from professionals who are new to that same field. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1986) defined categories that distinguish experts from novices using a scale ranging from very low to very high levels of attainment. They described four areas in which novices become experts: complexity of skills, amount of knowledge, knowledge structure, and problem representation. Novices, by definition, have a basic foundation of skills and knowledge that have a “shallow structure” (p. 12)—a few ideas and not a lot of connections between ideas—and they are not adept at solving “novel problems in one’s own domain” (p. 13). Experts are better at using their extensive knowledge of the subject to structure the problem or process in a few broad categories, with smaller categories that have more complex connections to the larger categories. They then present the problem in a more complex way than the novice. The novice, with a more limited knowledge base, can assess the problem in only a limited way.

There have been several studies on expert–novice differences, particularly in the field of education. Some researchers argued that expert teachers make more reflective comments than do novice teachers when discussing their decision-making processes (Stough & Palmer, 2001). The prominent difference between expert and novice teachers is that the expert’s knowledge “is extraordinarily well organized, and this organization centers around a relatively smaller number of ‘big ideas,’ such as fundamental concepts, principles, theories, or themes” (Niemi, 1997, p. 240). The novice’s knowledge, on the other hand, is limited and not well organized, which results in a simplistic representation of the process. St. Germain and Quinn (2005) posited that experts also possess tacit, or

instinctual, knowledge that allows them to take the right amount of time to think through decisions before they make them and that novice educational leaders make decisions too quickly.

### *2.3 Ethical Decision-Making Models*

Historically, the definitions of *morals*, *values*, and *ethics* have been used as standards for measuring ethical decision making. According to Kohlberg (1975), a “moral principle is a universal code of choosing, a rule of choosing which we want all people to adopt in all situations” (p. 58). Although morals are difficult to define in absolute terms, they are said to be the foundation for ethical codes that guide professionals in day-to-day ethical decision making (Rachels & Rachels, 2006). Ross (1930/2002) posited that morals are also the basis for meta-ethical principles, also called *prima facie duties*, on which ethical codes are developed, such as the following:

1. Do no harm (nonmaleficence)
2. Do good (beneficence)
3. Fidelity (to keep one’s promises and contracts and not to engage in deception)
4. Reparation (repair the injuries that one has done to others)
5. Gratitude
6. Justice and equality
7. Self-improvement

Others added to Ross’s list of *prima facie duties* the principles of protection of the weak and vulnerable, responsible caring, self-improvement, and informed consent (Humphrey, 1999; Humphrey, Janosik, & Creamer, 2004). These meta-ethical principles are the foundation for all ethical codes, including the National Association of the Deaf and Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf’s *Code of Professional Conduct* (CPC; available online at <http://www.rid.org/ethics/code/index.cfm>; Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, n.d.). To understand and adhere to ethical codes, members of any group must understand the meta-ethical principles and use those meta-ethical principles to make solid ethical decisions. When professionals face a situation that has competing meta-ethical principles, such as respect for autonomy and do no harm, they are expected to draw on their own values and personal ethics and apply those to the situation at hand. Although the literature describes several ethical and decision-making models, there have been no studies exploring how individuals actually process information to make those decisions.

### *2.4 Signed Language Interpreting and Decision Making*

Scheibe (1984) was the first to develop a decision-making model specifically for interpreters. She developed the “creative problem solving model—a repeatable process,” a circular model expanded on by Gish (1990), who added “outlining the steps of the solution” to the process of interpreter decision making. In 1995, Humphrey and Alcorn developed a third model with 10 steps in the decision-making process. This model added the concepts of meta-ethical principles, interpreter’s emotions, and consulting with colleagues, if necessary. Table 1 shows Hoza’s (2003) comparison of these models. The models assume that interpreters will define the problem accurately, collect facts in the situation, take action, and reflect on their actions. The models, however, lack interpreters’ accounts of their actual decision-making processes.

## Thinking Through Ethics

Table 1: Comparison of signed language interpreters' decision-making models  
(Hoza, 2003, p. 32)

<b>Scheibe (1984)</b>	<b>Gish (1990)</b>	<b>Humphrey &amp; Alcorn (1995)</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The situation: where are we in relation to where we want to be?</li> <li>2. Fact-finding: who, what, when, where, why</li> <li>3. Problem definition: zeroing in on the problem</li> <li>4. Solution findings: brainstorming, deferred judgment</li> <li>5. Evaluate ideas: criteria, listing</li> <li>6. Implementation: commitment, target date</li> <li>7. Follow-up: effective?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe the problem clearly: What is happening? What to change?</li> <li>2. Find out all the facts you can about the problem (who, what)</li> <li>3. Think of possible solutions: ways to change the situation (don't evaluate)</li> <li>4. Think of the pros and cons of each possible solution (evaluate)</li> <li>5. Choose a solutions to try (best choice)</li> <li>6. Outline the steps of the solution</li> <li>7. Try the solution (accept responsibility)</li> <li>8. Evaluate what happened</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collect all information and facts possible</li> <li>2. Identify goals and relevant meta-ethical principles</li> <li>3. Note all possible options</li> <li>4. Identify all potential beneficial and negative results</li> <li>5. Review foundational goals and principles</li> <li>6. Identify any emotions that may bias or influence judgment</li> <li>7. Consult with colleagues as necessary</li> <li>8. Rank options</li> <li>9. Take action</li> <li>10. Review and evaluate action taken</li> </ol>

Dean and Pollard's (2001) demand-control schema theory developed and expanded on Karasek's (1979) demand-control theory. Karasek had (1979) developed a job-strain model that compared the demands of a job and the controls that the employee has to act on those demands, finding that jobs with high demands and low controls produce more stress than a low-demand and high-control job. Dean and Pollard (2001) proposed that interpreting is a high-demand yet low-control occupation. They characterized the demands of interpreting as belonging to four areas:

- Environmental: specific to the setting (i.e., professional roles, terminology, physical surroundings)
- Interpersonal: specific to the interaction of the consumers and interpreter (i.e., culture, goals)
- Paralinguistic: specific to the expressive skills of the deaf/hearing consumers (i.e., style, pace, volume)
- Intrapersonal: specific to the interpreter (thoughts, feelings, physical reactions) (p. 5)

Dean and Pollard (2001) suggested that interpreters do have choices in certain areas and can make decisions that can have either a positive or negative outcome, either a short-term or long-term. This is the current theory of decision making and one that has been used for developing the national interpreter exam and for educating future interpreters. However, the Dean and Pollard study was, again, based on a theory and not on probing interpreters themselves on how they think through ethical decisions.

### 3. Research Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate and understand the strategies and behaviors that expert and novice signed language interpreters reported using when making ethical decisions in work situations; therefore, the focus was on these two specific groups of interpreters. I defined *novices* as those interpreters who had the National Interpreter Certification—Certified (NIC—Certified), a certification from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) that had only been offered in the 4 years prior to this research, which ensured that these interpreters had been nationally certified for fewer than 4 years. The expert group included interpreters who possessed RID's Comprehensive Skills Certificate (CSC), a national certification offered by RID only until 1987, and thus these interpreters had many years of experience. Both certifications are, or had been, developed, administered, and maintained by the RID, the national certifying body for signed language interpreters in the United States. The potential participants for the study included a total of 1,403 certified interpreters from novice and expert groups as found on RID's online interpreter database. Of the 1,403 potential qualified participants, 393 successfully completed the survey. Of the 393 survey participants, 225 interpreters (57%) had earned the NIC—Certified certification and were classified as novices, and 168 (43%) interpreters had earned at least the CSC and were classified as experts.

The study included an analysis of documents used in the signed language interpreting field in the United States and responses to the online survey and interviews. The documents included the CPC, RID's *NIC Interview Evaluation Rubric Anchors*, and other documents that outline the criteria of the National Interpreter Certification exam. The online survey asked participants for demographic information and posed questions about how often they experienced certain areas in ethical dilemmas (see Appendix for survey questions). The six interview participants (three novice and three expert interpreters) were selected and interviewed in English via webcam (see Appendix for interview questions). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The survey covered ethical areas deliberately limited to four tenets from the CPC: confidentiality, impartiality, professional conduct, and business practices. *Confidentiality* in the field of signed language interpreting pertains to keeping all assignment-related information protected and restricted to only those participants in the interpreting situation. *Impartiality* is defined as the interpreter being neutral and unbiased during the work, regardless of how strongly the interpreter supports or opposes the topic of discussion, or how the interpreter feels about either participant in the dialogue. Impartiality also includes providing services regardless of the consumers' age, gender, race, ethnicity, and/or religion. The ethical area of *professional conduct* refers to interpreters possessing necessary updated skills and using discretion when accepting and performing interpreting tasks. *Business practices* are guidelines for interpreters to honor commitments, charge fair and reasonable wages for their services, and perform pro bono work.

My analyses followed Ross's (1930/2002) theory of prima facie duties and his assertion that people's tendencies to choose a right action initiate "a certain change in the state of affairs irrespective of motive" (p. 6). Ross's prima facie duties were chosen because all professional ethical codes are related to prima facie duties. These concepts embody the basic morals and beliefs of most professional organizations. According to Ross, a prima facie duty might present itself as a moral situation on the surface, but when studied more closely, it "is an objective fact involved in the nature of the situation, or more strictly in an element of its nature, though not, as duty proper does, arising from its *whole* nature" (p. 20, emphasis in original). One must analyze each situation for its elements to distinguish if one or more of the elements are, in fact, of moral or ethical nature. One must also prioritize prima facie duties in order to make the decision that will benefit all parties involved. Ross said that if there is a conflict of duties, or more than one prima facie duty involved in the situation, the decision maker must have a tacit understanding that one prima facie duty, for example, fidelity, would have priority over another, such as beneficence, to ensure the ensuing act has a morally beneficial outcome for all involved.

For my initial analysis, I first established a list of a priori codes from Ross's prima facie duties. The participants were presented with six questions that required narrative responses (see Appendix). Coding followed meta-ethical principles (Humphrey, 1999; Humphrey et al., 2004; Ross, 2002) to determine how interpreters make ethical decisions from the scenarios presented to them. Each response was first coded for prima facie duties; through analysis and an evolving deductive process, a second list of emerging codes was developed and refined. Some of these codes were specific to the CPC, such as quoting verbiage, specific tenets, or following the NIC



evaluation rubric. I added other codes that emerged from patterns that were not identified as *prima facie* duties but were interesting nonetheless. These included feelings of conflict, perceived bias in relationships, not being qualified, demanding payment, and not mixing personal and professional relationships. Other codes were based on theories, such as espoused and enacted theories of action and use of metaphor. The remaining codes were developed to ascertain if the interpreter correctly identified the ethical situation, or if the interpreter stated that the situation was not ethical when, in fact, it was ethical. The last code, “other,” was chosen when the participant responded with a statement or exclamation that did not fit into the above categories.

In last phase of the study, I interviewed three novice and three expert interpreters, to examine their perceptions of, explanations of, and justifications for their behaviors and the strategies they used in ethical situations. Interviews were conducted in English via webcam, audio recorded, and transcribed. The interviews were semistructured, meaning that the same topics were covered for each participant, but the order of the questions was sometimes changed according to individual responses (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In designing the interview questions, I used Patton’s (1990) question typology, in which questions are designed to elicit information on the opinions, values, and feelings of the participants that relate to their behaviors and experiences, their knowledge of a given situation, how they perceive the world around them, and any particular themes that emerge. The responses were initially analyzed for similarities and differences among and between groups. The concepts of high-context/low-context language and collectivist/individualistic discourse patterns (see Section 4.3 for further discussion) emerged as the strong patterns between groups.

## 4. Findings

### *4.1 How Do Novice and Expert Interpreters Identify Ethical Dilemmas?*

The first key observation from the survey data was that that novice interpreters identified similar ethical conflicts as the expert interpreters, but only when the ethical issue was a main tenet of the CPC and one they had rehearsed answering for the National Interpreter Certification. For example, when the ethical issue involved the act of interpreting, such as in Scenarios 1 and 3 in an educational setting (see Appendix for the scenarios presented), both groups replied that they would prioritize the meta-ethical principle of fidelity (keeping one’s commitments) over other meta-ethical principles. A typical response from an expert interpreter was, “Yes, it is a confidentiality issue. The interpreter should not engage the parent in that type of conversation, but rather nicely suggest that the parent contact the classroom teacher to set up a conference time.” A typical novice response was, “This one falls under confidentiality. I would encourage the parents to talk to the teacher about how the student is doing in class.” Both groups identified the ethical category as confidentiality and claimed that they would continue in their role as interpreters and redirect the questions to the proper authority, a concept that is explicitly defined in the CPC.

Another similarity between both groups was the prevalence of the code for the category of fidelity in situations where there were billing issues and interpersonal conflict issues. Both novice and expert interpreters expressed a strong commitment to staying within their role as interpreters and abiding by time commitments. Both groups stated that they would not risk deviating from their prescribed role to answer questions meant for someone else and work for the billed time frame. Their responses to Scenario 5 demonstrated a commitment to their roles as interpreters and abiding by the CPC. Experts said, “You have billed for the two-hour minimum so you do have an obligation to continue to interpret.” Novices said, “If I was booked for the client for two hours, I would expect to stay for the two hours and would expect my team interpreter to stay as well.”

Novices and experts differed in their responses to ethical issues embedded in the scenario that related to the subtenets of the CPC. Scenario 2 asked about impartiality and avoiding perceived conflicts of interest, which is not one of the main tenets of the CPC but is found under the third tenet, Conduct (3.8). Most experts responded that they felt qualified to interpret the interrogation and provide resources for the police department to secure future interpreting services. Novices, on the other hand, responded with deep sympathy for the deaf person who could potentially be incarcerated without being cognizant of the charges. They would opt to interpret the

assignment, even though they were not qualified and despite a possible perceived bias with a brother being the police officer.

The results indicate that novice and expert signed language interpreters make different ethical decisions based on their experience. Novices appeared to have difficulty identifying the ethical area in the scenarios, possibly due to lack of experience and exposure to a given setting. Novices attempted to look for “black-and-white” answers in order to more easily identify the ethical issue. When they did so, they explicitly referred to a main tenet of the CPC. Experts displayed a multilayered level of analysis; they asked probing questions, considered multiple perspectives, and illustrated a firm understanding of the ethical consequences. In addition, novices were concerned about being perceived as professionals through payment, contracts, and not mixing their personal and professional lives, whereas experts tended to make decisions based on tacit knowledge of relationships with deaf community members, agencies that employ interpreters, and fellow colleagues.

When they were asked for suggestions to improve interpreter training curricula, novices answered that they would recommend that expert interpreters join interpreting skills classes to discuss their experiences in the field, as well as describe how they make ethical decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas. None of the experts made this same suggestion; all three experts recommended that students learn how to think critically about each situation and act accordingly.

#### *4.2 How Do Interpreters Prioritize Competing Meta-Ethical Principles?*

Most of both groups of interpreters’ responses (i.e., novices and experts) fell under the principle of fidelity. Ross (1930/2002) defines *fidelity* as being faithful to one’s contracts or promises; both groups responded that they would remain in their role as interpreters even when faced with an ethical dilemma. Ross has received criticism for not having tested his theory of prioritizing prima facie duties. In my study, I used his prima facie duties as a framework for coding survey responses and applied them to the research on novice–expert interpreters. Both groups were coded for prioritizing “fidelity” as the first prima facie duty and “do good” and “reparation” as the second and third, respectively (Table 2). The next pair of prima facie duties, “do no harm” and “justice and equality,” were inversely listed. Both groups had zero codes for the last two prima facie duties, meaning that there were no responses coded for “gratitude” or “self improvement.”

Table 2: *How novice and expert interpreters prioritize prima facie duties*

<b>Novice</b>	<b>Expert</b>
<b>Fidelity</b>	<b>Fidelity</b>
<b>Do good</b>	<b>Do good</b>
<b>Reparation</b>	<b>Reparation</b>
<b>Do no harm</b>	<b>Justice and equality</b>
<b>Justice and equality</b>	<b>Do no harm</b>
<b>Gratitude</b>	<b>Gratitude</b>
<b>Self-Improvement</b>	<b>Self-Improvement</b>

“Professional conduct” was coded a similar number of times for both groups. *Professional conduct*, as RID defines it, is when interpreters “conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation.” Of the five ethical scenarios, one clearly involved professional conduct issues, but how interpreters conduct

themselves in dealing with the demands of their job is important and relevant in any given situation. Interpreters appeared to choose “professional conduct” as a way to illustrate that how they would act in their decision is just as important as what they would choose to do as a result of the decision they chose. The findings indicate that interpreters, regardless of professional experience, make an effort to ensure that they faithfully remain in their role while interpreting and adhere to contractual obligations. Both novices and experts responded that *how* they approach individuals in the situation, or their professional conduct, was an important technique for resolving conflicts during their work. They believed that interpersonal skills, incorporating respect and consideration for others, would guide how they would approach the other person in the scenario.

### 4.3 Novice and Expert Discourse Characteristics

Novices and experts showed patterns of explaining their decisions in specific ways. One of the aspects of the NAD-RID National Interpreter Certification’s rubric is to include in one’s answer implications for the candidate’s response to “contain sufficient discussion of both the short-term and long-term effects that might include cultural, political, and/or sociological implications.” Hofstede (2001) includes a long-term-versus-short-term dimension to his analysis, which is “related to the choice of focus for people’s efforts: the future or the present” (p. 29); in this study, novice interpreters typically responded with an emphasis on present outcomes. Novices also used low-context, individual-focused responses when describing their ethical decision-making processes. Hall (1976) describes *high-context* cultures and languages as those that are “rooted in the past, slow to change, and highly stable” (p. 93), whereas *low-context* languages are the opposite, recently occurring, quickly changing, and unstable. Novices would explain their decisions, explicitly describing the context and asked if the interviewer understood the situation. Experts, on the other hand, discussed the consequences of their decisions on the deaf community and perceptions of interpreters and used high-context, collectivist-focused responses. They assumed intersubjectivity between interlocutors and included others’ perspectives in their decision-making processes. Experts used language that included a shared understanding of cultural contexts.

Hofstede (2001) posits that societal norms and values shape how cultures are either individualistic or collective in nature. “The relationship between the individual and the collectivity in human society is not only a matter of ways of living together, it is intimately linked with societal norms” (p. 210). Mindess (2006) applies these concepts to deaf culture and English speakers and explains that ASL is a high-context language, whereas English is a low-context language. Mindess writes, “Every verb in an English sentence shows its tense, while, in ASL, tense may be set at the beginning of an utterance and the carried implicitly until a change of tense is noted” (p. 47). ASL interpreters live in both worlds: the hearing American culture, which is typically individualistic, and the deaf American culture, which is typically collective.

Novice interpreters, as individuals who are new to the profession and are learning deaf history, culture, and language; interpreting skills; and ethical codes and rules of conduct are not yet equipped to make decisions based on complex connections between the concepts that are required as a foundation for becoming an expert interpreter. As they gain expertise, they are able to draw on more complex cultural relationships to make decisions that include the collective culture. They thus move along a continuum from low-context to high-context and from individual-focused to collective-focused decisions. A typology of this concept is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Typology of novice and expert interpreters' discourse narratives

	Individualistic	Collectivistic
High-Context		<b>Expert interpreters</b>
Low-Context	<b>Novice interpreters</b>	

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore how novice and expert ASL interpreters make ethical decisions. Through online surveys, document analysis, and face-to-face interviews, interpreters were asked how they would respond to a series of ethical scenarios. Novice interpreters looked for clear-cut ethical issues and based their decisions on the overt ethical dilemma. Expert interpreters were able to distinguish more subtle ethical issues embedded in the ethical dilemma. Experts also appeared to base their decisions on how those decisions would affect the communities as a whole, not just the individual, as in the novice responses. The discourse patterns of the two groups varied; the novices made explicit connections, using low-context language, whereas the experts used high-context language that assumed the researcher knew contextual connections in their discourse.

### 5.1 Implications of This Study

This research supports an argument for expanding curricula in interpreter education programs (in all languages) to include different ways of teaching ethical decision-making. Interpreter educators presenting ethical dilemmas for analysis can encourage students to identify the meta-ethical principles involved and then follow Dean and Pollard's (2001) demand-control schema process of ranking the principles in order of priority. By prioritizing the meta-ethical principles they identify in a situation, students will develop insight into *why* they make certain decisions in certain situations. For example, students presented with Scenario 2 (below) can develop a list of decisions and discuss *why* they would make that particular decision.

You are a certified interpreter and your brother is a police officer. One night he calls you and begs you to do him a favor and come in and interpret for a man they just picked up for allegedly committing a crime. Your brother tells you that they have called everyone on the list and no one is available. What do you do?

In the above scenario, there are several options available, and students can prioritize meta-ethical principles to come to a final decision. One can:

1. Decline the assignment due to the perceived bias with your brother, the police officer, and the perception of power aligning the interpreter with the police officer. Non-maleficence (do no harm)
2. Accept the job because you do want to help facilitate the communication with the Deaf client. Beneficence (do good)

---

## Thinking Through Ethics

3. Accept this assignment and adhere to one's professional commitment, regardless of the fact that your brother asked you to interpret the interrogation. Fidelity (keep one's promises and contracts and not to engage in deception)
4. Accept the assignment because you do not want the client to sit in jail with no communication as to why he is there. Protection of the weak and vulnerable and/or responsible caring
5. Accept the assignment to ensure that the deaf client has the same access that a hearing client would have. Justice and equality
6. Other meta-ethical principles that would not be relevant: Reparation (repair the injuries that one has done to others), gratitude, self-improvement, and informed consent.

One response to the scenario might be to give names and contact information of other qualified interpreters to the brother (beneficence/responsible caring). Even though the brother stated that he has "called everyone," the police department might not have the names of everyone who is qualified to interpret the interrogation. Another response might be to accept the assignment if another officer replaced the brother in the interrogation (fidelity). The prevailing choice of response is to not interpret the interrogation with your brother as the interrogating officer (non-maleficence), as the deaf client could perceive the interpreter and the police officer in an authoritative relationship with him in a powerless role.

The findings could aid novice ASL interpreters in the process of studying for and initially passing the National Interpreter Certification for ASL, or assist working interpreters in advancing to a higher certification level. The same process of identifying meta-ethical principles can be used in professional development opportunities for working interpreters who have worked longer than novices but are not yet experts in decision making. Now that there is evidence of how expert signed language interpreters make ethical decisions, instructors can use that information to teach novices in both signed and spoken language interpreting to follow the same decision-making processes.

This study also highlights the potential benefits of teaching interpreting students to think of the collective culture when they make decisions. If interpreters are explicitly taught to consider the potential impact of their decisions on consumers in both cultures, as well as on the interpreting profession, would interpreting students become more expert-like in their decision making? Interpreting students have to learn a new language and culture, develop their understanding of their own native language and culture, analyze the theory and application of interpreting, and then apply those concepts to ethical decision making. Many novice students are not yet acculturated into the culture of their clients and make decisions based on their native culture—in the case of ASL interpreters, typically American hearing culture, which is an individualistic culture (Gish, 1990; Mindess, 2006). Explicitly teaching decision making and how those decisions affect the collective culture could assist students in becoming confident ethical decision-making interpreters.

### 5.2 Limitations

Space limitations here prevent elaboration on the entire discussion of the findings of this research. Approximately one third of the potential novice and expert groups from the online survey responded, so this study is indicative of only that population. Research on ethical decision making is also limited by the presentation of hypothetical rather than actual scenarios, with responses divulged to the researcher. Even with these limitations, this study presents foundational evidence on the differences between novice and expert interpreters' ethical decision making that can assist student interpreters in learning to make sound ethical decisions in their future work.

This study focused on how novice and expert interpreters differ in identifying ethical dilemmas and in making ethical decisions. It did not address how interpreters gain expertise in ethical decision making. Is expertise gained solely through experience over time? Or can one gain expertise in a classroom? A longitudinal study could discover interesting and useful information to help educators develop their students' expertise in ethical decision making.

## 6. References

- Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (1986). Educational relevance of the study of expertise. *Interchange*, 17(2), 10–19.
- Dean, R. K., & Pollard, R. Q., Jr. (2001). Application of demand-control theory to sign language interpreting: Implications for stress and interpreter training. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 6(1), 1–14.
- Gish, S. (1990). *Ethics and decision making for interpreters in health care settings: A student manual*. Minneapolis, MN: College of St. Catherine.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors institutions and organizations, across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hoza, J. (2003). Toward an interpreter sensibility: Three levels of ethical analysis and a comprehensive model of ethical decision-making for interpreters. In D. Watson (Ed.), *Journal of Interpretation* (pp. 1–48). Alexandria, VA: RID Publications.
- Humphrey, J. H. (1999). *Decisions? Decisions!* Amarillo, TX: H & H Publishers.
- Humphrey, J. H., & Alcorn, B. J. (1995). *So you want to be an interpreter: An introduction to sign language interpreting*. Amarillo, TX: H & H Publishers.
- Humphrey, E., Janosik, S. M., & Creamer, D. G. (2004). The role of principles, character, and professional values in ethical decision-making. *NASPA Journal*, 41, 675–692.
- Karasek, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 285–307.
- Kohlberg, L. (1975). Moral education for a society in moral transition. *Educational Leadership*, 32(6), 13–16.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego, CA: Elsevier.
- Metzger, M. (1999). *Sign language interpreting: Deconstructing the myth of neutrality*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Mindess, A. (2006). *Reading between the signs: Intercultural communication for sign language interpreters*. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.
- Niemi, D. (1997). Cognitive science, expert-novice research, and performance assessment. *Theory Into Practice*, 36(4), 239–246.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Quigley, S. P. (Ed.). (1965). *Interpreting for Deaf people*. Washington, DC: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2006). *The elements of moral philosophy*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. (n.d.) *Certification and certificates*. Retrieved from [http://www.rid.org/education/edu\\_certification/index.cfm](http://www.rid.org/education/edu_certification/index.cfm)
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. (n.d.) *Code of professional conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.rid.org/ethics/code/index.cfm>
- Ross, W. D. (2002). *The right and the good*. Ed. Philip Stratton-Lake. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (Reprinted from original 1930 edition.)

---

## Thinking Through Ethics

- Scheibe, K. (1984). Creative problem solving. In M. McIntire (Ed.), *New dimensions in interpreter education: Proceedings of the Convention of the Conference of Interpreter Trainers* (pp. 152–173). Conference of Interpreter Trainers.
- Smith, J. S. (Ed.). (1964). *Workshop on interpreting for the Deaf*. Muncie, IN: Ball State Teachers College.
- St. Germain, L., & Quinn, D. M. (2005). Investigation of tacit knowledge in principal leadership. *The Educational Forum*, 70(1), 75–90.
- Stough, L. M., & Palmer, D. J. (2001, April). *Teacher reflection: How effective special educators differ from novices*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children, Kansas City, MO.
- World Association of Sign Language Interpreters. *Code of ethics*. (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.wasli.org/CodeofEthics.htm](http://www.wasli.org/CodeofEthics.htm)

## **Appendix**

### **Survey questions**

#### **Scenario 1:**

You work as an interpreter/classroom assistant for a deaf student in a classroom of 34 students. Part of your role is to interpret; part of your role is to work with all of the students in support of the teacher—grading papers, helping with learning activities, etc.

You have known the deaf student for several years and know his parents quite well. As a matter of fact, you socialize with them outside of work. This student has begun displaying some behavioral problems at school, acting out, skipping class, and acting rude to you and to the teacher. The parents have asked you how their child is doing in school.

#### **Scenario 2:**

You are a certified interpreter and your brother is a police officer. One night he calls you and begs you to do him a favor and come in and interpret for a deaf man they just picked up for allegedly committing a crime. Your brother tells you that they have called everyone on the list and no one is available.

#### **Scenario 3:**

You interpret in an educational setting with 20 students (five of whom are deaf), a hearing teacher, and a deaf teaching assistant. The teacher has a habit of asking you questions concerning the progress of the deaf students. You keep directing the questions towards the teaching assistant but it is clear the teacher still doesn't understand your role as the interpreter. Further, you feel she is not showing proper respect toward the deaf teaching assistant.

#### **Scenario 4:**

You are interpreting a professional development workshop where a video will be shown. The hearing presenter turns off all of the lights in order to improve the video clarity, but the deaf participant now cannot see you when you interpret.

#### **Scenario 5:**

You and another interpreter have been booked to interpret a 1½-hour appointment between a deaf social worker and the hearing parent of a deaf child. You will both bill for the two-hour minimum. Without tell you, your team interpreter contacts the deaf social worker in advance of the appointment. The interpreter explains that he is really busy with another volunteer project and hopes the meeting will finish early if at all possible. The social worker thanks your partner for the call and promises to do what she can to keep things on schedule. You show up at the appointment, unaware of this earlier conversation. The two of you interpret the appointment that wraps up after only 35 minutes. The social worker thanks your partner and tells him he can go that she would like you to stay the remaining 3–4 minutes to interpret several telephone calls.

Is this an ethical issue? If so, under what category?



---

## Thinking Through Ethics

- Confidentiality: Interpreters adhere to standards of confidential communication.
- Impartiality: Interpreters render the message faithfully by conveying the content and spirit of what is being communicated.
- Professional conduct: Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation.
- Business practices: Interpreters are expected to conduct their business in a professional manner.

What would you do in this situation and why?

### Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. It is designed to help me understand how sign language interpreters make ethical decisions.

1. First, I would like to know:
  - a. How long have you been an interpreter?
  - b. How long have you been a certified interpreter?
2. Describe a recent interpreting situation where you felt you had to make a decision that involved ethical issues related to confidentiality, impartiality, professionalism, and/or business practices.
3. What triggered the acknowledgment that this was an ethical dilemma?
4. What made the situation ethically challenging?
5. How did you feel about this ethical issue?
6. Please describe the process you went through in resolving the dilemma.
7. What did you decide to do?
8. Would you change your decision?
9. What training, background, and experience did you draw upon to determine a course of action?