

The motivations to enter and the lived experience of men in Sign Language interpreting.

Sign Language interpreting as a profession is relatively new and hails from the research in the 1960s by linguist, William Stoke, into American Sign Language as a distinct and bona fide language which requires interpreting into spoken English for those who do not understand Sign Language. Subsequent research into other signed languages from around the world by various scholars, reinforced the work of Stoke and provided similar status for those signed languages being analysed.

Historically, Sign Language interpreters were naturally enculturated into Deaf communities and were invited by Deaf people to enter interpreting courses (Pivac, 2014). This enculturation into the Deaf community and adoption of Sign Language was generally a result of hearing people having Deaf family members, friends and co-workers (Metzger, 1999). In the early days of interpreting, people did not identify as an interpreter because they were not expecting remuneration for the, so called, help they were providing. For that reason, many people undertaking the interpreting were housewives (Cokely, 2005) who would have been in the position to offer their time on a voluntary basis.

Fifty years later we are in a very different landscape where the culture is very much about university interpreter training programs, professionalism, membership of registering bodies and associations. 77% of interpreters in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are self-employed with the potential to earn double the average gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in the UK (ONS, 2016). Therefore, Sign Language interpreting is now considered a desirable profession because of its flexibility and earning potential. However, little has changed in the last 50 years regarding the representation of the profession where gender is considered and there is currently only around 18% of interpreters in the UK who are male.

Through my presentation, I will offer some explanations of the motivations for men to enter the Sign Language interpreting profession where they are the minority. In addition, I will give some indication as to how they cope with their 'token' status and the challenges they may face, through examples of their lived experience within the profession. The information presented will be based on interviews with male Sign Language interpreters primarily from the UK and forms part of my PhD research which I am currently undertaking at Durham University in the UK.

Paul Michaels
Durham University
p.a.michaels@durham.ac.uk
4 St Augustines Court, Churcfields Road, Beckenham, Kent, BR3 4QR, UK