

Black, Indigenous, People of Color: The BIPOC Interpreter Experience

Tokenism and Weaponization of Our Identities

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Setting The Stage

Definitions



Tokenism:

The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of racial, gender, or disability equality within a workplace or educational context.



Weaponization:

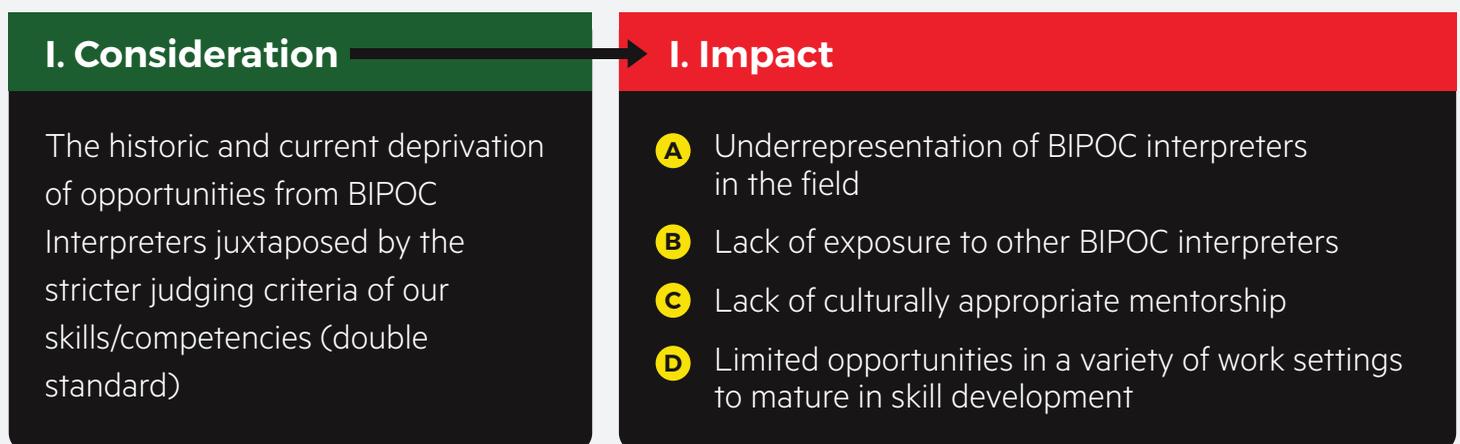
Exploitation for the purpose of attacking a person or group, spreading discord, and/or setting as a negative example for the purpose of excluding or deterring others in the group from participation.

The acronym BIPOC may be controversial as it decentralizes the experiences unique to a specific marginalized group and presents the experiences of all non-white people as one and the same. Taking that into consideration, we have decided to use 'BIPOC' in this conversation starter to demonstrate the unified experience that many non-white interpreters have had with being tokenized and having their identities weaponized.

The purpose of this document is not to attack or offend, but rather "call in" hiring entities and invite the Deaf and interpreter communities to engage in difficult conversations that will, in turn, lead to more transparent and authentic collaborations/interactions amongst our colleagues and peers.

The content we present is by no means an exhaustive list of the experiences of BIPOC interpreters. The hope is that by reading this document, the reader will go into further self- and/or organizational analyses to address practices that sustain or promote the tokenism and weaponization of BIPOC interpreters. Addressing some of the issues outlined in this document may cause discomfort for those who have been privileged and/or uplifted within the interpreting profession. Non-BIPOC interpreters have historically occupied spaces for which they are not appropriate because they have had the privilege to do so with little to no consequence or pushback. Now, as many entities make strides towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, this privilege has been called into question. Therefore, addressing tokenism and weaponization may also require non-BIPOC interpreters to recognize 1) when their privilege has given them advantageous access to spaces and opportunities, and 2) the importance of relinquishing opportunities (and stating why) in order to force hiring entities into more equitable action.

Opportunities for BIPOC interpreters have always been disproportionate to those of our non-BIPOC counterparts prior to COVID and the current landscape of social movements. With a drastic shift to a virtual world, BIPOC Interpreters around the globe suddenly became accessible for entities, businesses, and organizations who for various reasons previously, provided few, if any, work to BIPOC interpreters. This shifted emphasis toward virtual interpreting opened up a myriad of possibilities for hiring entities to become more diverse in providing culturally appropriate access. However, we must recognize that tokenism masked as diversity is cyclically problematic. One of the impacts of tokenism has been the undue burden placed on BIPOC Interpreters, evident by increased media attention around social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Dakota Access Pipeline protests, DACA reform, Stop Asian Hate, and the like. While more representation of BIPOC interpreters is a positive change, we must still consider their experience, expertise, and familiarity of the content. Oftentimes, BIPOC Interpreters are reduced to a simple skin match in the following formula: Black Deaf Man = Black Male Interpreter or BIPOC/social justice-related content = BIPOC interpreter, merely reducing the interpreter selection to the color of their skin, which is problematic for several reasons. This document is not a checklist of actions entities should avoid, rather, our goal is to help them or you move beyond tokenism and toward providing considerations for making decisions about interpreter fitness for all requests, not just to allay societal pressures or enhance optics.



The Trickle-Down Effect of Underrepresentation

BIPOC Interpreters comprise only a small percentage of professional working/certified interpreters in the United States. Deprivation of opportunities and culturally relevant mentorship shape their professional growth and skill development. Most (not all) aren't fortunate enough to benefit from BIPOC mentors and many weren't even exposed to other BIPOC Interpreters until COVID. These same interpreters are then thrust into very public virtual interpreting jobs under the guise of being a "culturally appropriate match," when historically they haven't been afforded the opportunity to develop the tools or have the exposure to adequately prepare for such public-facing work. In turn they have to learn on the job at the expense of the consumers and their own reputation. This could potentially have a negative domino effect damaging the interpreter's self-esteem, confidence, and performance; often leading to delayed attempts at certification, if at all. This could also prevent other BIPOC Interpreters from accepting similar jobs for fear of being ridiculed by their colleagues, communities, and consumers that they serve.

The BIPOC Interpreter Request

In an effort to tread lightly, all requests for which a white interpreter are not ideal are offered to BIPOC interpreters. Although the culturally and contextually appropriate interpreter need is extremely apparent, the request is sent out by hiring entities as a “BIPOC Interpreter Request” as if any non-white interpreter is appropriate for any and all non-white contexts. This can be off-putting, especially after analyzing the request realizing that by use of the term BIPOC you actually mean an interpreter from a very specific cultural group.

An Example:

Topic: Asian/Asian American Solidarity

Request sent out to Interpreters: Looking for 2 **BIPOC** Interpreters

Interpreters Assigned: Black Female Interpreter, Puerto Rican Male Interpreter

Using BIPOC to replace a specific ethnic and/or racial group is a manifestation of essentializing all non-white interpreters. That must be changed! Therefore, it is important when reviewing requests for interpreters that hiring entities do their due diligence (e.g., ask the right questions expanding your scope beyond racial profile; be specific about the interpreter’s experience, qualifications and skill set needed) to increase the possibility of assigning the most appropriate interpreter to the job.

II. Consideration

Many interpreting agencies prioritize optics and having an outward-facing diverse team over community benefit. They often screen and delegate work for BIPOC interpreters without regard for our skill sets and linguistic appropriateness, which reduces our value down to a simple skin-match.

II. Impact

- A** BIPOC interpreters are passed over for work opportunities outside of celebratory months like Black History, Latinx Heritage, and Indigenous Peoples’, when they are inundated with requests based solely on a skin match, but not on skills, experience, competence, or appropriateness. This is tokenism - intentional or not.
- B** Although seemingly well-intentioned, this can be triggering for many BIPOC Interpreters who are NOT normally called upon to work with these same clients, in these very same spaces, outside of the aforementioned 28-31 days. It calls into question the requestor’s motives and intentions oftentimes reading as disingenuous because they wait until they need us instead of cultivating and nurturing relationships year-round.
- C** While it is extremely important for both the BIPOC Deaf and Interpreter communities to have representation, it should not come at the expense of either.

To BIPOC Interpreters: We're In This Together!

The Weight We Carry

There is an immense amount of pressure on BIPOC Interpreters in mixed spaces, but often these pressures aren't openly discussed. While it may be perceived as a 'safer space,' it comes with an entirely different set of challenges. As BIPOC interpreters, we have been indoctrinated to believe we have to work twice as hard to get half of what our non-BIPOC counterparts receive automatically. But how do we do that work and collectively lift each other up in the process?

The Importance of Solidarity/Support

There are BIPOC interpreters who didn't have exposure to other BIPOC interpreters until the onset of COVID when virtual spaces made it possible for work opportunities beyond our physical locations. Interpreters without BIPOC colleagues have been conditioned to feel like they have to prove themselves in non-BIPOC spaces which can lead to insecurities about their identity and skills. When they enter into BIPOC spaces, sometimes their insecurities are exacerbated and the pressure to *'show up and show out'* is heightened because they feel the need to prove themselves to their own community, as well. In BIPOC spaces, interdependence, solidarity and trust are values that should be uplifted; however, the professional traumas BIPOC interpreters experience in non-BIPOC spaces often hinders them from leaning into the aforementioned values.

Some ways to embody these values are:

- Open communication with corresponding actions that emphasize it's a supportive space
- Address crab mentality
- Hold one another accountable in a loving and uplifting way

Reject Weaponization of Our Identities

Our identities can be used not only as strikes against us but also as badges to tokenize us, depending on the spaces in which we are working. We often work in spaces where our identities become justification for implementing higher performance standards and lower tolerance for mistakes denying us future opportunities for growth/improvement. This is our call for solidarity among BIPOC Deaf and hearing interpreters. Whenever possible, we must resist spaces and entities that weaponize our identities and we should ensure that we aren't re-enacting these practices amongst ourselves.

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