

**Faces of Interpretation: A Study on the Experiences of Black American Sign Language
(ASL)-English Interpreters in Legal Settings**

By

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“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

- Philippians 4:13

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**Faces of Interpretation: A Study on the Experiences of Black American Sign Language
(ASL)-English Interpreters in Legal Settings**

Meikayla M. Mixon

Abstract

Legal interpreting is a complex, highly specialized field of interpreting (Solow, 2000), one that is currently lacking sufficient numbers of American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreters (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). It is important to understand the experiences and needs of those currently working in the field to improve training and resources for interpreters entering the field. More specifically, Black and African American (B/AA) ASL-English interpreters have historically faced racism in work environments, both from colleagues and consumers (West-Oyedele, 2015). B/AA individuals are a minority in the ASL-English interpreting community and in legal interpreting spaces, and the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings may align with those working in less specialized environments. The purpose of this study is to record and consider the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings and to identify the demands and controls that may impact these individuals' work. Participants' stories were gathered using virtual, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis. A short pre-interview questionnaire was administered to participants

to gather general demographic information, and responses were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The participants' responses aligned closely with existing literature, confirming that legal interpreting work is consistent across diverse interpreter groups and that B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings experience the same racism that their respective peers experienced in a variety of settings. These findings may be used to inform interpreters' practice and lay the groundwork for future large-scale studies. B/AA ASL-English interpreters working in legal settings are vital members of the ASL-English interpreting community and hold a variety of experiences and insights that may be beneficial to future generations of interpreters and researchers.

Keywords: American Sign Language (ASL), Black/African American, Legal/Court Interpreters

Chapter 1: Introduction

The stories of Black American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreters in legal settings provide valuable insights into the field of interpreting by expanding our understanding of their individual experiences and perspectives and helping others identify areas of improvement. With Black and African American (B/AA) identifying interpreters being a minority in the profession (Statchell et al., 2022), and communities of color often being overlooked in academic research (Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyedele, 2015), it stands to reason that in legal settings, B/AA ASL-English interpreters experience the same dismissal as their respective peers across the field. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of B/AA interpreters practicing in the legal system, which may be informative to practicing interpreters and lay the groundwork for future large-scale studies.

Background and Problem Statement

As a Black interpreter intending to enter the field of legal interpreting, I am curious about the perspectives and experiences of B/AA identifying individuals already in the field. During preliminary research, I identified a notable gap in existing studies focusing on this small subgroup of legal interpreters. As I struggled to find literature regarding either ASL-English or B/AA interpreters in legal settings, I am attempting to synthesize existing research on both legal interpreters and B/AA ASL-English interpreters to gain an impression of the circumstances B/AA interpreters navigate in their work.

There is a dearth of research on B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings. Current information regarding the demographics of the legal interpreting community is limited and presents an opportunity for future research. Many B/AA individuals have reported negative experiences as ASL-English interpreters across the field in general, from both consumers and

colleagues (Gough, 2022; Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyedele, 2015). If this is mirrored within the legal discipline, it is important to consider the impact this may have on the interpreters there.

Position of the Study

My intent for this study is to provide a space for a few B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters to share their experiences through storytelling and to surface themes and trends across their narratives. There is research on legal interpreters, demonstrating the need for them, explaining their roles and responsibilities, and examining the conflicts they experience in this specialized setting (Solow, 2000). Research has also been conducted regarding ASL-English interpreters, both generally and specifically in legal settings, demonstrating the same (Solow, 2000). Finally, the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters have been addressed in published literature. However, the unique intersectionality of B/AA individuals working in legal settings, specifically those who use ASL and English as their working language pair, has not been investigated. I hope that my research will begin a discussion for ASL-English interpreters across the field about the work being done in legal settings and recognizing the unique experiences of the B/AA individuals.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I aim to investigate the experiences of B/AA interpreters in legal settings and address the lack of research in this area. I address this gap by conducting semi-structured interviews regarding the experiences of individual B/AA ASL-English interpreters in those specialized environments. The essential questions addressed in this study are:

1. What are the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings?
2. What demands and controls impact B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings?

These questions are designed to consider the holistic experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters. This includes collecting demographic information, such as how frequently these interpreters team with others, especially other People of Color (POC) or B/AA legal interpreters. I also plan to ask about the type of legal work these individuals accept and the various environments in which these assignments take place. Finally, I will ask these individuals to share their unique stories about interpreting in these settings and how they feel their racial identity impacts interpreting dynamics. Although the questions are designed to be intentionally broad and thus generally applicable, my goal in this study is to engage deeply with the experiences of only a few B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters. This study views the challenges that interpreters experience through their status in the community, and their responses will be similarly bound by the same.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was developed by combining Dean and Pollard's (2013) Demand/Control Schema (DC-S), which is heavily based on occupational stress theory (Karasek, 1979), and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Karasek (1979) proposes that occupational stress and/or satisfaction are highly dependent on the occupational demands and the resulting freedom or lack thereof to make decisions that can subsequently impact the presence of those demands. Karasek continues by saying that if an individual is limited in their decisional latitude, their "unreleased energy may manifest internally as mental strain" (Karasek, 1979, p. 287). Both Karasek (1979) and Dean and Pollard (2001; 2013) acknowledge that there is never simply one single demand at play, but rather a complex interplay of several demands simultaneously.

Dean and Pollard (2001; 2013) apply Karasek's theory to interpreting by identifying and categorizing types of demands and controls that exist within the profession. They designate four categories of demands: environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic, and intrapersonal (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). Demands do not inherently cause occupational stress; rather, demands are used to describe those things that require an interpreter's attention (Dean & Pollard, 2001). DC-S provides a framework for discussing interpreters' experiences.

CRT holds that racism is not a collection of outlying experiences but is deeply interwoven with daily life. Even if the daily experience of racism changes, the fundamental uses for it do not (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Delgado and Stefancic (2023) expand on this idea by explaining that the concept of "white-over-color ascendancy" serves the majority class, but that the categorization of "color" and these individuals' societal status are a social construct that can change based on the needs of the majority class. This creates a sort of fluid existence for individuals of color and changes how they are viewed by other groups depending on current circumstances and societal needs. Researchers agree that racism is still an issue, despite many people claiming that society has entered a post-racial era (Carpenter, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ford, 2021).

In the same way that racism permeates the daily lives of Black and Brown individuals, it begins to infiltrate every element of the interpreting dynamic. Ford (2021) notes that the law responds differently to minoritized groups, and often, when Black and Brown individuals enter the legal system, justice eludes them. Specifically, in interpreting studies, Carpenter (2017) discusses the prioritization of White Deaf and White interpreters' experiences in teaching and training. B/AA interpreters may face additional demands due to the prevalence of racism in society. However, Carpenter (2017) and Delgado and Stefancic (2023), both note that the voices

and lived experiences of minoritized individuals provide valuable perspectives and insights that can contribute positively to communities of practice, thus, turning the racialized experiences of B/AA individuals into controls.

While Dean and Pollard (2013) explain that every aspect of the interpreted environment plays a role in the interpreters' decision-making processes, Delgado and Stefancic (2023) explain that B/AA individuals have a fundamental difference in experience from non-minority peers. Whether a fundamental difference in demands and controls impacting B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings exists and contributes to occupational stress or satisfaction is unaddressed in existing research. In this study, the overlap between the pervasive and permanent nature of racism and the framework provided by DC-S to discuss occupational demands and controls guides the investigation into the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters by considering the intersectionality between their roles as ASL-English interpreters, their identities as B/AA individuals, and the unique setting of legal interpreting.

The Gap

While reviewing established literature, I noticed a lack of data on the overlap of legal interpreters, ASL-English interpreters, and B/AA individuals, despite existing research investigating each group individually. The literature reviewed provides limited data on the racial and ethnic demographics of current interpreters in legal settings. Additionally, there is little to no research regarding the specific experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings. Statchell et al. (2022) note that approximately 4% of ASL-English interpreters identify as Black, but the data provided does not specify the certifications these individuals hold or the areas of specialization they may focus on. The voices and experiences of these individuals are valuable to

the field and to the Deaf community; diversity in the Deaf community should be equally reflected in the interpreting community (Olopade, 2015).

Organization

This study begins with an explanation of the origins of my interest in B/AA legal interpreters, progresses into a summary of the problem and purpose of the research conducted, and then provides a framework and definition of terms to be used throughout the project. Next, in the review of the literature, I dive into the history and importance of legal interpreters. I also examine the experiences of B/AA interpreters in the field at large in hopes of drawing inferences of potential similarities in legal interpreters specifically. The methodology chapter provides details of the research conducted, its participants, data collection and analysis methods, and other essential information for the foundation of the results and discussion sections. The data analysis and findings section of the research will be presented in the results, with a discussion about implications for the field following. The conclusion will address the limitations of the research and opportunities for future research.

Definition of Terms

B/AA interpreters – Any interpreter who self-identifies as being Black or African American.

Controls – The ways in which “the interpreter interacts with and responds to the demands of an interpreting assignment” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 15).

Covert Racism – “the practice of racism that is subtle and unspoken [...] The victim of this type of racism often feels uneasy, excluded, ignored, silenced, rejected, marginalized, or exploited without necessarily knowing why. Expressions of covert racism can be conscious or unconscious” (Ni, 2021, para. 5).

Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (D/HH) – Any person who identifies as Deaf, DeafBlind, Deaf Plus, Hard-of-Hearing, Late Deafened, or deaf.

Demands – Any “factor that rises to a level of significance that will, or should, impact the decision-making involved in your work” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 5)

Judiciary (Court) Interpreters – Interpreters who “work in courtrooms and in out-of-court settings, in any matter related to law or a legal case” (The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, 2016, para. 1).

Legal Settings – Any environment that involves law enforcement, an attorney, immigration, negotiation, mediation, or the presence of a judge; or any proceedings that occur in a courtroom or police station (Law Insider, 2013).

Novice Status – For the purpose of this study, this phrasing indicates an interpreter who is unskilled, unqualified, or new to the field.

Overt Racism – “the practice of racism that is racially oriented based on evidence, data, patterns, and/or history” (Ni, 2021, para. 4).

Quasi-Judiciary (Quasi-Legal) Interpreters – Interpreters who work in “settings such as attorney-client interviews, prosecutor and victim or witness interviews, proffer sessions with prosecutors, Grand Jury proceedings, or law enforcement interviews and interrogations [...] interpret for court support personnel or other justice services (e.g., probation officers, medical personnel conducting psychiatric evaluations, law enforcement personnel conducting polygraph examinations); probation and parole interviews; administrative hearings; depositions; immigration hearings; and worker’s compensation hearings” (The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, 2016, para. 3).

Racialization/Racialized Experiences – a social process by which a racial identity is assigned to a group of people based on various characteristics. These characteristics can be real or imagined and are shaped by history, prejudice, and the human tendency to assign abnormality to things that do not align with their own experience of the world (Caffrey, 2025).

Racism – This study uses the broader definition of racism: “a set of theories and beliefs that establishes a hierarchy of races and ethnicities, based on misconceptions and stereotypes” (Cornell Law School, n.d., para. 1).

Tokenism – “is a concept referring to the practice where individuals from minority groups [...] are included in roles typically held by members of dominant groups [...] Individuals who are considered "tokens" may experience increased visibility and pressure to perform, often feeling isolated due to their unique status within the group” (LaPointe, 2023, para. 1).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As there is limited research published on this topic, the research questions are intentionally broad. The goal of this research is to highlight the B/AA experience of ASL-English interpreters in legal settings. The foundation for this research was pulled from literature regarding interpreting and interpreters in legal settings, highlighting relevant features of the Demand/Control Schema (DC-S), and considering the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters. The first area of study in this literature review is the brief history of interpreters in legal settings, to establish the historical foundation for the development of ASL-English interpreters in these settings. Then, DC-S will be addressed as an additional framework for analyzing the experiences of B/AA interpreters. The third and final section of this literature review focuses on the experiences of B/AA interpreters, first as B/AA individuals through the exploration of CRT, then as ASL-English interpreters.

Defining Legal Settings

Legal interpreting has been a specialty in interpreting since before the United States was established as a country, with the first recorded interpreted proceeding occurring in 1683 (Palma, 2023). The work of legal interpreters has been shaped by the laws, cases, and environments present in American legal history. Here is a summary of historical events and their implications that have contributed to legal interpreting as it is currently recognized.

The Laws

Over the years, legal interpreting has expanded to include a variety of settings with legal implications.¹ Five legislative frameworks designate communication access through interpreters

¹ Non-court legal interpreting includes: attorney-client interviews, prosecutor and victim or witness interviews, proffer sessions with prosecutors, Grand Jury proceedings, or law enforcement interviews and interrogations [...] probation and parole interviews; administrative hearings; depositions; immigration hearings; and worker's compensation hearings" (The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, 2016).

as a necessary and reasonable accommodation; two of those laws apply specifically to the Deaf community and ASL-English interpreters. The United States (US) Constitution, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Court Interpreters Act of 1978 (amended in 1988) address the general need for interpreters in legal settings. The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, originally passed in 1975 and updated in 1990, address the specific needs and accommodations of Deaf individuals in other legal and social are

The US Constitution, through Supreme Court interpretation, establishes the need for interpreters in criminal and civil courts across the country (Sherman, 2017). Although not stated explicitly, the foundations for legal interpreting are established in the US Constitution (as no amendment directly addresses access for diverse language users, those with disabilities that affect communication, or the Deaf community). The 5th, 6th, and 14th amendments established the judicial system, laying the groundwork for jurisdiction, jurisprudence, and justice (U.S. Const. Amend. V., n.d.; U.S. Const. Amend. VI, n.d.; U.S. Const. Amend. XIV, n.d.). It is from these same amendments that legal inferences are made, which protect Deaf individuals' rights to have sign language interpreters present during any legal proceedings.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 establishes that no individual shall be discriminated against because of race, color, religion, or national origin (Civil Rights Act, 1964). Although the Civil Rights Act does not openly mention language as a protected class, traditional interpretation has classified native language under the category of national origin (Palma, 2023). This has been used to justify and require state and local courts receiving federal funding to provide interpreters (Sherman, 2017).

The Court Interpreters Act of 1978 was passed to help ensure that interpreters are provided for court proceedings at the federal level (Miller et al., 2011; Palma, 2023; Sherman,

2017). The passage of this Act was a step forward, but it left much to be desired. This Act only applies to federal proceedings, meaning that it does not regulate state courts. According to Sherman (2017) the application of this act is inconsistent because a determination of need was left to the discretion of the case's presiding judge, and the Act does not explicitly include the translation of the document. Palma (2023) explains that one function of the Court Interpreters Act of 1978 was to create certifying programs for "interpreters, which was initially intended to cover at least the principal, if not all, languages required by defendants in federal criminal proceedings" (p.29). However, this never happened, and today the program and the federal courts only certify English-Spanish interpreters (Abel, 2013; Palma, 2023).

The ADA also addresses the rights of Deaf individuals. It mandates that access to an interpreter be provided if requested. This interpreter must be qualified, meaning "someone who is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively [...] and expressively [...], using any necessary specialized vocabulary" (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2020, para. 5). The ADA further specifies that responsible entities cannot require a Deaf individual to bring or otherwise provide their own interpreter. Additionally, communication access must be provided for "companions" of the initial consumer when appropriate, such as in instances where a school talks to the parents of a child. (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2020)

The final law regarding legal interpreting to be discussed here is the IDEA, a safeguard law that protects the rights of Deaf children to obtain effective education. While education is not inherently tied to legal interpretation, there is one aspect that is legally binding: Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The IDEA Act ensures the provision of IEPs for Deaf students (Dragoo & Graber, 2025). The establishment of a student's IEP is often discussed between the

child's educational team and their parents. IEPs may be interpreted during these meetings for Deaf parents.

The Cases

Legal interpreting has a historic context. The first recorded interpreted court proceeding in America occurred in 1683 in Pennsylvania. In a court proceeding, trying a local woman for placing curses on the town cows, a multilingual Swedish woman was brought in to interpret for the defendant. Then, over one hundred years later, in 1795, the first court interpreter was sworn in, confirming that they would provide accurate translation services for several German gentlemen selected to serve as jurors in Virginia (Palma, 2023).

Although not an American institution, the Nuremberg Trials represent a significant shift in legal interpreting history. The trials were convened after World War II to try the cases of top leaders of the Nazi Party. The trials were conducted in four languages – English, German, Russian, and French, which made consecutive interpreting a logistical nightmare. Leon Dostert, a French-born American citizen, recommended the use of simultaneous interpreting to reduce the time it would take to translate the proceedings and related legal events, documents, and discussions into the four languages. After the success of simultaneous interpreting at the Nuremberg Trials, this method of interpretation became popular and is now the primary means of interpreting in many settings (Baigorri-Jalon et al., 2014).

The 1967 Supreme Court case of *United States ex rel. Negron v. New York* set a precedent that designated interpreters must be provided for the defense (Abel, 2013; Palma, 2023). Key elements of confrontation, fairness, and integrity in relation to language access were investigated through the case of *United States ex rel. Negron v. New York*. During this trial, Rogelio Nieves Negron had no access to an interpreter and was using only the prosecution's

interpreter, who summarized the witness's testimony against him (Palma, 2023). Supreme Court justice John R. Bartel set legal precedent that failing to provide an interpreter during court proceedings was an infringement on the rights of any non-English speaker when he stated:

[T]he right that was denied Negron seems to us even more consequential than the right of confrontation. Considerations of fairness, the integrity of the fact-finding process, and the potency of our adversary system of justice forbid that the state should prosecute a defendant who is not present at his own trial. (Palma, 2023, p. 33)

Many early cases establish precedent for the use of sign language interpreters for every stage of the court process. In 1817, in Massachusetts, a Deaf man named Timothy Hill was indicted using a Sign Language interpreter before the trial continued. Then, in 1830, a Sign Language interpreter was provided for a Deaf victim named Celestia Bull in Connecticut. Ten years later, in 1840, an Indiana court questioned the ability of a Deaf witness to testify. A Sign Language interpreter was called to interpret the oath and the concept of perjury, at which point the witness was permitted to take the stand. The first recorded use of a Deaf Interpreter in court was in 1886, when a victim was testifying through an interpreter. When the interpreter was deemed not appropriately qualified to render the message accurately, a Deaf Interpreter was brought in to further mediate communication; unfortunately, the witness became distressed and left the courtroom. The Deaf Interpreter followed and received a partial testimony that was not admissible in court. (Alcalde, 2022).

In 1893 and again in 1906, the rights of Deaf individuals to access various parts of court proceedings diminished. In cases from South Carolina and Arkansas, respectively, it was twice decided that Deaf witnesses who had a strong enough grasp on the English language to read and

write should provide written testimony rather than testimony rendered through an interpreter. However, in Arkansas, it was conceded that “The court should adopt the best method of having the facts in knowledge of such witness imparted to the jury” (Alcalde, 2022, p. 220), meaning that interpreters should be provided when that is determined to be the best method of communication. (Alcalde, 2022).

The first case regarding a Deaf defendant occurred in 1925 in the case of *Terry v. State*. This case was raised to the Alabama State Court of Appeals after a judge declined to provide Terry with an interpreter. The court said that an interpreter would be sworn in if the defense could “furnish an interpreter.” The defense attorney made it known that they were unable to provide an interpreter. As a result, the Appellate Court determined that a refusal to provide an interpreter infringed upon the defendant’s rights, and the ruling was overturned. (*TERRY v. STATE*, 1925).

The Environments

Current research suggests that interpreters do not specialize in legal work because of a lack of necessary training (Bancroft et al., 2013; Roberson et al., 2011). Typically, when discussing legal interpreting, there are two connotations of the topic: court interpreting and everything else. Court interpreting is any federal, state, or local court that handles proceedings, including civil, criminal, traffic, small claims, domestic relations, and juvenile courts (Dubow et al., 1992). According to the National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators (2016) and Solow (2000) working within court settings and legal proceedings is judiciary interpreting, while working in other environments, such as with the police, in jails and prisons, with probation officers, is considered quasi-judiciary. This distinction is important because there are different

laws and regulations, as well as certifications and qualifications required for court versus general or quasi-legal work.

Federal courts are required under the Court Interpreters Act of 1978 to provide interpreters for court proceedings (*Federal Court Interpreter Orientation Manual and Glossary*, 2024; Smith, 2016). The only certification exam currently offered at the Federal level is the Administrative Office Certification Examination, and it is only available to Spanish, Haitian-Creole, and Navajo interpreters (*Federal Court Interpreter Orientation Manual and Glossary*, 2024; Smith, 2016). Interpreters not working with language pairs listed above can become considered professionally qualified by taking and passing at least one of three examinations – United States Department of State conference or seminar interpreter test, United Nations interpreter test, or the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L), with at least one language being English *OR* by being a member in good standing of the Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence or the American Association of Language Specialists (*Guide to Judiciary Policy*, 2025; Smith, 2016). Finally, interpreters who are neither certified nor professionally qualified but have proven their abilities to the satisfaction of the court can be labelled *ad hoc* interpreters and may be permitted to work in Federal court settings (*Guide to Judiciary Policy*, 2025).

At the state and local level, there is no such universal guidance as to the qualifications necessary for interpreters to work in legal settings; each state is permitted to create its own laws, statutes, and guidelines to determine what qualifies an interpreter. At this level of legal work, the standard law requiring the provision of interpreters for communication access to Deaf individuals is the ADA, which does not apply to federal courts (Dubow et al., 1992). At the state level, interpreters must be provided by the court for any person engaged in the court proceedings,

including, but not limited to: defendants, plaintiffs, attorneys, witnesses, and jurors (Dubow et al., 1992; *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, 2025).

Lawyers and attorneys are also legally obligated to provide interpreters when there is a significant language barrier as part of the due process defined in the U.S. Constitution (Bancroft et al., 2013; Dubow et al., 1992). The 6th amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to counsel (U.S. Const. Amend. VI, n.d.), a right that cannot be adequately satisfied when a language barrier exists. This right is further enforced by the ADA, which requires the provision of public accommodations (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2020; Dubow et al., 1992). However, this expectation does not solely apply to lawyers but also to police and law enforcement, as well as to prisons, both the programs and activities (Dubow et al., 1992). At every level of the justice system, access to communication through interpreters is considered a reasonable accommodation.

The final category of legal interpreting is quasi-legal interpreting. This category includes legal services and processes that do not occur within legal settings, for example: immigration services, divorce and custody mediations, sight translation of legal forms, and individualized education programs or other school meetings that discuss students' rights and access (Bancroft et al., 2013). These assignments often spark debates and confusion because there is no clear delineation between community assignments and legal ones (Bancroft et al., 2013).

Each of these settings have their own dynamics, goals, jargon, and levels of formality; each presents a unique interpreting environment for which interpreters must be prepared. Interpreters need to understand the settings and context for legal jargon because they are responsible for presenting an equivalent message in a second language, and their language choice may influence the impressions of those present (Collin & Morris, 1996).

The Work of Legal Interpreters

Legal interpreting is a specialization within the profession. This work requires a unique understanding of the courtroom's language and culture, which may be separate from the rest of society (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2011; Dubow et al., 1992; Palma, 2023; Solow, 2000). The technicalities of courtroom language and the culture of legal proceedings necessarily influence the interpretation process. Bhatia and Bhatia (2011) and Solow (2000) both explain that including courtroom culture and expectations in an interpretation is vital to conveying the entire scope of the message. Interpreters are not responsible for the explanation of terms or contexts; however, they are responsible for the accurate and comprehensive interpretations of such (Solow, 2000). A strong understanding of legal culture, language, and process helps to develop a framework from which to interpret. According to research, appropriate preparation improves the interpretation's presentation (Thóroddsdóttir & Gísladóttir, n.d.). This means that effective legal interpreters have a deeper understanding of legal terminology and technicalities than the general public or even non-legal interpreters. Due to the nature of legal environments, interpreters in these settings must be comfortable with the specific linguistic needs of their work.

Brunson (2022) explains that for interpretive services to be effective, interpreters and consumers must each understand the other's use of legal terminology, whether in standardized signs, home signs, or some other linguistic form. Research has shown that adequate preparation dramatically reduces the occurrence of errors and better allows interpreters to make corrections swiftly and appropriately (Brunson, 2022; Russell, 2000; Thóroddsdóttir & Gísladóttir, n.d.). Preparation may include a variety of processes, from consumer sit-downs to vocabulary review; whatever the interpreters' process choice, the overall goal of preparation is to reduce the number and severity of surprises an interpreter might face during an interpretation. While one study

emphasizes that preparation for an assignment reduces cognitive load and improves an interpreter's confidence, while also allowing them to compile possible solutions to address unforeseen circumstances, making it a valuable part of any experienced interpreter's toolbelt (Thóroddsdóttir & Gísladóttir, n.d.). Brunson (2022) takes a different approach to the value of preparation, stating that it is an opportunity for interpreters and legal staff to familiarize themselves and consumers with the specific legal language they might encounter in the room.

Finally, Russell (2000) gives a third explanation of the importance of preparation, explaining that in her study, participants believed the overall number of errors would have been reduced had more preparation been conducted. Whether interpreters choose to subscribe to one theory over another or some combination of the three, it is clear that appropriate preparation for an assignment is critical, and it is up to the interpreter to decide what constitutes appropriate in a case-by-case fashion. This further emphasizes the importance of employing qualified interpreters who understand the language and culture of legal settings.

Entry to the Field Pathways

There is a demonstrated need for qualified interpreters in legal settings; however, there are limited pathways for ASL-English interpreters to gain the necessary experience and credentials required to be deemed qualified (Smith, 2016). Formal certification and education opportunities are sparse. RID, which once hosted the SC: L examination, which was established for interpreters working with ASL, placed the exam under moratorium in 2016 and has not certified new practitioners since (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., 2026). This moratorium impacts ASL-English interpreters seeking legal certification nationwide. The Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) hosts an active court certification, but this credential is only recognized in 17 states (ASL Terp Prep, 2023). The lack of a national certification severely

limits the formal credentials available to ASL-English interpreters interested in entering legal work.

Turning to formal education provides only some additional opportunities for entry to the field. Smith (2016) found that the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) identified 17 training programs for legal interpreters in the United States, but only one conferred a degree upon completion. Additionally, these programs were designed for spoken language interpreters; only the MidAmerica Region Interpreter Education (MARIE) Center and later Project CLIMB, both hosted by the University of Northern Colorado, were specifically designed to train ASL-English interpreters for legal settings (Smith 2016; University of Northern Colorado, 2026). The funding cycle for both programs ended without renewal, and neither program is currently operational, although some materials from the programs are available online (University of Northern Colorado, 2026). The majority of Smith's participants reported that they entered the field through some combination of "formal classes, mentoring, workshops, and self-study" (Smith, 2016, p. 23). There does not seem to be a standardized process for developing or certifying qualified legal ASL-English interpreters.

Demand/Control Schema

One approach to help interpreters analyze and evaluate the ethical and moral decisions made in legal settings is to use the Demand/Control Schema (DC-S) developed by Dean and Pollard (2001). This framework helps interpreters isolate, define, and discuss specific elements of the work that cause conflicts within themselves, the work, and between consumers. DC-S and the related supervision sessions described by Dean and Pollard (2013) are typically specific to a given scenario, but for this study, they will be applied more generally to legal interpreting settings, ASL-English interpreters, and B/AA interpreters.

DC-S became a prominent framework for the interpreting community in the early 2000s, when Dean and Pollard presented it as a potential framework for considering ethical decisions within the profession (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Based on Robert Karasek's theory of occupational stress, DC-S discusses demands (requirements of the work) and controls (the interpreter's skills and resources) (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). The demands aspect of this framework allows interpreters and others to examine the individual elements, considerations, and requirements of the work as they rise and fall in significance in a variety of situations (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). It is important to note that demands are not inherently negative, but rather, simply represent something in the interaction that requires an interpreter's attention (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). In response, the controls allow for an interpreter to consider what traits, resources, and skills they bring to confront and resolve demands as they arise (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). The goal of DC-S is to be able to objectively speak about the interpreting work and the individual interpreters doing the work, allowing professionals to improve their practice, consider what type of interpreting situations they are best suited to, and how to handle scenarios for which they are ill-equipped.

DC-S as a Conceptual Framework

While the general categories of Demands and Controls are useful for broad discussion, further distinctions within the categories allow for more specific classifications. Due to the variety of demands that can occur during any assignment, Dean and Pollard (2013) instruct interpreters to further divide this category into four types: environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic, and intrapersonal. Each additional label allows interpreters to discuss the work to isolate and review a single or a set of main demands. This study is centered on inter- and intrapersonal demands, and therefore, only these categories will be discussed at length here. A

subsection of the interpersonal demand category is thought worlds and will be discussed briefly. The controls category is divided into three time-based sections: pre-assignment, assignment, and post-assignment (Dean & Pollard, 2013). This division of the controls category allows interpreters to consider what their controls are and when would be the appropriate time to address demands. This lends a practical action plan element to the DC-S framework.

Demands. Interpersonal demands refer to the aspects of the interpreted interaction that position the consumers, interpreters, and others present within the communication dynamics (Dean & Pollard, 2013). An important note is that interpersonal demands include individuals present who are not directly involved in the interpreted interactions (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). In legal settings, this may include the gallery or jurors who are typically limited in their permitted interactions with the rest of the court. Beyond the physical presence of the people involved, interpersonal aspects of interpreting also include the power and cultural dynamics, communication styles, goals, emotional tone, and thought worlds of everyone involved (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Each of these elements plays a fundamental role in how the individuals present relate to each other. This demand category represents one of the most complex categories of demands that interpreters face in daily work (Dean & Pollard, 2013). One particularly complex element of interpersonal demands is the interpreters' understanding of and ability to incorporate the thought worlds of themselves and others present in the interpreting dynamic.

The concept of thought worlds, as used by Dean and Pollard (2013), was first introduced by Claude Namy, a spoken language interpreter who acknowledged that interpreting involves more than language, but includes a semantic element of connection. Influenced by “socio-cultural experiences, upbringing, values, and emotions” (Dean and Pollard, 2013, p. 7), thought worlds combine the “mental influences [... of a] person’s perceptions, cognitions, feelings, and

behaviors at a specific moment” (Dean and Pollard, 2013, p. 6). The interpreter needs to consider the thought worlds of their consumers and themselves, as these influence the intent and meaning of the message. Thought worlds are uniquely individual, and each person brings their entire life experience into the interaction. Navigating these complexities is a responsibility of the interpreter.

Intrapersonal demands are the internal thoughts, perspectives, and influences of the interpreter during the interpreted interaction (Dean & Pollard, 2013). This is not limited to considerations about the work, but also physical distractions such as hunger and fatigue (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013). Because interpreters are people and have their own needs, desires, and experiences, these elements of individuality are brought into the work. In the context of legal interpreting, sensitive topics, considerations of interpreter safety, or the weight of the interpreter’s responsibility may represent the kind of psychological thoughts that may become intrapersonal demands. Because interpreting dynamics can be complicated and rapidly changing, it is difficult to predict what the intrapersonal demands of each interpreter will be at any time.

Controls. Pre-assignment controls are those attributes inherent to the interpreter, such as “background, personality, characteristics, as well as the specific things you do to prepare for an assignment” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 17). Effective employment of these controls requires the interpreter to accurately anticipate the demands of an assignment to help prepare those controls that may be useful in the moment. This preparation may include education, such as researching appropriate vocabulary. It may be personal, such as emotional preparation or changing outfits to match the environment of the assignment. Pre-assignment controls are anticipatory in nature and thus may be difficult to fully employ, especially in new environments.

Assignment controls are the in-the-moment actions, decisions, and judgments the interpreter makes during the assignment in response to the job's salient demands (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Assignment controls encompass every decision made during the interpreting scenario, including those situations in which the interpreter decides not to take any action. This type of control also includes translation choices, such as how to interpret a specific sign or interventions such as asking the consumers for clarification.

Post-assignment controls are the actions taken after an assignment that either prevent demands from being future demands, reduce the interpreters' stress, or allow for education (Dean & Pollard, 2013). These kinds of controls may include debriefing with a team, discussing the demands with an agency or consumer representative, or engaging in self-care for the interpreter. There is a wide variety of actions that can be considered post-assignment controls because often the controls are unique to the situation and the interpreter.

No matter the timing of the control's employment, all controls can be placed on a spectrum between liberal and conservative. In DC-S's framework, liberal is defined as leaning toward stronger action, and conservative leans toward stronger inaction (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Ethically sound decisions can be found along the spectrum in either direction, and unethical decisions can be placed at either end depending on the interpreter's choices and the demands to which they respond (Dean & Pollard, 2013).

Experiences of B/AA ASL-English Interpreters

Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars state that Black individuals have unique experiences due to their existence in a racialized system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gonzales Rose, 2016). Delgado and Stefancic (2023) go on to explain that these experiences are universal to Black individuals as the system is pervasive in American life. B/AA ASL-English interpreters are first

and foremost Black individuals, meaning that to understand their professional experiences, it is important to contextualize race within society. Then, narrowing the scope slightly, the research considers the role of race in the various environments that B/AA ASL-English interpreters interact with. Finally, demands and controls experienced by B/AA ASL-English interpreters in direct relation to assignments will be discussed.

Critical Race Theory and ASL-English Interpreting

CRT began in the 1970s in American law schools when students began to investigate how race and the law intersect (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ford, 2021). Since then, the theory has been incorporated and applied to a variety of interdisciplinary studies and used frequently as a framework for research investigating racialized experiences. CRT emphasizes at least five core tenets: 1) racism is not aberrational but rather normal in society and social systems 2) racism serves to differentiate between races benefiting some while subordinating others 3) Black and minority voices should be recognized for their unique contributions within scholarship 4) changes within the social hierarchy are only made when it serves the majority in power 5) race is a social construct and is intersectional with additional identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ford, 2021; Lawrence & Hylton, 2022). CRT is foundational to this study because B/AA ASL-English interpreters are, first and foremost, Black individuals. Delgado and Stefancic (2023) explain that racism is still prevalent in American society, in the fact that the prison population consists mostly of Black and Brown individuals, that Black and Brown judges and lawyers still experience discrimination at work and out in public, and when “chief executive officers, senators, surgeons, and university presidents are almost all white” (p.13). CRT is used to understand and discuss these experiences.

In the field of ASL-English interpreters, B/AA individuals make up just 4% of the total number of ASL-English interpreters (Statchell et al., 2022). From students in Interpreter Training Programs (ITPs) to professionals working in the field, many interpreters report feeling isolated (Obasi, 2013; Statchell et al., 2022). Weru (2024) explained that in predominantly White professions, organizational policies, rules, and norms appear racially neutral but disproportionately negatively affect B/AA employees. Once again demonstrating how ingrained racialization is in societal norms.

In Interpreter Education Programs (IEPs), there is often a lack of diversity represented in faculty, students, and curriculum (Beal, 2021; Obasi, 2013; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyedele, 2015). The lack of representation among students and professionals perpetuates the idea that interpreting is a White profession. This has many effects on students' perceptions and experiences because the lack of diversity in the faculty and curriculum presents the Deaf community as a monolithic community (Carpenter, 2017; Obasi, 2013). However, the Deaf community is not comprised solely of any one racial group, and interpreters must be prepared to serve the needs of all Deaf individuals in their work. This lack of diverse cultural education in IEPs eventually leads to the professionalization of interpreters who are not sufficiently culturally competent in diverse cultures outside their own (West-Oyedele, 2015).

The presence of culturally competent interpreters may reduce the burden on B/AA ASL-English interpreters to fill in cultural gaps through education and mediation. Carpenter (2017) explains that when only Black interpreters and educators are expected to serve the Black Deaf communities, this places a heavy burden on this already limited population. The Black Deaf community deserves the same quality of cultural mediation that other Deaf consumers are receiving; if B/AA individuals are perceived as the only interpreters culturally competent enough

to provide services to this community, there is a disparity in communication access. This may also place additional pressure on the few B/AA interpreters to accept assignments that include Black consumers.

Along these lines, B/AA mentors are difficult to find, and Schafer and Cokely (2016) reported that many of their participants found it rare to find a mentor of the same cultural background. Carpenter (2017) investigated the potential for cross-cultural mentoring and found that mentors declined these opportunities because they did not feel qualified to do so, but then also declined to learn the cultural nuances to successfully mentor B/AA individuals. Once again, experienced B/AA ASL-English interpreters become responsible for mentoring B/AA students and interpreters. IEPs are not emphasizing diversity within their curriculum, and there is limited representation among professionals. This contributes to the individual demands impacting B/AA ASL-English interpreters in their daily work.

Demands of B/AA Asl-English Interpreters

Researchers agree that B/AA individuals are actively exposed to racism and racialized experiences within the ASL-English interpreting community in the form of overt comments and microaggressions from both consumers and colleagues (Carpenter, 2022; Carpenter, 2017; Ford, 2021; Harwood, 2017; Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; Statchell et al., 2022; West-Oyedele, 2015). These researchers agree that negative racial commentary takes a cognitive, emotional, and psychological toll on interpreters. These racialized comments and the subsequent personal effect on B/AA interpreters exemplify the inter- and intrapersonal demands² as explained by Dean and Pollard's DC-S framework (Dean & Pollard, 2013).

² Any “factor that rises to a level of significance that will, or should, impact the decision-making involved in your work” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 5)

Interpersonal. Interpersonal demands occur when individuals in an interpreted space interact; these demands are direct results of those interactions (Dean & Pollard, 2013). The first set of demands addresses how interpreters physically appear in the environment and how they are perceived by others, their invisibility within the profession, and their hypervisibility in interpreting dynamics. In addition to perception, it discusses overt racism, the assumption of novice status, and tokenism. In several studies conducted regarding the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters, participants mentioned paying careful attention to the impact of their physical appearance (Beal, 2021; Carpenter, 2017; Nakahara, 2016; Obasi, 2013; Olopade, 2017; Statchell et al., 2022; West-Oyedele, 2015). The factors influencing attire-related decisions varied.

One consideration unique to B/AA ASL-English interpreters is the industry standard of wearing black as a contrasting color to skin tone. Gilchrist (2023) and Obasi (2013) both discuss that this standard was established by and for White ASL-English interpreters, to whom black represents a contrastive color while simultaneously dismissing or marginalizing B/AA ASL-English interpreters by failing to acknowledge that black does not provide a visually contrastive background for those with darker skin. This is a practical representation of the CRT tenet of ordinariness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gonzales Rose, 2016), denoting something as arbitrary (i.e., black attire as standard for sign language interpreters has become a way to dismiss B/AA interpreters).

Another demand B/AA ASL-English interpreters face is their invisibility and hypervisibility in the community and field. These concepts must be discussed simultaneously because they can and often do exist in the same space (Obasi, 2013). Invisibility in this context is the overall lack of racial and cultural representation in the field of ASL-English interpreting,

while hypervisibility refers to the individual experience of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in spaces where they become representative of their race. According to Nakahara (2016), many people believe the Deaf community to be white and, by extension, believe that their interpreters are also white. This not only erases People of Color (POCs) from the Deaf community, but it also overlooks the B/AA interpreters involved in the interpreting community. Many B/A interpreters report feelings of being alone in the field (Statchell et al., 2022), which may contribute to additional demands in their work. West-Oyede (2015) and Statchell et al. (2022) explain that new interpreters who enter the field and do not see peers they identify with are more likely to leave the profession. This attrition further exacerbates the invisibility issue.

In contrast to invisibility, interpreters often comment on feeling hyper-visible because they are the only B/AA individual in the space (Obasi, 2013). Obasi (2013) goes on to explain that because many people perceive the Deaf and interpreting community as White spaces, B/AA ASL-English interpreters are judged by the standards and norms established by and for the White community. These norms may not align with the experiences, beliefs, or cultural values of B/AA individuals, making it difficult to succeed in these environments.

Overt racism consist of those comments and actions that are obviously race-based and intended to be derogatory (Ni, 2021). West-Oyede (2015) found that 61% of the participants in their study experienced at least one instance of overt racism while working, and 18% stated that overt racism was occurring very to extremely frequently. Several other studies also report that B/AA ASL-English interpreters experience overt racism in their work (Ford, 2021; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyede, 2015).

A B/AA individual is considered a *token* when they have been placed in a position typically held by members of the majority for the purpose of portraying diversity (LaPointe,

2023). In interpreting this may look like hiring a B/AA ASL-English interpreter for the sole reason that they are a B/AA individual. Hill (2018) asks agencies and interpreters to consider, “if [minority interpreters] are being asked [to interpret] because of [their] skill and professionalism, or for the tone of [their] skin” (para. 9)? Tokenism may lead to feelings of isolation within the field, and as one participant reported in Nakahara’s (2016) study, it begins to feel like B/AA interpreters are only hired because of their race, which is discriminatory.

Another common report for B/AA ASL-English interpreters is experiences where either their colleagues or consumers assume, based seemingly on race alone, that they are underqualified to handle a particular assignment (Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; Statchell et al., 2022; West-Oyedele, 2015). These assumptions may be expressed to the B/AA interpreter in a variety of ways: open questioning of credentials, subtle assumptions of inability, or interruptions to the work in the form of over-feeding or taking over the interpretation. This demand begins to incorporate the thought worlds of the individuals present in an interpreting environment. Thought worlds are the internal values, feelings, and perceptions of an individual (Dean and Pollard, 2013), which may make them difficult for individuals to identify in others; however, the actions taken based on these thought worlds may become demands for the interpreter to handle.

West-Oyedele (2015) reports that for many interpreters, this constant confrontation with others' lack of faith in their abilities becomes frustrating. This frustration may also become an intrapersonal demand for the interpreter who needs to maintain professionalism despite these negative experiences. Olopade (2017) addresses the possible stereotyping that leads to these assumptions, explaining that in the media, B/AA individuals are often portrayed as poor and uneducated. These biases can present an interpersonal demand as they are likely to influence the

power and authority dynamics between individuals present (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Finally, Statchell et al. (2022) state that many people believe that White interpreters have inherently more linguistic skill in ASL than their B/AA peers. While White interpreters are perceived as having higher linguistic skills than their diverse peers, often B/AA and other minority ASL-English interpreters will be placed on assignments because the assignment has B/AA consumers.

Intrapersonal. Interpersonal demands refer to the internal happenings of the interpreter themselves, thoughts and feelings, for example (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Vicarious stress, pressure to manage perception, and the struggle of determining appropriate responses to racialized experiences are all included for B/AA ASL-English interpreters in this section. When Deaf people are treated unfairly, the interpreters working with them may experience vicarious stress; for B/AA ASL-English interpreters, this is further complicated (Obasi, 2013). There may be instances of ableism that oppress the Deaf community, but also of racism, which the B/AA individuals will need to navigate. Racism is especially likely in legal settings where minorities tend to be treated unfairly by the law (Gonzales Rose, 2016). In tandem with this, B/AA ASL-English interpreters must also consider how they are perceived by others.

Due to the visual/manual modality of ASL, ASL-English interpreters remain visible in the environment, unlike some other interpreting processes. This contributes to the hypervisibility demand as discussed previously, but it also means that B/AA ASL-English interpreters tend to think about how they are perceived by others (Ford, 2021; Obasi, 2013). For example, B/AA and other minority interpreters often feel they need to dress more professionally than their non-minority peers to attain the same level of respect from consumers (Beal, 2021; Carpenter, 2017; Nakahara, 2016; Statchell et al., 2022; West-Oyedele, 2015). Olopade (2017) suggests that one contributing factor to this pressure is that Black individuals are often portrayed through the

media as poorly dressed and uneducated. This representation of the Black community may establish a stereotype that B/AA professionals feel the need to counter in their working environments. This demand is two-pronged – how are B/AA ASL-English interpreters perceived by their team and by their consumers?

Ford (2021) explains that a participant from their study reported wondering how their team was perceiving them and subsequently what support would look like from that team. Team interpreting is built on the reliance on another person; when some cognitive load is dedicated to wondering what that person believes about the work being done, that experience takes a mental toll and may impact the quality of the work. Additionally, B/AA ASL-English interpreters may consider how their actions reflect on their consumers (Obasi, 2013). Gonzales Rose (2016) explains that in legal settings, often Black witnesses will be discounted because most people inherently trust Black individuals less than White individuals. How might this impact Deaf witnesses when a B/AA interpreter is voice interpreting for them? Additionally, when interpreters encounter racially charged moments, they may craft their response based on how their choices may impact the outcomes of those they are interpreting for (Obasi, 2013). Other factors, such as location, may also influence an interpreter's decision on how to respond (Olopade, 2017). Many individual demands may affect B/AA ASL-English interpreters; however, it is important to realize that it is likely that several demands happen simultaneously and regularly. It is to these demands that an interpreter must decide how to respond.

Controls of B/AA ASL-English Interpreters

CRT posits that minority individuals have a unique perspective and voice as a direct result of their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In this same way, B/AA ASL-

English interpreters bring unique personal controls³ to assignments. Having a variety of controls may help interpreters confront and manage the demands listed above.

Pre- and Post-Assignment Controls. Pre- and Post-Assignment controls are those steps interpreters can take outside of the assignment to help prepare them to confront relevant demands in their work (Dean & Pollard, 2013). For B/AA ASL-English interpreters, this includes building a strong community and personal/professional identities.

Community building has at least two prongs: a community with Deaf individuals and a collegial community with interpreting peers. Both of which are important for ASL-English interpreters to develop. Statchell et al. (2022) claim that for many interpreters, the Black Deaf community is the reason they have continued in the field; these interpreters learned from the community, and the community supports them. West-Oyedeke (2015) and Ford (2021) echo these statements by indicating that B/AA interpreters feel welcomed by the Black Deaf community, who support their professional growth and development, and create spaces for B/AA interpreters by requesting B/AA interpreters. These communities are a dedicated support system for B/AA ASL-English interpreters.

In addition to the support of Black Deaf communities, B/AA ASL-English interpreters also desire to build a community with other ASL-English interpreters. Nakahara (2016) notes that some interpreters want to develop spaces where they feel they can discuss the struggles they face in an open environment with ASL-English interpreters of all racial backgrounds to help build understanding. This would be beneficial to the B/AA interpreters, but also their peers, as working with B/AA interpreters tends to increase the cultural competence of other interpreters as well (West-Oyedeke, 2015).

³ The ways in which “the interpreter interacts with and responds to the demands of an interpreting assignment” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 15).

West-Oyedele (2015) defines social capital as the network and relationships built between peers and claims that it is one of the strongest indicators of persistence for B/AA ASL-English interpreters in the field. West-Oyedele (2015) and Statchell et al. (2022) both found that interpreters find working with diverse peers can be authentic and empowering, which is important, especially in mentoring relationships. For B/AA interpreters, giving back to their community is important (Statchell et al., 2022). This often comes in the form of mentoring. Carpenter (2017) writes that working together cross-racially may improve retention for B/AA interpreters by building cultural capital for mentors (non-minority interpreters) and increasing perspective for mentees. Mentorship also helps expose B/AA mentees to obstacles they will face later on (Carpenter, 2022). At all levels, both vertically and horizontally, building community is a positive control for B/AA interpreters.

In addition to building community, interpreters must construct a personal identity and find their unique place within the community. Nakahara (2016) found that a strong personal identity is a key factor in successful interpretations, which require “constant negotiation, communication, and the making of cultural decisions that cannot be done effectively without a thorough understanding of one’s epistemic position” (p.59). This means taking a holistic evaluation of life experiences and biases to understand one’s own positionality within their sphere of influence. Interpreters have immense power in interpreted dynamics (Witter-Merithew, n.d.), and each message is filtered through a thought world unique to the interpreter (Dean & Pollard, 2013). B/AA interpreters bring many personal controls; three will be discussed here: resilience, positive attitude, and reputation.

Resilience is a continuous positive adjustment to challenges (Statchell et al., 2022). Statchell et al. (2022) discuss that resiliency has the power to reduce burnout and the negative

consequences of compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and other forms of occupational stress. Resilience can be developed through community but is related to several personal attributes such as experiential learning, open-mindedness, creativity, and compassion (Statchell et al., 2022). These traits are not unique to the B/AA community; however, West-Oyedele (2015) explains that People of Color face hard things and learn how to adapt because “we have heart, we have a community, we have an understanding” (p. 54). These traits and experiences are innate to the interpreter and brought to every assignment as part of their experience.

While resilience is a response to negative circumstances, a positive attitude is the lens through which those circumstances are viewed. Statchell et al. (2022) categorize a positive attitude as a factor in resilience and explains that interpreters who maintained positivity regardless of disparaging comments were better able to continue their work. Another element of positivity is acknowledging positive experiences. Harwood (2017) includes experience as an element of personal identity, stating that both positive and negative experiences contribute to personal identity, and positive experiences contribute to a sense of belonging in the field. Positive attitudes and experiences help to contribute to an interpreter’s perseverance in the field.

The final element of personal identity discussed here is reputation. Many B/AA interpreters acknowledge that their reputation is important in the field (Ford, 2021; Statchell et al., 2022). Some participants from Ford’s (2021) study reported feeling as though their reputation and success at assignments were taken as representative of the entire B/AA ASL-English interpreting community. Thus, showing that reputation can be both a control and a demand. Reputation is listed under controls because upholding good ethics and being a competent interpreter are pre- and during-assignment controls that the interpreter can leverage. Statchell et al.’s (2022) study demonstrates this when one respondent said they would wait to accept certain

kinds of jobs until their reputation was strong enough to avoid being questioned by the community. This participant recognizes the importance of a strong reputation and the benefits it provides in the Deaf and interpreting communities.

During Assignment Controls. It would be impractical to attempt to outline every control an interpreter might employ during an assignment, as dozens of decisions must be made throughout interpreted interactions. Therefore, this study will examine how interpreters leverage social and cultural capital to enhance interactions. Social and Cultural capital are similar concepts; both involve how an individual relates to the world. Social capital refers to the networks that interpreters build within professional spaces (West-Oyedeke, 2015). Cultural capital encompasses the vast elements of culture, a person's understanding of them, and the individual's ability to successfully navigate social interactions using this information (Moutunho, 2019). A third concept related to social and cultural capital is code switching; the process that diverse individuals use to facilitate understanding with non-diverse peers (Carpenter, 2017). This process includes being able to evaluate where others misunderstand and adjust one's own communication method to ensure that accurate communication occurs. Black Deaf and B/AA interpreters code-switch frequently as a control to help resolve misunderstandings.

Summary

While there has been some research on interpreters working in legal settings, ASL-English interpreters, and B/AA ASL-English interpreters separately, no research has yet investigated the intersection of these three areas. Legal interpreting has a long history and has been well established as a necessary profession. ASL-English interpreters often take a position of allyship with a community that has historically been disempowered and oppressed. B/AA ASL-English interpreters continue to experience racism and microaggressions in a variety of settings.

It is important to understand how these factors relate, providing useful insights for the profession.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to open a discussion and begin collecting data that will help to further research on this topic. This study is a qualitative study intended to gather experiential data in a way that maintains the context in which these experiences occurred.

Research Focus

This study was designed to explore the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings?
2. What demands and controls impact B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings?

I use DC-S as a conceptual framework (Dean & Pollard, 2013) to create clear categories within which experiences can be discussed and compared. The research approach followed an exploratory collective case study⁴ design (Hale & Napier, 2013; Shkedi, n.d.), which utilized both an online pre-interview questionnaire and virtual interviews. The goal of this study was to collect a wide range of experiential data to frame the diverse types of existing legal settings, understand the individuals doing the work, and consider the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings.

Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted primarily through semi-structured virtual interviews and with the support of a pre-interview questionnaire (Hale & Napier, 2013). The questionnaire (See Appendix B) was disseminated to interested participants along with the interview scheduling form. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire before scheduling the interview, to provide me with ample time to review the responses collected. The questionnaire

⁴ Exploratory case study methodology is used to research a phenomenon with the intention of developing new research questions for subsequent studies (Hale & Napier, 2013; Shkedi, n.d.).

included general demographic questions deemed relevant to the research, but too time-consuming for the interview portion of the data collection process.

The virtual interviews (See Appendix C) were held over Zoom, utilizing the record and automatic transcription functions to develop the initial transcript for data analysis. The transcripts were then reviewed and edited for accuracy and additional non-verbal information, such as signed vocabulary and body language, used to emphasize or convey information. The decision to conduct virtual interviews allowed participants to be recruited from a broader geographic area. Each interview was scheduled for 60-90 minutes, but I was responsive to participants' level of engagement, and no strict time limit was enforced. While a standard list of 26 questions was developed for each interview, I asked follow-up questions as needed for clarification and explanation.

Data Collection Protocol

All forms related to the study were approved by Western Oregon University's (WOU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) in accordance with university policy. The participants were informed of the study's purpose, methods, risks, and benefits. Participants voluntarily entered and completed the study, with the knowledge and understanding that their consent could be withdrawn at any time, without negative consequences to them.

Population and Sample

To be eligible to participate in the study, respondents must have been a professional ASL-English interpreter who has experience in legal settings, be 18 years or older at the time of participation, self-identify as Black or African American, and be willing to complete a short questionnaire and participate in a recorded interview regarding personal experiences.

Participants were recruited through non-probabilistic convenience snowball sampling, drawing on my personal network (Hale & Napier, 2013). I initially used social media, local group chats, and interpreter organizations to call for participants. Once individuals expressed interest in participating, informed consent forms (See Appendix A) were emailed to participants alongside the scheduling form and the pre-interview questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to read and sign the consent form and complete the pre-interview questionnaire prior to scheduling their interview. Participants were made aware of the potential risks and benefits and were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, with no negative consequences.

The risks to participants in this study were minimal. Participation in the interview assumed a possible risk of emotional discomfort due to discussing unpleasant experiences. Participants who experienced emotional discomfort were encouraged to seek consultation with a therapist or counselor. While I requested some personally identifiable information during the interview, transcripts and related data were de-identified to reduce the risk of participants' private information being disclosed.

There was no monetary compensation for this study, and direct benefits to participants were limited. Participants may have felt emotional relief in having space to share their experiences, perspectives, and feelings. Participants may also have experienced positive feedback from participating in research by offering them opportunities to share their experiences.

I prioritized ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. Each participant was treated with dignity and respect as they shared their experiences. The depth of the response was dependent on the participant's decision of how much or how little to share. Responses were given with the understanding that the interview was a safe environment and intended to foster

openness, respect, and collegiality. These goals were addressed by prefacing each interview with a short script reminding participants of their rights in the research and encouraging participants to maintain the ethical principles of confidentiality and respect for consumers and colleagues.

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

The pre-interview questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms from December 2025 to February 2026 and disseminated using the share link function. The link was copied and pasted into an email to be sent to individuals who expressed interest in participating. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, divided into five sections: informed consent documentation, demographics, interpreting – legal, interpreting – network, and scheduling the interview (See Appendix B).

Participants were asked in the email to please download, read, sign, and return the informed consent forms to me before continuing the questionnaire. The landing page for the questionnaire held a link to the informed consent form, hosted on Google Docs. The document was restricted so that no changes could be made to the original, and participants downloaded the document to sign the form. Participants were then prompted in the questionnaire to confirm that their completed informed consent form was returned via email. After completing the informed consent section of the form, participants were allowed to continue to the demographics portion of the questionnaire.

I collected only four points of demographic data, as demographics were not the focus of the study. Participants were asked to self-identify their racial, ethnic, or cultural background to confirm they satisfied the criteria for the study; this question was left open-ended to allow respondents the freedom to identify as they felt fit. Additionally, participants were asked to estimate how long they had been working as ASL-English interpreters and specifically how long

they had been working in legal settings. The final demographic question requested a short-answer response that asked participants to identify the state(s) in which they work.

The third and fourth sections of the pre-interview questionnaire were related to the participants' experiences as interpreters both in legal settings and when networking in the field. The third section of the questionnaire focused on the participants' experiences in legal settings. Participants were asked about their certification status as it pertained to court and other legal-specific certifications. Additionally, they were asked about the frequency and settings of their legal work. The question regarding legal settings was open-ended to encourage participants to be creative about what constitutes legal work. The fourth section of the questionnaire, the focus shifted to participants' experiences with other interpreters in legal settings, asking first about the frequency of working with a team, specifically if the team was a Person of Color or a B/AA individual. The questionnaire also contained two open-response questions regarding existing supports, resources, and trainings for ASL-English legal interpreters generally and B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters specifically. The responses provided in these sections of the questionnaire were expanded during the semi-structured interview.

Scheduling the interview was the final segment of the questionnaire. Participants were asked what time-zone they would be calling from and what days of the week and times of the day were most available for an interview. Participants were asked to select as many days and times as possible to increase the chances of overlapping with my schedule. One question provided participants with the opportunity to make me aware of any pertinent scheduling details. Finally, participants were asked to select the preferred language for the interview and provide their preferred name and contact information. Upon completion of the pre-interview

questionnaire, interviews were promptly scheduled and conducted to maintain the study's timeline.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted during January and February 2026. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for accurate data analysis. All identifying information provided by the participant was redacted from the transcript, and the participant had the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and request that any additional information be de-identified. This process also provided the opportunity for data triangulation to ensure that I captured the true intent of the participant's comments. Data was stored on a password-protected hard drive, and files with participant information were stored separately from de-identified transcripts. Only the principal investigator and the faculty supervisor had access to any raw data.

At the start of the interview, I read a short script reminding participants that their participation was voluntary and that their personal identity would be protected. I asked participants to be mindful of the first tenet of the CPC when responding with stories or accounts that included colleagues and/or consumers. The subsequent interview consisted of 26 questions categorized into four sections: Demographics, Lived Experience, Coping, and Follow-Up questions (See Appendix C).

The demographics section of the interview contained four questions (See Appendix C), which were paired with questions from the questionnaire. In this section, participants were asked to expand on their responses in the form of stories or more in-depth explanations regarding their entry into the profession. During the lived experiences portion of the interview, I encouraged participants to tell stories about their work in legal settings. There were five questions in this section, regarding the process of accepting a legal assignment, exploring the impact of cultural

identity in different facets of an assignment, and other benefits or challenges experienced during legal assignments. The final content section of the interview regarded coping strategies. Comprised of ten questions, this section was the longest in the interview and subsequently heavily focused on. Participants were asked to consider personal motivations and longevity in the field and provide advice for B/AA interpreters looking to enter legal settings. The fourth and final section was a list of possible follow-up questions to elicit more information from participants in response to previous questions.

I asked questions as they arose naturally in conversation and may not have followed the exact structure or wording of each question in an attempt to maintain the conversational quality of the interview. When the interview was concluded, I ended the recording and downloaded the autogenerated transcript before closing the Zoom meeting. Within the following week, I reviewed the transcripts with the original video and audio from the interview, checking for accuracy and additional information such as signed commentary and non-verbal information. When participants provided signed responses or additions to their thoughts, the interpreted English was added to the transcript in the following format: [signed: ...]. Finally, the informed consent documentation, questionnaire responses, audio/video recordings, and transcripts were downloaded to an encrypted external hard drive for secure storage.

Data Analysis

A basic descriptive statistical analysis of the pre-interview data was conducted to provide me with a basic understanding of the interviewees' demographic background, interpreting experiences, and feelings toward the field (Hale & Napier, 2013). The interview questions were then refined and grounded in the insights provided by the questionnaire.

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis method (Meraz et al., 2019; Robertson & Lappeman, 2025). Thematic narrative analysis to maintain the integrity of the participants' stories within their original context, allowing the data to surface organically. Demographic information and experiential data were collected to identify common themes of the experiences of B/AA interpreters in legal settings. Themes were further analyzed to provide insights into the cause and impact of those experiences. This data would be irrelevant if removed from the context and the intensely personal reactions to these situations.

Pre-Interview Questionnaire Analysis

The data collected from the pre-interview questionnaire was analyzed twice for each participant. The first analysis took place between the completion of the questionnaire and the virtual interview. During this initial analysis, I examined the individual data collected and used the findings to refine the wording of the interview questions, adding specificity and context and helping build rapport between myself and the participant.

The second round of analysis was conducted by comparing the datasets collected from all participants. The responses from the questionnaire were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet for easy viewing across questions and answers. Due to the limited responses, the data was analyzed by hand, and charts and figures were deemed unnecessary for complete analysis.

Interview Analysis

The data collected during the virtual interview portion of the study were analyzed using thematic coding. Themes from the interview transcripts were highlighted and tagged using Taguette. Each transcript was reviewed four times to obtain a thorough review of the data. Using a modified version of Robertson and Lappeman's (2025) 4-category narrative analysis process, the transcripts were reviewed for: Narrative Process, Context, Moments, and Language. Using

these four analytic lenses allowed for a multi-focal approach to the data and strengthened the reliability of the results. For a step-by-step explanation of the analysis process, see Appendix D.

The narrative process draws on how the participants tell their stories and the emotional conflict or resolutions that occur to determine the “why” behind the story. “Participants articulate their feelings throughout their narratives, which can reveal their internal conflicts or resolutions” (Robertson & Lappeman, 2025, p. 4). These conflicts and resolutions represent the data necessary to understand the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings, and the demands or controls occurring in these settings. This round of analysis was used to develop the data’s initial coding structure.

To aid in understanding and interpreting the initial codes, taking particular notice of the context of the story is important (Robertson & Lappeman, 2025). In this study, narratives were placed in the context of both the original story’s setting and the relationship between the story being told and the question I was asking. Due to the semi-structured interview style of data collection, participants’ stories typically demonstrated some theme or element of their professional experience in response to a direct question asked. Grounding the codes in the context of the story ensured that any results and subsequent discussion were not taken out of the original context.

The moment's round of analysis was used to determine the personal significance of a story to the participant sharing it. Robertson and Lappeman (2025) explain that moments of realization or personal “aha” moments indicate an important element of the narrative process where something changed or the participant realized something. These data points allow for more interpretation of the original codes and themes, as well as helping to organize them in the final report.

Finally, the participants' language choices while telling the story help to convey their relationship with the content and inform inferences made about the emotional reactions they experienced (Robertson & Lappeman, 2025). Robertson and Lappeman (2025) mention that this includes both what was said and what was left unsaid, as well as considering the specific words and phrases a participant used. This round of analysis was used to further consider the participants' feelings and connection to their stories.

Chapter 4: Results

This study received responses from two participants, henceforth designated Morgan and Jordan, both self-identifying as Black or African American and working in legal settings. While neither participant currently holds a specialty certification in court or legal interpreting, both are RID or the Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) certified and have been working in legal settings for more than ten years, and report working on average 1-3 legal assignments a month. These interpreters' personal demographic data, such as age, location, and gender identity, are irrelevant to the results of this study, and I have chosen to remove this data from the findings to protect participant anonymity.

Pre-Interview Survey Results

In addition to collecting key demographic information from participants, the pre-interview survey gathered data regarding participants' quantifiable experiences with legal interpreting, including: the frequency of legal appointments, how often legal teams are provided, what participants consider legal work, what kind of assignments interpreters are accepting, and the awareness of additional professional support and training. Throughout the survey, both participants responded similarly.

When asked on average how many legal assignments they work in a month, both respondents selected 1-3 assignments. Both participants said that they rarely worked with a legal team, and when teaming did occur, the team was never a Person of Color or identified as a B/AA interpreter.

When asked how they personally defined legal interpreting, participants responded with the following explanations:

To me, anything that obviously involves interpreting in a court of law (of any kind), meeting with attorneys and clients, interpreting legally binding documents, or in any situation where a citizen's rights and the law intersect (Morgan)

and

ASL to English and English to ASL interpreting and transliterating consistent with the interpreter code of professional conduct, legal ethics, knowledge of legal terminology, constitutional, and statutory understanding (Jordan).

When asked which legal settings participants most frequently find themselves in, they responded: city/local/district court, traffic violations, misdemeanor hearings, arraignments, and attorney/client meetings.

Table 1
Pre-Interview Survey Results

Question	Morgan's Response	Jordan's Response
What legal settings do you find you interpret most frequently?	City/local district court: traffic violations, misdemeanor hearings, arraignments, etc.	Attorney/Client meetings
On average, in one month, how often do you interpret in legal settings?	1-3 Assignments per Month	1-3 Assignments per Month
How often do you team with other legal interpreters?	Rarely	Rarely
How often do you team with other legal interpreters who are also Persons of Color?	Never	Never
How often do you team with other legal interpreters who also identify as Black or African American?	Never	Never

Finally, participants were asked if they were aware of any support systems, resources, or trainings available for legal interpreters. Jordan responded that some state-level mentoring programs are being developed. Jordan responded that the only program (Project CLIMB) they were aware of had gone on hiatus, although the materials and resources are still available in the

public domain. When asked to specify programs for B/AA interpreters, both participants responded that they were unsure or unaware of any programs currently in operation, but Morgan specified that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) interpreters run some online webcasts and workshops.

Interview Results

The interviews were conducted to build a more in-depth understanding of participants' experiences by allowing respondents an opportunity to give longer responses in their own words. Initial coding of the interview transcripts revealed 25 codes, which were then organized into six categories and placed into three themes: Experience in Legal Work, Demands, and Controls.

The theme labelled *Experiences in Legal Work* addresses the types of legal work participants are engaged in as a regular part of their practice and the certifications and qualifications necessary to provide high-quality work in those environments. This theme encompasses participants' overall experiences in legal settings and corresponds directly to this study's first research question. The study's second research question is addressed in the remaining two themes, *Demands*⁵ and *Controls*⁶. These sections include codes that identify the unique experiences of these two participants, as well as providing insight into how the participants responded. The themes and corresponding codes are shown in Table 1 below; the underlined codes became the categorical subheadings used to organize the report of results in this chapter. These themes will be further illustrated through participants' comments.⁷

⁵ Any "factor that rises to a level of significance that will, or should, impact the decision-making involved in your work" (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 5)

⁶ The ways in which "the interpreter interacts with and responds to the demands of an interpreting assignment" (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 15)

⁷ For improved readability, participants' stories and comments were edited to reduce non-linguistic fillers (i.e., umm's, uhh's, etc.) and repetitions in phrasing that did not meaningfully contribute to the overall sentiments of the response.

Experiences in Legal Interpreting

Table 2

Themes and Codes for RQ 1 Regarding Interpreter Experiences

Court as a Category of Legal	Qualified Not Certified
Level of Legality	Certification Status
Legal Settings	Certification Requirements Vary
Separation of Court and Legal	Qualified but not Certified
	Time Investment for Certification
	Community Needs

Court as a Category of Legal. To understand the framing of this study, it is important to recognize that legal interpreting encompasses far more than the hyper-formal, traditional image of a courtroom with a team of 4-6 court interpreters, each accepting responsibility for a separate party. This section discusses Morgan and Jordan's entry into legal settings, their apprehension, and their current understanding of what legal work is. To open the interview, I first asked participants to tell their story, focusing on how they entered legal interpreting. I asked this question to see what kind of legal environments interpreters began with and how they felt about transitioning into this work. When participants were asked to recount their entry into legal interpreting, both recalled events in which they were chosen by others to interpret and expressed sentiments of imposter syndrome. Jordan recalled:

A friend of mine, a Deaf friend, wanted to go to an attorney, and I was like, "It really should be somebody else." [They] said, "I cannot trust anybody else. You know what I mean? Like, I want to... I know you... You practice confidentiality."

Jordan continued to explain that it was not until after this experience that they began to consider legal interpreting, but eventually they asked a local agency owner to shadow legal interpreters in the area. At which point they fully began the legal interpreting journey. While Jordan's story began with a Deaf friend, Morgan's story began with an assignment. Morgan said that it was their first day of work at a new agency, and a supervisor informed them that the two of them would be going to court. Morgan remembered:

My whole body locked up, because I was trained all the way until that point, "you don't go in there if you're not, you know, you don't have a certification". But then... I was told here, it's like, "Hey, this is all we've got. We gotta work with what we have."

Since then, both participants have worked in a variety of legal settings as needed for the last decade. Although Morgan mentioned continuing to compare legal assignments to their idea of what court interpreting is.

Specifically, Morgan spoke often of this "kind of *Law-and-Order* courtroom" as their initial understanding of legal settings. In their day-to-day work, Morgan discusses going to traffic court, calls from the police, depositions, individualized education plan (IEP) meetings, and, only once, a courtroom with a jury – although they were interpreting for the jury. Morgan commented that, on one of their first assignments, they had the feeling of "oh, this is considered legal, too?" They went on to say that even now, over ten years later, they still compare every job to that idea of what legal interpreting is, asking internally and sometimes of others, "What is the level of legality? How legal is this? And how closely does it match my idea of that courtroom setting?"

While Jordan did not express this same level of questioning before each assignment, they did comment that often when they went to court, they would team with a certified RID Specialist

Certificate: Legal (SC: L) interpreter. Typically, they would work in one-on-one attorney/client meetings. Jordan works occasionally in court settings with a legal team.

Qualified v. Certified. An additional distinction that should be made for clarity within this work is the separation between certification and qualification. The participants emphasize that it is possible to be qualified for a legal assignment without being court certified. This is due to a variety of factors, which will be discussed in this section. After identifying the settings that participants work in most frequently, I asked them to explain how they accept jobs and what they feel qualifies them to do the work.

Jordan commented that their state would prefer SC: L certified interpreters in courtroom and trial settings; however, the 10+ year moratorium on SC: L testing has made that requirement untenable, and the expectation has been loosened to certified generally with a requisite number of continued educational units (CEUs) focusing on ethics. Jordan has held certification for over twenty years and satisfies this requirement. Additionally, Jordan believes that the trust their community has placed in them is a hugely qualifying factor:

Inter-community trust got me into it [...] we have other certified interpreters in [our area], and we have SC: Ls, people who have had, um, legal... experience for a long time, so that's not the issue [here]. A lot of times when I'm asked, it's from referrals, it's from Deaf people who trust me, or lawyers who trust me.

From the beginning of their interpreting journey, Jordan has been deeply involved with the Deaf and interpreting communities. They have always endeavored to show that they are doing the work not just for a paycheck but are also present for the community. Jordan acknowledges that they have a significant amount of social capital, which they have been building for nearly thirty years.

Morgan also talked about the importance of community when accepting legal assignments. Their perspective is focused less on the trust of the community and more on how well they can serve an individual consumer. Morgan commented that they frequently call to inquire about an assignment before accepting. They feel that knowing the consumer from previous work and being familiar with that consumer's language and communication style is a contributing factor to their overall qualification for the assignment. During this phone call, Morgan will also attempt to gather more information regarding the exact nature of the legal assignment. Inquiring about the nature of the proceedings allows Morgan to make an educated assessment of what legal jargon will be involved, the depth of the proceedings, and the need for multiple or specialized interpreters. In Morgan's area, certification requirements are not standardized, which leads to specialists being brought in for more complex assignments from other locations.

Both participants mentioned that they considered themselves to be qualified for certain legal assignments despite their lack of a specialty certification. When I asked about why they chose not to obtain their legal certification, both Morgan and Jordan cited the time commitment required. Morgan stated that becoming court-certified would require additional time and education, which, with their current lifestyle, was not feasible. They are involved with family and other community obligations, and as of the time of the interview, having a court-certified interpreter in their area was not considered a large need. Morgan did add that should that change, and a need arise, they would happily invest in meeting the needs of the community. Jordan mirrored many of these comments, citing their community and work obligations as reasons for not having the time to become court certified. Later in the interview, Morgan did state that upcoming changes to the certification and licensure laws in their area might affect the working

ASL-English interpreting population by reducing the number of interpreters who are eligible to work.

Additionally, both mentioned that they would take legal workshops when offered, but that these opportunities were infrequent. With legal workshops already being limited, I asked about the presence of legal workshops by and for People of Color or B/AA interpreters. Morgan stated that there were, on occasion, workshops run by BIPOC individuals, but that they were not aware of any hosted specifically for B/AA interpreters. Jordan mentioned the former Project CLIMB, which reached the end of its grant cycle several years ago and has been out of commission since. They went on to say that they wish there were more programs like Project CLIMB, but since they closed, Jordan was unaware of any programs opening to replace them.

When I asked participants about their network as B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters, they indicated that the community was small and tight-knit. Morgan expressed that they felt the number of qualified B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters in their area has plateaued, stating, “[I] don’t foresee a massive influx of interpreters of color. It’s pretty much the same as it’s always been. We’ve always been a small slice of that pie...” Although Jordan did not directly speak to the number of interpreters, they mentioned that in their area, the interpreters of color are a close community that works together to provide job opportunities, support in obtaining certification, etc. Therefore, it seems that, despite low numbers, these participants built community support.

Demands: Racialized Experiences

The participants described several encounters where they believed that their racial identity influenced their experiences at work. To gather a holistic understanding of how their racial identity influences their work, I asked both positive and negative questions (see question 6

in Appendix C). The demands category was developed by identifying those stories where, due to their race, the participants made additional considerations.

Table 3

Themes and Codes for RQ 2a Regarding Interpreter Demands

Interpersonal Demands	Intrapersonal Demands
Tokenism	Appearance Matters
Assumption of Novice Status	Personal Safety
Invisibility	Disproportionate effort

Interpersonal Demands. When the participants recounted stories that detailed their interactions and experiences with colleagues and consumers, they were coded as interpersonal demands. Within these demands, topics of tokenism, assumption of novice status, and invisibility were addressed. In following with Dean and Pollard's DC-S framework (Dean & Pollard, 2013), these demands do not necessarily represent negative experiences but rather neutrally describe what the participants mentioned in their storytelling.

The idea of tokenism was only brought up once during the interview, after I asked Morgan if they felt there were ever moments when identifying as a B/AA individual impacted their work. They responded that there were some instances where their superiors would request that they lead on an assignment for appearance's sake. Morgan recalled the following comments:

[Sometimes] they'll give me the nudge. 'Yeah, you might need to handle this one just for appearance's sake,' [...] there were certain times where I've been told, 'you need to handle this, because think about who's there, and how it looks. What would I look like if I

go out there in this particular forum? When you are here and can probably do this and represent the face of those with this particular issue that they're presenting,'

However, Morgan does not seem to feel negatively towards this concept of representing but rather feels proud that they are a trusted member of the team. They also recognize that being a B/AA individual is a trait unique to them that their teammates do not have and cannot acquire. Morgan states that they have felt supported in these moments, saying:

But yeah, there have been times when I think just having someone there that's part of the community, part of the African American community, that I've been trusted. "Well, yeah, you go ahead and take this, and I'll be here to support you."

Ultimately, being given this nudge was a positive experience for Morgan; however, later in the conversation, Morgan states that they are grateful their superiors have more confidence in their skills than they do. Meaning that this experience could have become an intrapersonal demand quickly if Morgan had felt truly unqualified for the assignment.

A second demand that appeared was the assumption that the participants were new to the field or otherwise unqualified for the assignment, often perpetuated by the participants' teams. When I asked if Morgan or Jordan could think of any time when they felt like their racial identity impacted their working relationship with a team, both had at least one story about being dismissed on the job. Jordan recalls working with a team and the following conversation taking place:

[It's] that kind of thing, where you're signing and they're trying to make the consumer [think] that you don't know what you're doing, or that kind of eye-roll, or that "I'm ready to switch," but it's only been five minutes. I said, "No. When my time is up, I'll let you know." Right? You know what I mean?

I think only one time in a legal setting I did have that, where it was, I don't know. I was teaming with some person, I don't really know and [they kept interjecting] "I understand, I get it."

"Stop it."

You know, when we were on a break, we had a break, I said, "Do not do that again. We are in a team. And if I need you, I'll tell you, and also, we do not need a consumer who's in a legal situation being nervous about the interpreters that are there. So, stop putting that out there."

While Jordan's story shows a lack of trust from a supporting teammate, Morgan told a story that expands on what can happen when the roles are reversed. When the B/AA interpreter is in a supporting role and their contributions are being ignored:

I think there were times where, I don't know if maybe a team or somebody would think, "Uh, well, he's new, and what does he know? I don't know." They didn't... Outwardly treat me with disrespect, but you know, sometimes you're trying to, "(signed: HEY-HEY, I'M HEARING) I'm hearing..."

I'm not facing the pressure of being the one on, on stage or interpreting, I'm not the on interpreter right now, and I'm sitting here and something, and I'm going, "That's not what was said", so I'm sitting here trying to (signed: HEY-HEY, FEED, LOOK+ME). And I know you see me, and I'm sitting there trying to show you, and they look like they can't see you, and it's like, "Oh, okay." [...]

"I'd rather be wrong," or they just say, "Well, I'm gonna trust myself and figure it out, rather than take the feedback from, you know, this new guy."

In both instances, the participants were qualified to complete the assignment but had teams that tried to dismiss, minimize, or outright ignore their contributions, seemingly because they did not trust that the participants could handle the message accurately.

During one of their stories, Morgan mentioned the concept of invisibility, which is where there are so few B/AA interpreters in a specific environment that people begin to believe that these individuals simply do not do this kind of work. Morgan commented that one challenge they face is finding their Deaf consumer and recalled with a laugh:

Many times, going into an assignment, and I'm trying to discreetly find out who it is I'm interpreting for (signed: HEY-HEY, YOU DEAF?), [before I] find the consumer, and then... Oh, yeah, you definitely [see] the eyes get big (signed: CL eyes+grow).

"You're the interpreter?"

"Yes, my name..." You know.

"Wow, you're so good?"

Well, I said, "I learned from you all the Deaf."

Oh, and then they go, "oh, yeah, right, of course," but you know, I think it was a compliment of sorts. [...] And then they get that, but sometimes it's just the fact that there are not so many of us in the profession, particularly in certain areas, so when I showed up to an assignment, it was that moment of being taken aback, "Whoa!" But it was nice to be able to get through the assignment and have them profusely thank [me], and "thank you so much, and if I had the opportunity, I'll call for you again."

Morgan then recalled consumer reactions specifically, in courtrooms, stating that:

Sometimes when I walk in, you know, the courtroom, sometimes I'm looking around, "wow," you know, everybody looks at me, "who is...?"

They're expecting you to sit in one part of the court, and when they see me go up to the other part [gestures: front of court], [... they're like,] "Oh, you're not, you're not in the... in the back? Oh, okay."

So, yeah, it's different, but I enjoy that feeling, and even if the attorney, perhaps, is African American. Sometimes they see somebody, "oh, you're the interpreter," you know. I've gotten that a lot through the years, because it's almost, depending on where you live. They don't see anybody, they [realize] "Wait. [You all] do that too? [...] we didn't know you could do that."

Later in the interview, Morgan acknowledges that they are already a minority in the interpreting community, and when they enter legal environments or other specialized settings, they become a minority of a minority.

Intrapersonal Demands. This section describes the individual thoughts, feelings, and considerations of the participants as they approach their work. The examples included here include personal appearance, personal safety, lack of opportunities, community stagnation, and disproportionate effort. Many of the stories here include demands from other categories, but the data analysis highlighted how the participants' thoughts and feelings were affected in these instances.

Both participants emphasized the importance of professional appearance in interpreting environments. Morgan cited another B/AA interpreter who repeatedly says, "appearance matters," while Jordan explained that they are "cognizant that [they are] Black" and will arrive in business attire. Jordan goes on to add that because they have longer hair, the styles they choose have also caused conflict in their work. They did mention that once consumers see their skill,

usually the hairstyles become a non-issue, although Jordan did mention that this causes them pause because:

[it's] a terrible thing, but you're... making a choice [based] on my hairstyles. [Which I'm not sure] relates to my skill, you know. But it happens [...]

Jordan did clarify that hair-related conflicts occurred outside of legal settings, but still felt it was relevant enough to this study to mention.

Morgan went on to mention the physical danger that is inherent when B/AA individuals appear in certain environments. Due to their geo-political environment, Morgan notes becoming increasingly concerned about the physical location of assignments in recent years. They now find themselves double-checking the location and surrounding areas before taking a job, due to personal safety concerns about being a B/AA identifying individual in certain locations. They cite local stories of other B/AA professionals entering a town or city to conduct business, or even just to drive through, and being attacked because of their racial identity. Morgan admits that these considerations have led to declining some assignments or reassigning them to other interpreters with lesser risk.

The final demand that appeared during the interview was the concept of disproportionate effort. When I asked the participants what advice they had to aspiring B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings, they had many helpful things to say, but this warning was noted.

If you feel that that's what you want to do, and this is the profession for you, be prepared. Anybody who comes into this profession has to work for it [...] But as in almost any other profession. When you're in our particular community, you've got to work harder. Just to prove that you have what it takes...

Morgan said this to me, and while Jordan did not say this explicitly, they did mention the importance of taking the time to put in the work.

Controls: Embracing Community Trust and Building the Practitioner

The controls section of this chapter summarizes those experiences in which the participants felt that their identity as a B/AA individual benefited their work. These stories were by far the bulk of the interviews, and both participants felt that although being a B/AA interpreter presented challenges, they were determined to keep doing the work for their communities.

Table 4

Themes and Codes for RQ 2b Regarding Interpreter Controls

External Controls	Internal Controls
Trust	Self-Confidence
Deaf-Centered	Boundary Setting
Knowledge Sharing	Positivity
Benefit of Positive Assumptions	Hard Work
	Education
Finding Place	
Support of Colleagues	

External Controls. The use of the term external control is unique to this study and applies to those controls that depend on factors outside of the interpreters themselves. Both participants mentioned the importance of their communities consistently throughout the interviews. They discussed building community and relying on those networks to persevere in

the field and find opportunities for growth and achievement. This section further explores what creates these rich communities, which mean so much to Morgan and Jordan.

Jordan was the first participant to discuss the idea of inter-community trust, saying that their first legal assignment was a direct result of the trust of one of their consumers. Later in the interview, they mentioned that trust helped them enter the field, but continued community trust also helped them stay there. When asked why the community continues to request them, Jordan responded, “I think it goes back to the trust. And remember, I'm just not usually showing up. It's from a referral, or somebody requested me. So, I think my situation is different from the norm.” Morgan echoed this sentiment when discussing qualifications for an assignment, commenting that building rapport with consumers and interpreting for individuals with whom there is already rapport and trust is important. Additionally, Morgan recognized the autonomy of the consumer to choose who they work with, stating:

some of my superiors have been in this part of this community for a couple of decades or more, so they know the community sometimes in ways even I don't, and so, we can't always assume when two go together, “oh, well, yeah, I want them” [referring to the Black interpreter] maybe you want the one that knows you better, you never know...

This further exemplifies the role that trust plays in the work of interpreters, especially in legal settings. Jordan mentions the influence of the setting on the need for interpreter/consumer trust, saying:

I think my name in our interpreting community is as somebody who is always professional, who has the appropriate skill, you know what I mean? They're not concerned that if I come up, they know they're [not] gonna have to repeat themselves. That happens, you know, but they do, they know I'm like, “okay, I need to get this right

for you. This is, this is important, this is legal.” So, they know I’m going to use the code of ethics, right? All the things that are in our part of our professional responsibilities, and those things. So, I think it’s... The trust because I’ve been in the community so long.

Earning trust is clearly an important part of building a community, and for the Deaf community, a large part of giving trust is seeing the intentionality and character of the person to whom they are giving that trust. Both Jordan and Morgan discuss the fact that they are Deaf-centered in their work and their belief that this has helped them progress throughout their careers. Jordan explains that when they were beginning their interpreting career, they made a consistent effort to go to Deaf events and be present in the community, stating:

I was dragging my kid’s places and showing the Deaf community that I was just not there for a paycheck, that I was there to support the community, but I think building trust early on.

Jordan was putting effort into building social capital early on by engaging with the community, as an interpreter, but also an advocate, and later as an instructor. They mention that in the present workshops, to this day, they endeavor to create environments that are accessible and welcoming to the community as well. Morgan also touched on the importance of being culturally Deaf centric. They mentioned that their agency is a place for Deaf people to come and go as they please, to get support and build community. Morgan mentions that on occasion their job requires that they go above and beyond for consumers, which is what connects them to the community and why they find their work so meaningful. They work to build an open community for their consumers.

When I asked the participants what advice they had for new B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters, they both emphasized the role of mentors and learning from the community of

interpreters already working in legal settings. Jordan's immediate response to the question was "find a mentor." Morgan agrees with this and adds, "immerse yourself in the community. Work with other experienced interpreters, even if they don't live in the area. Network with somebody who can at least kind of feel what you're going through." Both participants realized that continuing to learn and develop is the only way to continue in the field. Jordan said this when discussing the qualities of a professional, "You've got to grow, because at some point, legal is too important for people to just be like... 'I do like you, but you're screwing up.'" Morgan emphasized that everyone has something to bring to the table by acknowledging that interpreters with formal training backgrounds have different perspectives and insights from those without, or that experience comes in many shapes and sizes. The important part of these results is that in building community, novice and experienced interpreters have access to a wealth of knowledge from each other, which should be used to become the best interpreters possible.

Morgan introduced another interesting concept: the benefit of positive assumption. When discussing the tendency of consumers to request new interpreters in video relay settings, they mentioned that wanting another interpreter is part of life, which may spare them from something as well. This gives insight into how Morgan processes experiences and comments that may be difficult; they seem to automatically give the consumer the benefit of the doubt regarding their intentions. When I asked Morgan what advice they had for new B/AA ASL-English interpreters looking to enter the legal field, the first thing that came to mind was:

don't feel as if you don't belong. There's a place for everybody in this profession. You might have to kind of... make some of your space, you know, elbows... [mimes: throwing elbows] Sometimes, you know, you have to work extra hard to prove that, yes, "I can do this", you know, and then people go, "Wow, you know, you can."

This relates with the final aspect of community building, which is the support of colleagues. Morgan discussed on multiple occasions the confidence their superiors placed in them, and how it gave them the confidence to do the work. They also described a working environment where colleagues recognize each other's strengths and unique abilities and value everyone's contribution to the work. Morgan said, "I've appreciated working in an environment where I can still be myself and be respected for being myself."

Jordan also touched on the importance of a supportive network of colleagues, but they are helping to facilitate that. Jordan talks about the work they are doing as a mentor, working to get other B/AA interpreters in their area to become certified and find job opportunities. Jordan mentioned several times throughout the interview their role as an educator and clearly finds this element of the work fulfilling. Meaning that having a strong community is a crucial factor in interpreters persevering in the field.

When I asked both participants why, despite their negative experiences, they decided to persevere in the field, both Morgan and Jordan responded: *the community*.

Morgan added that, admittedly, financial stability is a huge factor in their perseverance because this job is the only thing they have ever done, but more than that, they enjoy people. "I get to meet so many different people. I like learning new things. I like being exposed to so many different areas of life [...]" they commented. Jordan agreed that their community is the reason they are still in this work. Their story has a more directly personal origin, with family members and friends being involved in the community, and then formally learning ASL and learning from Deaf mentors. Jordan feels that there is a deep connection with the people they serve, saying,

I have had good mentors and a lot of Deaf mentors, and that poured into me early, and so you know, what they deal with is much worse than what I deal with. Right, so if they can do it, I can do it with them.

It seems that this connection to the community influenced many of their responses to my questions. As so many of their responses discussed building a community and relying on the community they built.

Internal Controls. While building a strong community certainly seems to have impacted the participants' journeys, some characteristics are unique to the individuals who possess them. These characteristics have been labelled internal controls, again a term unique to this paper, to represent that these attributes are specific to the interpreter employing them. This section considers what personal attributes contribute to Jordan and Morgan's success in the field.

When Jordan was describing how they react to racial demands occurring in the workplace, they mentioned that they are a strong "self-advocate" who will not allow people to run them over. Jordan goes on to say, "My job is to do my job, regardless of what they do." Jordan admitted that they are quick to set boundaries, and they feel this helps them to mitigate conflict early on, stating, "I am a very strong self-advocate, and once people know that – you know what I mean. They may not like it, but they leave you alone." Additionally, Jordan feels confident in their skills, allowing them to adopt a show-and-tell attitude. When discussing negative experiences regarding their hairstyles, Jordan says:

[it's] a terrible thing, but you're... making a choice on my hairstyles. [Which I'm not sure] relates to my skill, you know. But, it happens, and so I don't... Not that it bothers me long, I'll just be like, okay, I can show you better than I can tell you. So let's go, let's get to it.

Jordan also credits their ability to take a positive outlook for their continued work in the field, saying:

I think I'm thriving, by choice. [...] I choose to take the, what's that saying? "Take the meat, and throw away the bone." So, I take those things that nourish me, I try to keep those [...] And those things that don't, I try to let them go and move on. [That's the] only way to survive as a person of color in this field.

In addition to self-confidence, setting boundaries, and maintaining positive attitude, hard work and education also came up as personal attributes that contribute to perseverance in the field.

Morgan and Jordan both advise aspiring B/AA ASL-English interpreters and those entering legal settings to “put in the work” and “do your homework.” Jordan mentions that it is impossible to work for something when “you don’t know what it is.” They advise reaching out to the leading body for court interpreters locally – typically, this is an individual state's Supreme Court – or connecting with other interpreters already working in legal settings. Both participants recommend taking workshops, specifically those regarding ethics and legal terminology, as these are often the most taxing elements of legal interpreting. Finally, Jordan recommends taking college courses in legal terminology and general law classes. They acknowledge that their educational background and experience have been a large factor in receiving opportunities and respect in the field.

Interpreting in legal settings is a complex and specialized process. The results reviewed in this chapter emphasized that legal interpreting is a broad categorization of work that includes a variety of assignments both in and out of courtroom settings. Additionally, legal interpreting requires highly skilled interpreters whose qualifications go beyond simple certification and may

not require certification in some instances. Additionally, for B/AA individuals in these settings, there are a variety of additional demands that may appear without warning on the job. The participants discussed at length how they confront these demands, building both confidence and experience through the community, and provided interesting insight into their daily work. Many of these findings overlap with existing research, the parallels and similarities of which will be discussed in the next chapter of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The narratives provided by the participants give rich insight into how these B/AA ASL-English interpreters experience and navigate working in legal settings. Legal interpreting is not confined to a courtroom, but regardless of the environment, it is a complex job that requires interpreters to possess unique skills and qualities. The work itself does not seem to be different for B/AA ASL-English interpreters; however, they also bring their experiences as B/AA individuals to these settings. My findings further support the existing body of literature regarding B/AA individuals in the ASL-English interpreting field. The generalizability of my study is limited due to the small sample size, but the stories of these two interpreters are powerful and may provide insights to other interpreter practitioners.

Three Key Findings

From my results, I have identified three key findings: 1) the work itself is a constant, 2) there are several pathways into legal interpreting, and 3) B/AA ASL-English interpreters experience the same racialization in legal settings as in any other area of ASL-English interpreting. What I found most interesting about these results was how closely they followed the existing body of research. Throughout the interview, Morgan and Jordan's responses consistently aligned with findings from prior research as discussed in the literature review.

One constant I saw throughout my discussions with Morgan and Jordan was that legal interpreting is legal interpreting; the work itself does not seem to be impacted by the presence of B/AA interpreters in place of ASL-English interpreters from another racial or ethnic background. The participants worked in quasi-judicial, quasi-legal, and occasionally in courtroom settings, and their work consisted of attorney/client meetings, traffic/municipal courts, and IEPs and other contractual agreements, which aligns with the work that Bancroft et al (2013) describe as legal

settings in which interpreters might work. Both participants emphasize the importance of a strong command of specialized terminology and legal jargon in legal settings, with Jordan even recommending that interpreters take formal law classes. This supports research that claims that legal interpreters must understand both the linguistic and cultural nuances of legal settings (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2011; Dubow et al., 1992; Palma, 2023; Solow, 2000). Finally, the participants talked about legal and court interpreting separately, noting that they are more cautious about accepting courtroom assignments; when they do, they are aware of the significance of their role. Based on my discussions with Morgan and Jordan, B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings do the same work as other legal ; the only difference is that they do it while being Black. For interpreters looking to enter the legal field, both the participants and I recommend doing the research. Find out what the work looks like in the area of interest and what is required to do the work effectively.

There are many ways to begin legal interpreting and gain the experience and qualifications necessary to enter the field, including mentoring, observation, and personal invitation. Unfortunately, more formal pathways such as education and certification are limited due to the moratorium on the RID SC: L certification and the discontinuation of Project CLIMB. Outside of Project CLIMB, neither participant was aware of ongoing programs intended to prepare ASL-English interpreters to work in legal settings.

With limited formal pathways into legal interpreting work, Morgan and Jordan reported turning to one-off trainings and informal educational experiences such as mentoring, observation, and personal invitation in the field. Morgan relied on the social capital they had developed with colleagues and consumers to identify when and how they should accept legal assignments. In this way, they slowly began building the skills, competencies, and qualifications

necessary to work effectively in legal settings. Jordan's path was similar, although with some key differences. A Deaf individual personally asked Jordan to interpret a legal meeting; this experience piqued Jordan's interest and sparked them to inquire with a local agency about mentorship and observation opportunities. Both participants encouraged ASL-English interpreters interested in entering legal work to find mentors and take the time to learn about the field before jumping into the practice. Thus, solidifies mentorship, observation, and personal connections as valid pathways into legal interpreting.

In terms of racialized experiences, B/AA ASL-English interpreters experience the same racism and microaggressions in legal settings that have been reported in other interpreting environments. Morgan and Jordan both reported instances where colleagues and consumers assumed that they were less qualified or capable than others, which aligns with microaggressions reported in research conducted by Nakahara (2016), Olopade (2017), West-Oyedele (2015), and Statchell et al. (2022). Themes of tokenism, invisibility, and hypervisibility were reported, further supporting claims by scholars such as Obasi (2013) and West-Oyedele (2015). While both participants explained the racism and discrimination they faced at work, I was inspired by how much they focused on the controls they had at their disposal.

The controls that Morgan and Jordan mentioned were the largest category of my results. Altogether, the control options mentioned by the participants numbered eleven; any time a demand or a racial experience was described, the participants would almost immediately explain how they handled the issue and the controls they employed. Researchers have discussed the importance of social and cultural capital for interpreters, and the participants agreed that building a community and network for support is vital for success in the profession. The participants, however, also emphasized that being confident in oneself, establishing clear boundaries,

maintaining a positive attitude, and working hard benefit B/AA ASL-English interpreters in all settings. These results suggest that an individual's personality and outlook may also contribute to their ability to address and mitigate racialized experiences in the field.

The purpose of this research was to answer two questions: 1) What are the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings? 2) What demands/controls impact B/AA interpreters in legal settings? While more research is needed to fully satisfy these inquiries, I believe the key findings described above provide early insights into potential responses. First, the overall experiences of the two B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters interviewed are not particularly different from what existing research would suggest. These interpreters are B/AA identifying individuals who encounter the same racialized experiences as other B/AA ASL-English interpreters (See Carpenter, 2017; Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyede, 2015). They do the same work as spoken language legal interpreters, but they specialize in ASL-English interpreting (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2011; Brunson, 2022; Solow, 2000). The participants took informal pathways to enter the field, and they do their work to the best of their abilities, knowledge, and skill. Secondly, this research finds that the demands and controls reported by the B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters interviewed here are similar to those reported in other studies across the field (See Carpenter, 2017; Nakahara, 2016; Olopade, 2017; West-Oyede, 2015).

Final Thoughts

For any B/AA interpreter, especially new interpreters, it is important to develop a strong personal identity (Ford, 2021). Jordan explained that they choose to thrive in the field, and that is a direct result of their ability to absorb positive experiences and reject negative ones. They also explain that they advocate for themselves, which reduces the frequency of negative racial

experiences. Through building a strong community, it may be possible to build individual self-efficacy, as demonstrated in Morgan and Jordan's entry into the field. Both participants commented that receiving encouragement from others helped them begin their legal careers. The community these interpreters built for themselves provides support and encouragement vital to navigating the challenges they face as B/AA ASL-English interpreters. As more research is published and supports the experiences reported by B/AA ASL-English interpreters, I think that it is important for B/AA individuals to recognize that their experiences and perspectives are unique to them, but common amongst their peers. This community should lean into building up each other and new B/AA ASL-English interpreters.

Morgan and Jordan both touched on the importance of giving and receiving support from colleagues. Morgan explained how much they value a working environment where they can be themselves and are respected for the unique perspective they bring. Jordan discussed instances where they felt they were not respected because of who they are and the experience they bring, even mentioning that they felt it was not until they achieved specific educational and experiential milestones that they earned status in the field. Jordan goes on to say that they work with new interpreters to provide the opportunities and network they feel are vital to interpreter success. I recommend that practicing interpreters endeavor to talk with and listen to their colleagues, especially those whose backgrounds differ from our own. My intention in conducting this study was to learn more about the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings and what demands and controls impact their work. In this work, I have noticed that racism, bias, and microaggressions are some demands of B/AA individuals; maybe communicating, connecting, and engaging are the controls.

To continue building connections and engagement across the field, I recommend that others undertake research into the legal interpreters, community building, and the experiences of novice legal interpreters. Whether it be in formal research studies, as I have done here, or in casual conversation with friends and colleagues. Ask questions, collect data, and find similarities and differences. I highly recommend qualitative data methodologies for practitioners interested in examining the experiences of interpreters working across the field. I met two interpreters I would likely never have had the opportunity to speak with; I was able to ask questions that were relevant to my interests, and I heard stories that would never have been shared with me otherwise. I advise future researchers to be open to following the data. I wish that I had been less structured with my interviews and asked more questions to follow up. After all, one will never receive an answer to a question that has not been asked.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, I asked a general question: What are the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings? I wanted to know the answer as a Black ASL-English interpreter who is interested in specializing in legal work. As I investigated Demand/Control Schema and Critical Race Theory to build a theoretical framework for this study, I realized that I wanted to focus specifically on the demands B/AA ASL-English interpreters have to navigate, and the controls they employ to address situations that arise. This research is unique because while there is some research in the areas of legal interpreting, ASL-English interpreters, and B/AA ASL-English interpreters, there is very little existing research on the individuals who stand in this intersection.

I chose a semi-structured interview with a pre-interview survey methodology to allow time to gather rich data rooted in the narratives of B/AA ASL-English interpreters working in legal settings. By using a basic descriptive statistical analysis for the pre-interview survey, I was able to adapt my interview structure to collect more detailed responses to my questions. Using a narrative analysis process on interview transcripts, I identified 25 codes, which were consolidated into six categories: Court as a Category of Legal, Qualified vs. Certified, Interpersonal Demands, Intrapersonal Demands, External Controls, and Internal Controls.

In the data collected, I observed a strong overlap between the participants' responses and existing literature. The participants reported that their experiences in legal interpreting were largely similar to those of spoken and sign language interpreters working in the same environment. Neither of the participants in this study took formal pathways into legal interpreting but rather relied on personal connections, observations, and mentoring. Both

participants discussed instances of racialized experiences they felt impacted their work and listed a variety of controls they employ to address these demands.

Limitations of the Study

This thesis is not a comprehensive study of the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings. Nor does it provide an exhaustive list of the demands and controls impacting their work. More research is needed to move the profession forward, and more conversations like these need to be had.

There were several limitations to this study. The first was the small sample size. I interviewed two B/AA ASL-English interpreters. While the population of B/AA ASL-English legal interpreters is quite small – only three interpreters are SC:L certified and have self-identified as African American on the RID registry (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., 2025)– a sample size of two is likely not large enough to be considered generalizable to the overall population. However, interviewing two allowed me to more deeply understand their experience.

Another limiting factor was the timing of this study. The entire project was conducted in less than a year, and several months were used for development purposes. The call for participants was only open from September to February. During this time, the study was placed on hold to obtain a modification for the initial pre-interview survey from the IRB, and as a result, several individuals who expressed interest in participating initially were no longer available for interviews when the study was approved to continue. It is likely that had the study been open for more than five months and not during the holiday season, more individuals would have responded to the call for participants, and more data would have been collected.

A final potential limitation for this study is my role as the sole principal researcher, as a Black-identifying individual. While I did my best to remain unbiased during the design, data collection, and data analysis portions of this study, I am aware that I hold innate and unintentional biases that may have influenced my work on this study.

Future Research

The discussion regarding the experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings is just beginning. It is critical to the interpreting profession that researchers continue to investigate the experiences, needs, and attributes of this community. The importance of community and community building as a supportive structure for B/AA ASL-English interpreters in legal settings should continue to be evaluated. Future research should consider what supports, trainings, and resources are available for ASL-English legal interpreters and where these tools can be improved, both for the interpreting community at large and the B/AA community. It may also be significant to study the unique experiences of B/AA ASL-English interpreters looking to enter the legal field. These discussions will help pave the way for future B/AA ASL-English interpreters to enter legal settings and encourage other practitioners to do the same.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Semi-Structured Interview Consent Form

Faces of Interpretation: A Study on the Experiences of Black American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpreters in Legal Settings

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding the experiences of Black and African American (B/AA) American Sign Language (ASL) and English interpreters in legal settings. You will be asked to complete a short online survey to collect demographic data and participate in a virtual, semi-structured interview to provide further context for your experiences in the field. This study is being conducted by Meikayla Mixon, a master's student at Western Oregon University, under the supervision of Dr. Elisa Maroney.

Volunteering to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary; you may withdraw from or choose not to continue in the study at any time. There is no penalty for choosing to withdraw or not participate in any way. If you have any questions, please contact us at mmixon23@mail.wou.edu or maronee@mail.wou.edu. If you decide to participate in this study, you must sign this form. The original will be saved for the researchers' records, and you will be provided with a copy upon your request.

Eligibility

To participate in this study, you must be a professional ASL/English interpreter who has experience in legal settings, be eighteen or older, self-identifies as a B/AA individual, and be willing to complete a survey as well as participate in a recorded interview regarding personal experiences.

Purpose

In this study, the researcher aims to investigate the experiences of B/AA interpreters in legal settings. There is currently a lack of research in this area. The researcher hopes to address this gap by collecting demographic data through a short survey and conducting semi-structured interviews regarding the experiences of B/AA interpreters in those specialized environments.

Participant Expectations

Participants will be asked to schedule a virtual meeting with the researcher using video calling technology. Before this meeting, interviewees will be asked to complete a short online survey, taking no more than 15 minutes to complete. During this meeting, a semi-structured interview will take place. The researcher will ask a series of guided questions designed to investigate several aspects of the participants' experiences in legal settings. The interview is expected to take between 60-90 minutes, but will be responsive to the participant's desired level of involvement. Participants may choose to respond to the questions however they choose, including skipping or postponing questions. The interview will be audio and video recorded, which will be transcribed to create a transcript for final analysis. Participants will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and may request further de-identification of personal information.

Confidentiality

Survey data will be kept confidential through the use of a separate password-protected hard drive. While the researcher will uphold appropriate confidentiality, the survey will be hosted on Google Forms, and the platform providers may have access to individual results. The interview will be recorded, and transcripts will be developed. All identifying information provided by the participant will be redacted from the transcript, and the participant will have the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and request that any additional information be de-identified. This information will be kept confidential in a separate file from the data and will be password-protected. The researcher cannot assure complete secrecy. Only the principal researcher and the thesis committee chair will have access to raw data. The interview responses will be published in a thesis, however, your name or identifying information will not be included.

Risks

Participation has a minor risk due to the possibility of emotional discomfort in discussing unpleasant experiences. If you feel you've suffered emotional distress during this study, please seek counseling. You may withdraw without penalty at any time.

Benefits

There is no monetary compensation for your participation in this study, and there may be no direct benefit to the participant. You may benefit emotionally or psychologically from sharing your experiences and participating in furthering research in the field.

Contact

For further information about this project, please contact the researcher Meikayla Mixon via email at mmixon23@mail.wou.edu. The thesis advisor for this research is Dr. Elisa Maroney at maronee@mail.wou.edu.

This study has been reviewed and approved by Western Oregon University Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact Western Oregon University Institutional Review Board at irb@wou.edu or 503-838-9200.

Statement of Consent

I understand that I will be video and audio recorded as part of this study, but that my identity in any published work will remain anonymous. I understand that if I have any questions or concerns regarding this project, I can contact the investigator at the above location or the WOU Institutional Review Board at (503) 838-9200 or e-mail: irb@wou.edu. I have read the information provided above and consent to be a participant in this research study.

Signature of the person agreeing to take part

Date

Printed name of the person above

Signature of the principal researcher

Date

Thank you,

Meikayla Mixon

Western Oregon University

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Pre-Interview Survey

Faces of Interpretation: A Study on the Experiences of Black American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpreters in Legal Settings

How do you identify (racially, ethnically, culturally, etc)?

Open response

How long have you been interpreting in general?

<1 year

1-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16-20 years

21-25 years

26-30 years

>30 years

How long have you been working in legal settings?

<1 year

1-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16-20 years

21-25 years

26-30 years

>30 years

In what state(s) do you work?

Open response

Interpreting – Legal

The following questions will be related to your experiences as an interpreter in legal settings.

Are you a certified legal interpreter?

Yes

No

No, but I am working on it

Prefer not to answer

How do you define legal interpreting?

Open response

On average in one month, how often do you interpret in legal settings (i.e., any environment that involves law enforcement, an attorney, immigration, negotiation, mediation, or the presence of a judge; or any proceedings that occur in a courtroom or police station)?

Never

1-3 assignments

4-6 assignments

6-10 assignments

>10 assignments

What legal settings do you find you interpret most frequently?

Open response

Interpreting – Network

The following questions will be related to your experiences networking as a legal interpreter.

How often do you team with other legal interpreters?

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

Often

Always

How often is that team a person of color?

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

Often

Always

How often is that team a Black or African American individual?

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

Often

Always

What supports/resources/trainings are you aware of for legal interpreters (i.e., professional development, communities of learning, mentoring opportunities, social/professional groups, social media, etc.)?

Open Response

What are the supports/resources/trainings specifically for Black and African American legal interpreters?

Open Response

Scheduling the Interview

In this section you will be asked about your general availability for a 60-90 minute virtual interview. This section is only intended to give the researcher an idea when your schedules may be compatible for a meeting. This section in no way signs you up for a time slot and if a conflict or schedule change arises, the researcher will do their best to find a solution.

What time zone are you in?

Eastern Daylight Time

Central Daylight Time

Mountain Daylight Time

Mountain Standard Time

Pacific Daylight Time

Alaska Daylight Time

Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time

What days are you most available? Please select all that apply

Monday
Tuesday
Wednesday
Thursday
Friday
Saturday
Sunday

What time frames work best on the days you selected above? Please select all that apply

Early Morning (Before 10:00)
Late Morning (10:00-12:00)
Early Afternoon (12:00-2:00)
Late Afternoon (2:00-4:00)
Early Evening (4:00-6:00)
Evening (6:00-8:00)
Other

Is there any relevant scheduling details I should be aware of?

Open Response

For the interview, please select your preferred language

English
American Sign Language
Other

Please include your name and preferred contact information for scheduling the interview

Thank you!!

Your time is valued and appreciated!

The researcher will contact you within the next two weeks regarding your continued participation in this study. If you have questions, concerns, or need to contact the researcher (Meikayla Mixon) please email mmixon23@mail.wou.edu. If you would like to speak to the Thesis Advisor (Dr. Elisa Maroney) for this study please contact maronee@mail.wou.edu.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Faces of Interpretation: A Study on the Experiences of Black American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpreters in Legal Settings

Interview Script

Thank you so much for participating in my study. As a reminder, this interview is completely voluntary; you may choose to answer any questions as you see fit, including declining to answer or requesting that the question be held until later in the interview. I am investigating the experiences of Black and African American (B/AA) American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreters in legal settings. I will be asking some demographic questions and about your personal experiences. Please remember that while your responses and personal information will be de-identified after the interview transcript is written, your colleagues and consumers have not agreed to be participants in my study, and as such care should be taken in your responses to uphold tenant one of the RID Code of Professional Conduct mandating that interpreters ensure the confidentiality of consumer information. If at any time you need to pause or end the interview, please let me know, and I will respond accordingly. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Demographics

1. When did you consider yourself a professional? (Correlates with #2 on survey)
2. How did you enter the field of legal interpreting?/Tell me your story.
3. I see you are/are not a legal interpreter (Correlates with #5 on survey)
 - a. If yes, what certification?
 - b. If yes, can you explain what that process was like for you?
 - c. If no, why not
 - d. Can you elaborate on any barriers you may have faced during your certification journey?
4. I see you frequently/sometimes/never work with a team (Correlates with #7 on survey)
 - a. Does having a B/AA or POC team impact the work or your dynamics in legal settings?

Lived Experience

5. How do you determine if you are qualified to accept a legal assignment?
 - a. Other than the qualifications you mentioned, do you perceive your cultural identity as a qualification for some legal assignments?
 - i. Why?

The next three questions I will ask are how your race has impacted you in the work, with colleagues, and with consumers. Please tell me three stories – when it impacted the work, when it impacted your teaming, when it impacted your relationship with a consumer asset or deficit

6. Have you experienced, in a legal interpreting setting, a situation where you felt your cultural identity had impacted the work?
 - a. Was this impact beneficial? How?
 - b. Was this impact negative? How?
 - c. How did this impact you personally?
7. I see that you frequently/never/etc. work with colleagues (Correlates with #9 on survey). While working with colleagues, has your cultural identity impacted your collaboration with a colleague?

- a. Was this impact beneficial? How?
 - b. Was this impact negative? How?
 - c. How did this impact you personally?
- 8. Have you experienced a situation where you felt your cultural identity had impacted your connection with a consumer?
 - a. Was this impact beneficial? How?
 - b. Was this impact negative? How?
 - c. How did this impact you personally?
- 9. Are there any other benefits or challenges resulting from your cultural identity that have not been addressed so far, about your experiences in legal settings?

Coping

- 10. What cultural capital do you bring to your work in legal settings?
- 11. Do you have colleagues that you can identify with, even non-interpreters?
- 12. What personal/professional strengths do you feel are a result of your status as a B/AA interpreter in legal settings?
- 13. If a B/AA colleague or peer experiences discomfort with a colleague, client, or situation, what might you suggest?
- 14. Do you know of any networking/professional/social groups for legal interpreters?
 - a. B/AA interpreters
- 15. You've been in the field for _____ number of years. Why do you continue in the work?
- 16. Can you recommend coping strategies for aspiring B/AA interpreters?
 - a. In general
 - b. Legal interpreters
- 17. How are you maintaining/developing new skills?
- 18. How do you maintain your motivation to continue in this field?
 - a. In the legal field
- 19. Do you believe you are thriving in the field versus just surviving?
 - a. How?

Follow-ups

- 20. Please expand on that.
- 21. Tell me more about your response to _____ (e.g., 1)
- 22. Please give me an example of your response to _____ (e.g., 1a)
- 23. Tell me more about your answer.
- 24. What other information would you like to add?
- 25. What, if anything, else would you like to share that you have not yet had an opportunity to share?
- 26. You know where my research is heading. If you were me, what questions should I be asking? What do you think is important to know?

Appendix D: Seven Steps Taken in Thematic Analysis

Seven Steps	Description
1. Data Immersion	I transcribed the interviews, reviewed the transcripts for accuracy by comparing them with the original video/audio recordings of the participant interviews, and noted additional signed/emphatic content in brackets. I also read the transcripts several times before initiating the coding process.
2. Initial Coding	During this phase of data analysis, I reviewed each interview transcript four times to create the initial coding structure. This process was completed using Taguette for highlighting and annotations. Each round of coding was saved as a new project in Taguette to see how the codes appeared independently across rounds of review. Then, the projects were saved to a master Excel spreadsheet for cross-comparison and cumulative review.
3. Identifying Themes	To transition from broad, undefined codes to more focused and overarching themes, codes were written out on post it notes and reorganized by category. Initial codes numbered 25 were consolidated into six main categories. These categories were then combined to follow the DC-S framework established as the theoretical framework for the paper. The final categories were organized into three themes intended to mimic the structure of the overall study.
4. Refining and Reviewing	At this point, the themes were compared back to the original data and coded transcripts to ensure the original meaning of the participants' comments was encapsulated by the larger themes.
5. Thematic Mapping	To visually represent the codes and their relations to the themes, a table was compiled of each of the original codes and how they were categorized by the final themes.
6. Identifying Thematic Networks	The thematic map was then reviewed and restructured to ensure the codes related consistently to each other and the theme to which they were assigned.
7. Results Write-up	Finally, the results were written up in the results and findings chapter of the study. This write-up included direct quotes and paraphrases from participants as contextual evidence of the assigned codes and themes.

Table adapted from Robertson and Lappeman's (2025) article on narrative analysis seen on p. 7