

What Prisms Can Teach Us about Professionalism: Ethical Reflection and Refraction

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Abstract

Have you ever been faced with an ethical dilemma while interpreting and wondered how to go about making the best possible decision? The goal is to enhance interpreters' understanding of professional responsibility and increase their knowledge of models of professional ethical decision-making. Interpreters well versed in the Code of Professional Conduct and experienced in ethical decision-making can benefit from immediate, quick decision-making models. These models are not meant to replace sound ethical education, but rather, offer additional support for interpreters faced with unexpected ethical dilemmas. Addressed here are models including an abbreviated Humphrey-Alcorn Decision Making Model, the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct's "reasonable interpreter" standard, and other approaches such as: *What would my mentor say? What does my prior experience tell me?* and *Is my decision publicly defensible?*



Introduction

"What we see depends mainly on what we look for." ~ John Lubbock

Have you ever been faced with an ethical dilemma while interpreting and wondered how to go about making the best possible decision? Perhaps you mentally review the tenets of the Code of Professional Conduct (CPC). Maybe you remember a prior experience that was similar. Possibly you fervently wish you could remember what was discussed in your Interpreter Education program!

Ethics in the interpreting field reflect the field's values and provide a professional guide for behavior. The foundation for ethical behavior is respect. Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot of Harvard University, in a lecture on "respect" at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, proposed that true respect has six dimensions: 1) it is empowering, 2) it is healing and leads to wholeness of the person, 3) it invites authentic communication and listening, 4) it comes from a true sense of curiosity; a genuine interest in what another thinks, feels and fears, 5) it requires self respect (which is gained by daily private vigilance), and 6) it requires one's attention to be "in the moment" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, S, 2000; Stauffer, 2001). Reflecting on the most highly ethical interpreters, it is clear these interpreters demonstrate a true respect for all individuals, but especially the consumers for whom they interpret.

Ethics, like prisms, can be viewed from different perspectives. Each perspective gives one a different view of the same thing. Ethical dilemmas can be viewed from various perspectives with decision outcomes influenced by the “lens” in which the dilemmas is viewed—much like prisms that both reflect (*to direct back*) and refract (*to bend and deflect*) light. Both new and seasoned interpreters need readily usable ways to apply the CPC tenets to ethical decision-making that consider self-reflection and application of decision-making models.

Ethical decision-making is something that has to be approached purposefully and exercised like any other skill. “Having a method for ethical decision-making is absolutely essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that we work through it automatically without consulting the specific steps” (Velasquez, Moberg, Meyer, Shanks, McLean, DeCosse, André, & Hanson, 1988, para. 14).

There are many resources and models for ethical decision-making and individuals are encouraged to explore these resources (Stewart & Witter-Merithew, 2006; Humphrey, 1999; Kidder, 1996). Unfortunately, an interpreter rarely has the luxury of stopping an assignment to check reference books, phone a friend, or otherwise consider how to make an ethical decision. If interpreters exercise their ethical “muscles” then it is easier to make sound, immediate professional ethical decisions.

All ethical models reflect the values underlying the professions’ values code. Interpreters must understand the underlying principle of the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct that states:

It is the obligation of every interpreter to exercise judgment, employ critical thinking, apply the benefits of practical experience, and reflect on past actions in the practice of their profession. The driving force behind the guiding principles is the notion that the *interpreter will do no harm*. (RID, 2005)

This requires each interpreter to bring critical analysis skills to each ethical decision. These skills are learned in the classroom, on the job, and through experience.

With that as a foundation, there are a few short models shared below that assist interpreters to view a situation from different perspectives. These models supports interpreters when ethical decision-making to arrive at an immediate, yet sound, decision. Why are these models necessary if interpreters consider themselves ethical people and are familiar with the field’s Code of Conduct? When faced with an ethical decision, people’s first thought to action typically comes from their personal value system and experience. Often these same individuals’ final decision for action will change drastically when a decision-making model is applied. Using one or more models for decision-making removes personal bias and places the field’s values and stated behavioral requirements squarely in front of the interpreter. This is how it should be. This provides quality decision-making and consistency across interpreters assuring consumers that practitioners are adhering to the field’s stated professional standards.

NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)

“Ethics set boundaries for professionals working in the field and provide guidelines between that which is allowable and that which is not.” ~ Esther de los Santos Rodriguez and Angel Reuguera Guerrero, Spain

When interpreters apply the CPC principles to their professional conduct, they must “...remember that their choices are governed by the *reasonable interpreter* standard. This standard represents the

hypothetical interpreter who is appropriately educated, informed, capable, aware of professional standards, and fair-minded” (RID, 2005).

A “reasonable” interpreter is one who has completed an interpreter education program, and is well versed in the profession’s standards. This interpreter has the knowledge, experience and sufficient skills to interpret in a variety of situations and for diverse consumers. This interpreter has a broad range of general knowledge including an understanding of current local, national and world events. The hypothetical “reasonable” interpreter understands basic ethical decision-making and has completed ethical studies. He or she is fair-minded; can objectively view situations from a variety of perspectives; can evaluate behavioral options, their outcomes and the impact on the consumers involved; and can discern the best course of ethical action.

Note that the description of a “reasonable” interpreter does not include the concept *unbiased*. It is said that interpreters are required to be “unbiased” when working professionally. Does this mean an interpreter *has no biases... or... is aware of their biases and can minimize the effects?* No one is without biases; however, if one is aware of their biases and the situations where personal bias may unduly and negatively influence the interpreted event, then the interpreter can make better decisions about accepting certain assignments and then monitor the influence of biases while working.

Personal moral values are also biases. Many people base the foundation of their lives on religious moral values. Is there a place in interpreters’ ethical decision-making process for personal or moral values? The short answer is “no.” If personal beliefs were the foundation for ethical decision-making, then there would be no need for a code of professional conduct. The Code is needed precisely because personal and moral beliefs differ and do not always reflect the field’s behavioral expectations. Without an expected standard for ALL interpreters to follow, there is no protection for consumers, interpreters, or the profession assuring each exactly what is expected without variation from interpreter to interpreter. Putting aside personal values (not getting rid of them) also allows interpreters to provide services to consumers in situations that vary from their own personal beliefs, such as a person of Christian faith interpreting a Jewish ceremony, or a straight interpreter providing services at a gay/lesbian event. One must remember that the interpreted event belongs to the consumers, not the interpreter. The interpreter’s personal values have no place here. In summary, interpreters are expected to suspend their personal beliefs and do what the profession requires.

With this understanding in mind, interpreters can ask themselves, “*What would a reasonable interpreter do in this situation?*” as a way to evaluate their options and arrive at an ethical and fair decision.

Humphrey-Alcorn Decision-Making Model (modified)

“It is not our abilities that show who we truly are, it is our choices.” ~ Albus Dumbledore

There are many models of ethical decision making readily available to interpreters via books and the internet. Within the field of interpreting, Humphrey (1999) reviewed several models or approaches to ethical decision-making. One such model is the 10-step Humphrey/Alcorn Decision-Making Model. This model can be modified to provide a guide for ethical decision-making on the job. With practice, these steps can become so familiar as to be almost automatic. Additionally, by using an ethical decision-making process, an interpreter can defend his/her decision should the need arise. Five abbreviated steps include:

1. *What facts/information do I have? Do I need more information before I am able to move ahead?*

Interpreters should evaluate the situation for what they know. Is there known history to this event or these consumers? What is the political or social context? Interpreters should also evaluate the need for additional information. Is there an unknown that would more clearly define the best decision?

2. What are the key ethical issues in the situation?

Is this an issue of confidentiality? Consumer respect? What exactly is the underlying ethical issue? It is much easier to evaluate alternative options and make ethical decisions if the ethical dilemma can be labeled.

3. What are the applicable meta-ethical principles? (Prioritize them if possible)

Meta-ethical principles are “large, over-riding principles ...encompassing an extensive range of behavior, morality, valued rights, and responsibilities” (Humphrey, 1999, p. 10). These principles include such concepts as *do no harm, autonomy, imbalance of power/oppression, respect, informed consent, safety, reputation, and justice*. Considering meta-ethical principles is examining the “larger picture” and situating the dilemma within a larger context. Interpreters must consider their behavioral options and the consequences within the context of applicable meta-ethical principles.

4. What options for action can you think of and what outcomes can you predict for each?

Once the ethical dilemma has been identified and the meta-ethical principles prioritized, then the interpreter can generate options for action and predict outcomes for each action.

5. Identify your choice of action with a rationale.

At this point interpreters must make the best decision possible, based on an understanding of the ethical dilemma, the meta-ethical principles in play, a review of all possible actions and their consequences, and then take responsibility for their decision. The decision should be explainable and defensible. All actions should be reviewed and analyzed.

Mentor Model

“The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.” ~ Robert M. Hutchins

Interpreting is a life-long learning process. Those in the field understand that graduation from an interpreter education program is the beginning of the learning process, not the end. Graduates are prepared to enter the field and begin the process of self-directed learning. This can happen on the job, through in-service workshops, graduate course work, and in mentoring relationships.

Mentorship is a jointly agreed upon professional relationship between interpreters formed for the purpose of skills development. All interpreters should have mentors throughout their professional lives. If interpreters know their mentors well, they can predict what they might say even when they are not present. When faced with an ethical dilemma needing an immediate decision for action, interpreters can ask themselves, “*What would my mentor say?*” In this way, an interpreter can have an imagined conversation with one or more mentors seeking “advise” to inform the current decision before them. Of course, later, the decision can be discussed with a mentor for further analysis and learning.

Public Defensibility Model

“Adhering to the letter of the law is not enough—we must accept responsibility for our action or inaction.” ~ Josephson Institute of Ethics

While no interpreter likes to think about the possibility of having his or her actions grieved against through the RID Ethical Practices System (EPS), it behooves all interpreters to approach their work as if this were a possibility. This is not meant to encourage interpreters to work from a place of fear, but rather to encourage interpreters to make decisions responsibly and in a way that could be publicly defended. The EPS gives consumers and interpreters power for action against unethical actions.

When faced with an ethical decision, interpreters can imagine themselves standing in front of a group of their peers and answering questions such as: *Can I defend my decision clearly to the satisfaction of my peers? Can I explain clearly the process I used to arrive at my decision? Was my decision made in a defensible manner? Does my decision abide by the Code of Professional Conduct?* Another analogy is for the interpreter to imagine reading his or her decision and supporting reasons on the front page of the morning newspaper or viewed on TV on the evening news. Would the interpreter feel good about his/her decision? Would he/she be able to defend the decision without embarrassment? If the answer to any of these questions is “no” then the decision should be reviewed and other options considered.

Experiential Model

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” ~ George Santayana

Experience is a great teacher. Any parent knows that, sometimes, young people learn best from direct experience rather than from other sources. The same is true for all, including interpreters. The more interpreters work and experience life, the more vast the experiences and knowledge they bring to their work.

When making an ethical decision, interpreters can ask themselves: *What have I learned from past experiences? Have I had similar experiences that I can apply to this decision? Have I discussed a similar situation previously in my IEP classes, with my mentor, in a workshop?* Past actions can serve as a resource of information to inform current decisions. While different interpreters may arrive at different solutions to ethical dilemmas, the most one can ask of an interpreter is that he or she have a deliberate process of solid reason and approach to ethical decision-making that adheres to professional standards.

Comparison Model

“In pursuit of this profession [of interpreting] in a democratic society it is recognized that through the medium of interpreters, deaf persons can be granted equality with hearing persons in the matter of their right of communication.” ~ Preamble, 1965 RID Code of Ethics

The last model presented encourages interpreters to ask, *What if this person were a hearing person? What would happen? Should the same thing happen here?* One of the difficulties of interpreting, at times, is to let deaf consumers experience the consequences of their actions. This is particularly difficult when interpreters perceive these consequences as negatively affecting these individuals.

Assuming that the situation is not due to a lack of cultural understanding or oppression, but rather arises from informed actions of the consumer, the most respectful stance an interpreter can take is to interpret accurately and neutrally, allowing the consumer to have control over his or her own actions and the outcomes. Consumers who are deaf have the same right to make excellent decisions, or mistakes and bad choices as hearing people. The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct asserts that, “Members of the American Deaf community have the right to informed choice and the highest quality interpreting services” (RID, 2005, p. 1). Clearly interpreters’

professional role does not include interfering in the consumer's right to make his or her own decisions; however, it does reflect that, through quality interpreting services, consumers have the right to "informed" choice. Anything less violates the field's own values and tenets of behavior, and reflects back on former paternalistic models of interpreting. Comparing the consequences to what would happen if the consumer were a hearing person without an interpreter is one perspective for approaching ethical decision-making.

Additional Participant Suggested Models

"To think ethically means to steer your thoughts toward compliance with the rules, contributions you can make and harmful consequences to avoid." ~ author unknown

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to ethical decision-making. Similarly there is no one path to the "correct ethical decision" for any given dilemma. Janice Humphrey (1999) describes this clearly:

As Sign Language professionals, we face moral, ethical and legal dilemmas in the course of our daily work...The real challenge comes when there are several options, more than one of which is valid...Making decisions in these cases is no simple matter. Yet we are expected to make difficulty or challenging decisions within seconds while engaged in our work. Because of this complexity, it is important to consider several approaches when making ethical decisions. Eventually, you will need to shape the ideas of various decision-making models into a personalized integrated model that makes sense to you (p. 17-18).

An approach suggested by one workshop participant is application of Dean and Pollard's demand-control theory to sign language interpreting. Ethical dilemmas arise from demands of the interpreter's work other than linguistic such as environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal. These demands can range from low to high. Interpreters have varying degrees of control (decision latitude) from low to high. According to Dean and Pollard (2001), "control refers to the degree to which the individual has the power to 'act upon' the demands presented by the job, perhaps by making decisions, bringing skills or resources to bear on the task, or altering the environment or other aspect of the task demand" (p. 2). The restrictive nature of the interpreter's role, especially the restrictions created by the profession's code of conduct, can create stress leading to burnout (Dean & Pollard, 2001). Understanding the demands that interpreters face and determining what control (decision latitude) one might have in a particular situation may be one way to approach ethical decision-making by reducing the stress involved with such decisions.

Conclusion

Not every interpreter, when faced with an ethical dilemma, will arrive at the same conclusion regarding the most appropriate ethical course of action. The field sets guidelines for not only interpreter behavior, but also ethical decision-making. These guidelines should insure consistency across interpreters' actions, not create identical behaviors among interpreters. Ethical action is still an individual choice made each time an interpreter goes on assignment. No one can make an interpreter ethical; however, ethics are learned through teaching, modeling, and teaching people how to think ethically.

A word of caution: Do not choose a model that will best "get you to the decision you wanted in the first place." These ethical models are not meant to support a particular decision; rather, the models provide a process to clarify the options available and inform a sound decision.

It is hoped that the approaches presented here will encourage interpreters to consider ethical decision from differing perspectives. The goal is to give interpreters a way to approach ethical

dilemmas that require immediate decision-making in order to arrive at a course of action that is ethically sound, legally defensible, equitable, respectful, and supports all consumers' right to make informed choices. We owe it to our consumers to do no less.

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