

**Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer  
Sign Language Interpreters Working in the Video Relay Service Setting**

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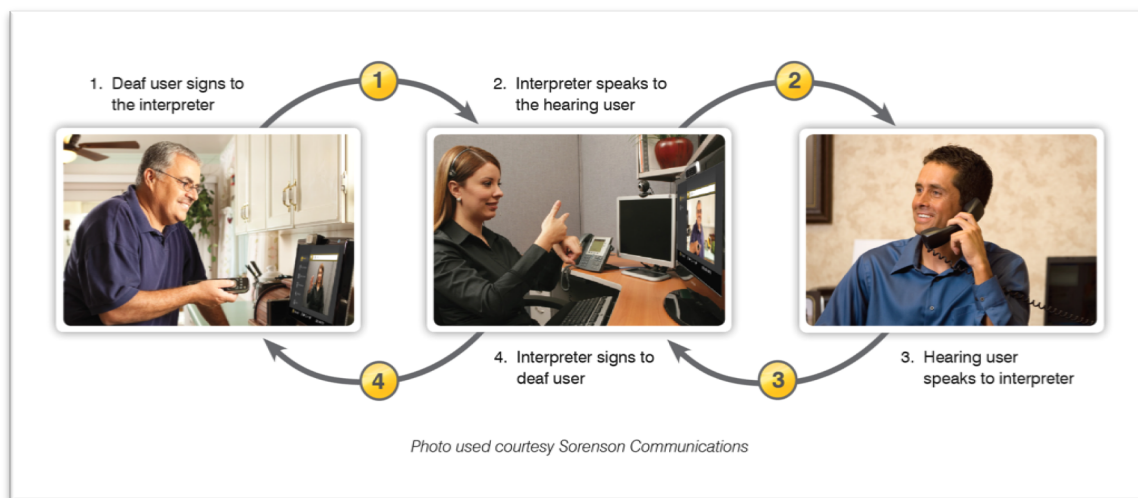
### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) sign language interpreters who have worked in the video relay service setting – more specifically targeting their experiences during interactions with consumers, both deaf and hearing. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and triangulated through a mixed methods approach using anonymous surveys (N=137) and semi-structured interviews (N=8). Three themes emerged from the findings, including (a) the implications of consumer recognition of an interpreter’s LGBTQ identity, which correlates to the social construction of gender and the process of gender attribution – the way that people mentally place others into binary gender categories (Kessler & McKenna, 1978); (b) the experiences of interpreters whose LGBTQ status is not easily detected by consumers and how those interpreters approach the decision to disclose (or reveal) their identities; and (c) the role of the video relay service companies and the ways they cultivate either supportive or oppressive environments for LGBTQ interpreters, which can ultimately impact their interactions with consumers. Since there has been no research conducted on LGBTQ interpreters in the video relay service setting, this study can serve as foundational research regarding the experiences of those interpreters with the goal of generating future studies about the LGBTQ community in the field of interpreting.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Video Relay Service Background

When video relay service made its United States debut in 2002, it altered the landscape of sign language interpreting. Video relay service “enables persons with hearing disabilities who use American Sign Language to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment, rather than through typed text” (“Video Relay Services,” 2017). In this definition, the phrase “persons with hearing disabilities” refers to individuals who are deaf<sup>1</sup>. The video relay service sign language interpreter serves as the middleman, facilitating communication between the deaf consumer (using video equipment) and the hearing<sup>2</sup> consumer (using telephone equipment). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of a video relay service call.



<sup>1</sup> It has been widely accepted that the capitalized term “Deaf” refers to a minority group who shares similar cultural and linguistic values, however the lowercase term “deaf” will be used throughout this thesis to refer to a plurality of identities among that community, including those who identify as hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, and so on (Robinson, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The term “hearing” will be used throughout this thesis rather than “nondeaf” because that is the terminology typically used when referring to the video relay service experience.

*Figure 1.* Video Relay Service Image. Reprinted from Sorenson Communications, n.d., Retrieved from [http://www.sorenson.com/assets/images/press\\_materials/Image1\\_nvp\\_call\\_flow\\_graphic\\_photo-courtesy-SC.jpg](http://www.sorenson.com/assets/images/press_materials/Image1_nvp_call_flow_graphic_photo-courtesy-SC.jpg). Copyright 2019 by Sorenson Communications.

While a video relay service interpreter's primary role is to interpret the conversation taking place between the two consumers (deaf and hearing), opportunities arise when the interpreter, instead, engages directly with the consumer – these will be referred to as non-interpreting interactions. These interactions occur when there is only one consumer on the line, which happens before the call is connected or after the call has ended. Additionally, a non-interpreting interaction could occur during the call when one consumer is waiting for the other party (for instance, a deaf consumer waiting on hold for a call center representative) or any time a consumer disengages from their conversation with the other party to communicate directly with the interpreter.

### **Purpose of Study**

As a practitioner who has worked in the video relay service setting for almost a decade, I have seen firsthand the way this niche field of interpreting has evolved over the years and continues to evolve based on our understanding of the work. I have tried to engage in continuing education activities specific to video relay service (including workshops and webinars) and also stay abreast of the current research being conducted, all the while mentally – and perhaps subconsciously – chronicling my own personal experiences on the phones.



As an interpreter who identifies as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ<sup>3</sup>) community working in the video relay service setting, I began to realize that I had a unique perspective. I also realized that my perspective (and those of my fellow LGBTQ interpreters in this setting) had yet to be formally explored. After some deliberate reflection on my own experiences and past conversations with fellow colleagues about issues that were LGBTQ-specific, I decided that these experiences needed to be investigated and shared. This led to the development of my research question: What are the unique experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer sign language interpreters working in the video relay service setting, specifically with consumers during non-interpreting interactions?

This research project was approached using a phenomenology framework, which is a way to study experiences from the perspective of the individual using their own subjective frame of reference (Hale & Napier, 2013). Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) note that “the central idea is to conduct an investigation ‘for’ rather than ‘of’ the group – that is, not just to describe the group’s perspectives but instead develop knowledge that will be useful for that group” (p. 17), which resonated with me and how I approached my study. My goal was never to simply study a group of people, but to give this community a platform on which to share their experiences and to create something meaningful to give back.

This study was also guided by Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory. This theory argues that anyone who has an identity which is not socially regarded as “normal” will be viewed as tainted or less desirable. As a result, individuals living with stigmas are likely to be treated more negatively by members of a society. Goffman (1963) recognized homosexuality as an example of

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<sup>3</sup> There are many more identities not recognized in the LGBTQ acronym, including asexual, pansexual, and so on. Although this limited acronym only recognizes five identities, it is intended to be inclusive of all sexual and gender identities that are not heterosexual and cisgender, respectively.

a stigmatized identity, which I then used to draw parallels to the wider LGBTQ community. Using this theory as a framework helped to guide the development of the study and frame the results.

As I began the data collection process, it became clear that the participants shared my feelings about the gap in the research. My inbox became inundated with anonymous survey responses expressing gratitude for conducting this study – comments like, “I’m so grateful that you chose this as your thesis, thank you!” and “THANK YOU for doing all of this work! I appreciate you!” I felt an incredible sense of responsibility to accurately portray each and every experience shared with me. I value and appreciate every response, but including them all here was not possible. It is important to note that while I analyzed all of the data collected, only the data that came up most frequently were used to develop the themes for this thesis project. That said, I feel extremely honored and humbled by the participation invested and extend my deepest gratitude to all who took the time to contribute to my research.

Because there has been no prior research conducted about LGBTQ interpreters who have experience working in the video relay service setting, this project serves as a foundational contribution to this topic and hopefully will result in future research that can keep the dialogue moving forward. When asked on the survey if participants felt they had a unique experience as LGBTQ interpreters in the video relay service setting compared to interpreters who do not identify as LGBTQ (N=137), 64% answered “Yes.”<sup>4</sup> This study hopes to honor those 64% of responses and illuminate the ways in which experiences of LGBTQ interpreters are unique. Initiating this dialogue is not only important to the LGBTQ interpreting community, but also has implications for the LGBTQ deaf consumers of video relay service, for those individuals who

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<sup>4</sup> 19% of survey participants answered “No” and 17% answered “I don’t know.”

consider themselves allies, and even for the video relay service companies who employ LGBTQ interpreters.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

Because there have been no studies about LGBTQ interpreters who work – or have worked – in the video relay service setting, this review of the literature will focus on research that will help frame the topic from a broader perspective, which can have application for LGBTQ interpreters in that setting. By way of introduction, since many in the LGBTQ community experience social stigmatization, this review will begin with a discussion of social stigma theory. Also, in that most LGBTQ individuals self-identify later in life (unlike many other stigmatized populations), the process of identity formation for LGBTQ individuals will be examined, followed by the ways in which LGBTQ individuals manage their stigmas and deal with microaggressions.

Next the process of gender attribution will be explored, which refers to the categorization of others into gender classifications (Kessler & McKenna, 1978) – especially as it relates to the social construct of gender and how that applies to the LGBTQ community. Intercultural communication will also be reviewed, with a focus on individualist and collectivist cultures, including deaf collectivist cultural norms. In addition, the workplace environment will be discussed with regard to LGBTQ identity management; boundary theory and role management; pride, professionalism and disclosure; individualist and collectivist clashes; and the role of the organizational environment. Finally, interpreting in the video relay service setting will be described, explaining the unique characteristics that distinguish it from face-to-face interpreting, and how this workplace environment can impact stigmatized identities.

### **Social Stigmatization**

#### **Social Stigma Theory Overview.**

Social stigma theory, or stigma theory, is the process by which a society identifies those individuals who possess attributes considered tainted or less desirable because they deviate from attributes it has collectively deemed normal or ordinary (Goffman, 1963). Stigmas can include everything from physical deformities to religious affiliations. Those who are labeled with social stigmas often feel devalued and discredited by others.

In addition to the examples of stigmas mentioned above, Goffman (1963) identified another stigma category which he describes as “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions” (p. 4). Goffman’s focus on character stigmas differs from either physical or cultural stigmas because it suggests that this stigma is something an individual can choose (or reject). As examples of these “blemishes,” Goffman references dishonesty, imprisonment, as well as mental illness, alcoholism, and homosexuality, all of which he argues are the result of “weak will.” Since Goffman’s 1963 analysis, scholarship has expanded, and it is now widely recognized that there are complex factors in place which negate the assumption that people *choose* mental illness, sexual identity, etc. Regardless of the strides that society has made toward a better understanding of topics like homosexuality, the historically negative treatment of this stigma has carried forward to present day and significantly impacts the ways in which society interacts with the LGBTQ community.

According to stigma theory, when someone is known to have (or suspected to have) a stigmatized attribute, they are not only considered inferior or undesirable, they are regarded as not quite human and are generally treated more negatively than individuals who do not have stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963). When people are labeled with stigmas, it can influence the ways that those individuals engage in socialization, which is the process of learning socially acceptable behavior.

Perhaps not surprisingly, individuals who share a common stigmatized classification “tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their [shared] plight, and similar changes in conception of self” (Goffman, 1963, p. 32). This is particularly true for stigmas that occur later in life, as in the case of a person who becomes disabled in adulthood. As Goffman (1963) notes, “Such an individual has thoroughly learned about the normal and the stigmatized long before he must see himself as deficient” (p. 34) and has already experienced life without a stigmatized label.

Members of the LGBTQ community generally fall into the category of becoming stigmatized later in life. Typically, LGBTQ individuals reveal their sexual identity only after they recognize it, come to terms with it, and are ready to withstand public feedback. It is important to acknowledge that although sexual and gender identity may be decided pre-birth, it is invisible at birth. As a result, society generally assumes that a person will be heterosexual and cisgender – meaning that one’s gender identity will correspond to one’s birth gender (Brewster, Velez, Mennicke, Tebbe, & Gonsiorek, 2014). These assumptions, in turn, tend to produce a society that is inclined to be both heteronormative and cisnormative, with most of its members subscribing to these norms when thinking about the sexual and gender identity of others. Consequently, when an LGBTQ individual comes out, or shares their LGBTQ status with others, that individual challenges the generally accepted views of sexual or gender identity norms, often becoming stigmatized.

In some cases, stigmatized populations can cover up or hide their identities, which Goffman (1963) characterized as “passing.” Passing occurs when a person is able to navigate society with their stigmatized attribute undetected, which is easier for some stigmatized populations than others. Passing can occur unintentionally (because the stigma is hidden from

society's view) or intentionally (as when an individual miscasts themselves in order to be perceived as ordinary and reap the benefits of normalcy). Almost anyone in a position to pass will do so on some occasion (Goffman, 1963). The process of intentionally passing is known as identity management and depends, of course, on the visibility of the stigma – in other words, how easily the stigma can be detected by others, which is crucial. “That which can be told about an individual's social identity at all times during his daily round and by all persons he encounters therein will be of great importance to him” (Goffman, 1963, p. 48). For a diverse group like the LGBTQ community, this means that if one's LGBTQ identity is easily recognized by the public they will likely have different lived experiences than an LGBTQ individual whose status tends to go undetected.

Interestingly, Goffman characterized homosexuality as a stigma that is undetectable by others, due, perhaps, to the early date of his research (more than 50 years ago). Today, gays and lesbians (and other members of the LGBTQ community) are often more authentic regarding how they present themselves, preferring to intentionally signify their LGBTQ identity. This suggests that this stigma can no longer be regarded as exclusively undetectable (Pfeffer, 2014).

Stigma theory has been reexamined and reframed over the years, including by Orne (2013), who expressed disagreement with the notion that an individual's primary motivation for managing their stigma is to be perceived as normal and thus avoid the potentially hostile reactions of others. For instance, Orne argues that, on occasion, stigmatized individuals may *welcome* hostile reactions with the goal of challenging or changing society's point of view.

Orne (2013) also disagrees with the way that Goffman homogenizes groups who share stigmatized identity, namely the LGBTQ community, or what he refers to as the queer community. Instead, Orne contends that “with the proliferation of labels for queer identity, queer

people can use alternative identification to fine-tune the management of their identity" (Orne, 2013, p. 223). As Orne points out, the opposite can also be true, as when a bisexual man may find it easier to tell others he is gay, in order to mitigate any negative reactions or confusion. This suggests that even within a stigmatized group, reactions from society will vary depending on individual circumstances and identities. Additionally, Orne (2013) notes that the way in which stigmatized individuals view their reception by society should be considered along a continuum, neither wholly accepting, nor wholly hostile.

For interpreters in the video relay service setting, having a stigmatized LGBTQ identity could impact their interactions with consumers in ways that differ from non-LGBTQ interpreters. Furthermore, experiences within the LGBTQ interpreting community could be different depending on whether the stigmatized identity is able to be detected by consumers or if the interpreter is able to engage in passing strategies to conceal this identity.

### **Stigma Theory and LGBTQ Identity Formation.**

As mentioned earlier, the stigma of identifying as LGBTQ is not only unique because it has later onset than some other stigmas, it is also an identity that requires time to become fully formed. Cass (1979) was one of the first people to develop a model of homosexual identity formation, proposing "six stages of development that all individuals move through in order to acquire an identity of 'homosexual' fully integrated within the individual's overall concept of self" (p. 220). The stages are as follows:

- 1) Identity Confusion – individual's first awareness of gay or lesbian thoughts
- 2) Identity Comparison – individual examines the wider implications of this identity
- 3) Identity Tolerance – individual seeks out other gays and lesbians
- 4) Identity Acceptance – individual attaches a positive connotation to their identity



5) Identity Pride – individual shares identity with others

6) Identity Synthesis –individual integrates their identity with their sense of self

Although this model was limited to gays and lesbians, there may be some overlap with other sexual and gender identity labels within the LGBTQ community.

Cass' model of homosexual identity formation was considered radical at the time because, historically, homosexuality had become so stigmatized that it was included as a psychological condition in the early editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Through her groundbreaking model, Cass challenged the widespread belief that homosexuality was inherently stigmatized.

A crucial part of Cass' model is the distinction between someone's public/social identity and their private/personal identity. For instance, a man can identify as gay and disclose to his family and friends; or he can identify as gay and decide not to disclose to anyone. Cass (1979) recognized that the homosexual identity can take many forms depending on which stage the individual is working through.

For those who have not yet reconciled their personal/private and public/social identities (they recognize that they are homosexual, but have not disclosed to others) will engage in a process called passing. This aligns with Goffman's conception of passing and the idea that humans may sometimes try to hide or conceal a stigmatized identity. Cass (1979) notes that there are various reasons a homosexual would choose to intentionally engage in passing strategies, including wanting to control others' access to personal information in order to avoid threatening situations. Alternatively, disclosure of one's homosexual identity, as opposed to concealment (intentionally passing), carries certain benefits as well. Most notably, the act of disclosure, or coming out, allows for the integration of one's private and public identities, in other words,

identity congruency. Cass (1979) categorizes this in her proposed sixth and final stage, which she labels identity synthesis. Kaufman and Johnson (2004) note that individuals have a desire for consistency between their view of themselves (identity standard) and their perception of how others see them (reflected appraisals). This explains why some people may choose to disclose even though it can come with certain risks. Understanding the groundwork for identity development and the motivations behind concealing or disclosing a stigmatized identity can shed light on the decisions made by LGBTQ interpreters during their interactions with consumers.

### **LGBTQ Stigma Management (Strategic Outness).**

LGBTQ stigma management refers to the way people control how their identity is perceived by others, a process known as strategic outness. Within the LGBTQ community, stigmas are managed either through disclosure or concealment, options that Cain (1991) argues are not mutually exclusive. Instead, he says, “gay individuals may be either overt or covert in particular types of interactions or with particular people, but even then, it may be difficult to categorize some interactions as either one or the other” (Cain, 1991, p. 67). Motives for disclosure or concealment vary from person to person and also depend on the circumstances of each interaction. “The management of one’s identity – affirming it, deciding when to speak of it, when to deflect, when to compartmentalize – is all central to coming out” (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016, p. 347).

A factor that may impact the decision to be strategic about one’s outness relates to where one is in the process of accepting one’s LGBTQ identity. For instance, in the first stage of Cass’ (1979) model (identity confusion) she described the “realization that feelings, thoughts, or behavior can be defined as homosexual [and that this] presents an incongruent element into a previously stable situation” (p. 222). This means individuals are unlikely to disclose their

identity because they have not completely accepted it themselves. Interestingly, even when someone is further along in the process and does, in fact, accept their sexual identity, there may be other important reasons to avoid disclosure, including the perceived probability of rejection by others.

A concept known as social distance is another factor individuals may consider when deciding whether or not to disclose their stigmatized identity (Orne, 2011). Social distance refers to the nature of one's relationship with another and where it falls on the spectrum between intimacy and superficiality. Orne (2011) suggests that there are two metrics to gauge social distance: the depth of personal knowledge between the individuals; and the degree of social interaction. For LGBTQ individuals deciding whether or not to disclose, it becomes important to evaluate whether the other person is meaningful and/or whether they are a tangential or even a transitory figure (Orne, 2011).

Because disclosure depends on the circumstances of a situation (i.e., who else is involved and what kind of interaction it is), Kaufman and Johnson (2004) suggest that coming out should not be viewed as a one-time occurrence but rather as a revolving door, something that is engaged in again and again (although, perhaps, not in the same way twice). Any linear theory of homosexual identity formation and management tends to be one-size-fits-all, ignoring the fact that there is "tremendous variation in the development and maintenance of a gay or lesbian identity" (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, p. 808). Guittar and Rayburn (2016) echo this sentiment, asserting that coming out is not a finite process, but something that should be thought of as a lifelong process with no definitive end.

LGBTQ people often face decisions about disclosure and concealment on a daily basis, which suggests that they consistently (and simultaneously) live both in and out of the closet, as

in the case of someone who may be out to their family but not to their yoga teacher. In addition, coming out does not always refer to a one-time, momentous occasion but could include passively talking about one's personal life, for instance, when a woman mentions her wife to a new acquaintance. Orne (2011) also points out that negative experiences with past disclosures can impact the way that someone uses identity management strategies in the future, meaning that coming out is not just ongoing, it is ever-evolving.

As mentioned earlier, Goffman (1963) put forth the idea that stigmatized individuals hope to pass in society in order to reap the benefits of normalcy. Over the years, however, the stigma of sexual differences has lessened, and, in the more recent past, LGBTQ individuals have begun to publicly and proudly reclaim their identities. As such, passing is not necessarily something all individuals seek. For instance, Pfeffer (2014) found that "being (mis)recognized as heterosexual was described as personally and socially problematic by many participants – particularly insofar as they feared being (mis)recognized as 'heteronormative' by social others" (p. 21). Societal recognition is a powerful process that can either validate or invalidate someone's personal identity and group membership. Even though passing allows someone with a stigmatized identity to gain access to normative social privileges, it can also mean that the individual loses access to their coveted minority community.

It is important to understand that coming out is a continual process for LGBTQ individuals and that identity management is a lifelong endeavor. For an LGBTQ interpreter in the video relay service setting, each new consumer can bring about decisions to make with regard to the management of their identity. These decisions are potentially influenced by various factors, including those mentioned above – potential rejection from consumers and the degree of social interaction.

**Microaggressions.**

One way that society reacts to stigmas is through microaggressions, defined as subtle put downs by others against members of historically marginalized social groups (Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016). The research indicates that microaggressions adversely impact the mental health of individuals who belong to marginalized social groups, and correlations were found between exposure to microaggressions and depressive symptoms. The research also showed that there were lower levels of well-being and self-esteem for marginalized groups exposed to microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2016).

Nadal et al. (2016) put forth the idea that there are four psychological dilemmas that occur when someone is on the receiving end of microaggressions, including (a) a clash of realities, which refers to the seemingly harmless intent of the person committing the microaggression versus the detrimental impact they inflict on the recipient; (b) the invisibility of unintentional bias, which “describes the notion that most people are socialized to learn biases, due to systemic oppression and the superiority of dominant groups – for example, cisgender people may not even realize there are no gender-neutral restrooms in certain public spaces because they are socialized to believe that only two kinds of restrooms, for men and for women, are needed” (p. 490); (c) the perceived minimal harm of microaggressions, which is the idea that people do not always think the topic of microaggressions is worthy of discussion because it is believed to be unimportant and innocuous; and (d) the “catch-22” of how to deal with microaggression, as when a recipient *wants* to respond (even in a benign, clarifying way), but is worried about repercussions.

Nadal et al. (2016) found that LGBTQ microaggressions take different forms depending on gender. For instance, lesbians often encounter microaggressions in the form of misogynistic

behavior or actions. Additionally, lesbians and bisexual women often experience negative messages about not conforming to traditional gender norms regarding their appearance and dress. On the other hand, gay and bisexual men are typically exposed to negative comments about speech and mannerisms. Platt and Lenzen (2013) built on the research about LGBTQ microaggressions by adding a category (in addition to the four mentioned above) including what they call oversexualization, the tendency for other people to sexualize LGBTQ identities. This means that by someone simply mentioning an LGBTQ identity, they are making the conversation sexual or about sex.

Understanding microaggressions specific to the LGBTQ community is important when considering the experiences of LGBTQ interpreters. Those who work in the video relay service setting could potentially be on the receiving end of microaggressions as they interact with consumers, both deaf and hearing.

## **Gender Attribution**

### **Gender as a Social Construct.**

Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2014) say, “One of the most fundamental ways we humans frame and organize our social experience with others such as our identity, social roles, and social function is based on binary gender categories” (p. 133). This means that humans are socialized to believe that male and female gender labels are mutually exclusive. As such, even today, people tend to “sort each other into the category of ‘male’ or ‘female’ in social situations on the basis of visual information cues (such as facial hair) and implicit rules for assigning characteristics to particular genders (women wear skirts; men do not)” (Westbrook & Kristen, 2014, p. 35), all of which are visual cues culturally agreed upon. The process of categorizing people into gender

labels is known as gender attribution, and it is an important part of how humans organize and navigate their social experience (Kessler & McKenna, 1978).

The research suggests, however, that framing gender in binary terms is far too limiting and does not truly reflect the way humans experience gender. Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2014) note that Goffman was one of many who challenged this binary notion of gender, with his belief was that there is “no innate masculine or feminine ‘nature’ but only culturally constructed and socially defined images of what is respectively ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (p. 135). Despite this, it is human nature to attempt to categorize what they experience, and often the process of identifying someone’s gender is so instinctual that people do it without thinking. As a result, gender attribution is typically a routine, unremarkable part of everyday social interactions – that is, until someone does not fit the culturally-accepted binary system.

When this happens (for instance, when visual cues are absent or ambiguous), the process of gender attribution breaks down, which can cause concern, anxiety, and sometimes anger (Schilt, 2010; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Suddenly the ordinary process of categorizing people by gender becomes a source of confusion and frustration. Lorber (1994) suggests that upon experiencing gender ambiguity, “we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated” (p. 14). This phenomenon has implications for the LGBTQ community who often reject heteronormative gender norms and have a more culturally progressive and fluid view of the construct of gender.

### **Gender Norms and the LGBTQ Community.**

Societal gender norms have significant implications for the LGBTQ community, especially with regard to how its members can be recognized or identified. Pfeffer (2014) labels this concept queer visibility and notes that it “remains culturally synonymous with social

perceptions of female masculinity and male femininity” (p. 33). In other words, society’s ability to use visual cues to identify a member of the LGBTQ community can be tied to their rejection of traditional gender norms.

Members of the transgender community can also disrupt the habit of gender attribution, especially for those who are transitioning. Transitioning refers to the process people undergo in order to change the way they present physically to match their preferred gender identity. In addition to the transgender identity, there are also people who feel that their gender identity does not align with a male or female label, and, as such, they identify as non-binary and typically use the personal pronouns they/them as singular pronouns rather than he/him or she/her (“Understanding Non-Binary People,” 2018). This “highlight[s] the societal friction caused by nonbinary conceptualizations entering into a binary system of thought” (Nadal et al., 2016, p. 500). When people are unable to attribute the gender of an individual as clearly male or female, it can sometimes lead them to assume an LGBTQ identity. This has implications for LGBTQ interpreters working in the video relay service setting because it could potentially lead to consumer detection of their LGBTQ status.

## **Intercultural Communication**

### **Contrasting Individualist and Collectivist Cultures.**

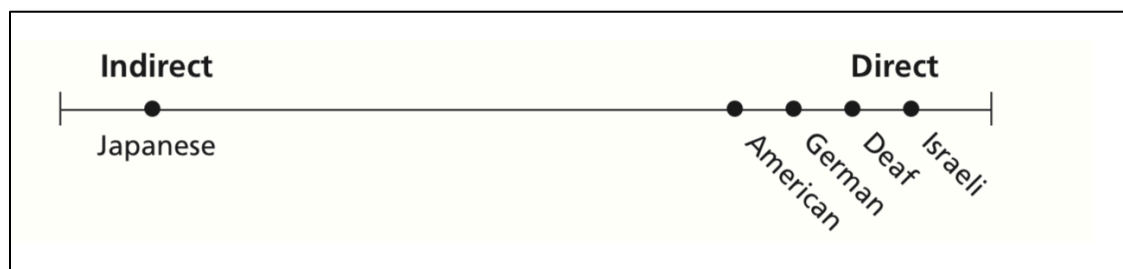
A dualistic theory of culture was proposed by Hofstede (1983), using the terms individualist and collectivist. In individualist cultures, members adhere to what is known as an “I” consciousness, with an emphasis on individual initiative and achievement, and where autonomy is highly valued. In collectivist cultures, members adhere to a “We” consciousness, with an emphasis on shared initiative and achievement, and where collective efforts are highly valued. These different emphases guide the way each culture functions and determines its norms



of behavior. Countries such as the United States and Great Britain are considered individualist cultures; while countries like Japan, China, and India have been identified as collectivist cultures. Subcultures, which are cultural groups within a larger culture, often have their own beliefs and values that may differ from the larger culture. Understanding cultural norms provides a framework with which to consider interactions between deaf consumers of video relay service, who typically adhere to collectivist culture norms, and their hearing interpreters, who instead typically adhere to individualist culture norms.

### **Deaf Collectivist Cultural Norms.**

One important factor that is influenced by cultural values is communication, which can be approached directly or indirectly. “The degree of direct or indirect communication a culture tends to employ can be plotted along a continuum” (Mindess, 2014, p. 83), as illustrated below (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Indirect/Direct Cultural Communication Continuum. Reprinted from *Reading Between the Signs: Intercultural Communication for Sign Language Interpreters* (p. 83), by A. Mindess, 2014, Boston, MA: Intercultural Press. Copyright 2014 by Anna Mindess.

Because the deaf community values clear communication, its members generally prefer a more direct style of discourse (Hall, 1983). In the deaf community, where communication is not

always accessible (i.e., most hearing people do not know sign language, and sign language interpreters are not always available), many deaf people have adopted a direct manner of expressing themselves, which ties back to the intent to facilitate the most successful communication possible.

When deaf culture intermingles with hearing culture in the United States, intercultural clashes surrounding communication norms can arise. “It is a stereotype to say that Deaf people are always blunt. However, many English-speaking Americans are struck by the fact that American Deaf culture tends to employ a direct mode of expression in certain specific situations” (Mindess, 2014, p. 83). This can include things like making candid remarks about another’s appearance or offering unsolicited opinions and advice, which in American culture can be seen as rude. In deaf culture, however, being direct and getting to the point is not typically considered rude, but rather a strategy that facilitates communication. Some prefer the phrase “straight talk” or “honesty” over the term “blunt.” Essentially, “Deaf people have no patience for ambiguity” (Mindess, 2014 p. 85). They have enough ambiguity living in a hearing-centric world, so whenever direct communication is an option, the deaf community will typically pursue it.

Another cultural norm among the deaf community is the tendency to ask personal questions, even of strangers or new acquaintances, which ties in with their collectivist values. “On a scale of formality, Deaf Americans rank as even more informal than hearing Americans. Conversations get to the point faster and intimate details are quickly shared with Deaf strangers” (Mindess, 2014, p. 71). For deaf people, questions are not only a way to gather information but a way to form meaningful connections, which can lead to questions that may feel like probing for things considered to be private. On the other hand, those belonging to an individualist culture can be resistant to answering personal questions, especially from new acquaintances.

Cultural communication norms are important to note because they could potentially influence the expectations interpreters and consumers have regarding non-interpreting interactions in video relay service. For instance, the direct communication style typically associated with the collectivist deaf community may dictate their reaction to gender confusion that arises upon seeing an LGBTQ interpreter who does not adhere to traditional gender norms. Another example could be the tendency to ask personal questions of the interpreter that would require the interpreter to decide to disclose or conceal an LGBTQ identity.

## **Workplace Environment**

### **LGBTQ Identity Management.**

Identity management refers to the ways that people uphold their image in various spheres, which includes the workplace. LGBTQ individuals go through unique experiences when engaging in identity management in this arena (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, and Kendra (2017) studied lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers and their decision-making strategies related to disclosing and concealing their sexual identities at work. Similar to previous research, these individuals were shown to strategically manage their identities based on situational circumstances and the perceived chance of rejection based on cues from others (King et al., 2017). Focusing on lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees, the study explored what is referred to as the disclosure dilemma and identified three levels of disclosure strategies: "counterfeiting (i.e., fabricating a false heterosexual identity), avoiding (i.e., eluding questions about personal life), or integrating (i.e., revealing an LGB identity)" (King et al., 2017, p. 489). Perhaps not surprisingly, concealment strategies in the workplace were used more frequently in situations that involved interactions with clients, as opposed to coworkers or colleagues.

King, Reilly, and Hebl (2008) note that because of the disclosure dilemma, gay and lesbian individuals in the workplace deal with challenges and decisions that their heterosexual colleagues do not have to consider in the same way – for instance, whether or not to bring a same-sex partner to an office event or whether to change their spouse’s pronoun when talking about their personal life. This confirms the idea that coming out is not a one-time occasion, but something that LGBTQ individuals must repeatedly confront, sometimes daily or even multiple times a day. The researchers also note that despite some potential negative impacts of revealing a gay or lesbian identity in the workplace, there are also important reasons why someone would do so, including to build relationships, maintain a more authentic sense of self, and even to promote social change (King et al., 2008).

Being afforded the option to disclose is not universal for the LGBTQ community and is only for individuals who are able to pass – individuals who are not able to pass (and typically detected by society as LGBTQ) do not always have the option to decide. This means the option to disclose depends on the ability of society to detect the LGBTQ stigma. Building on Goffman’s (1963) theory of social stigma, Clair, Beatty, and MacLean (2005) explore the notion of visible and nonvisible stigmatized attributes in the workplace – that is, whether or not others can detect a stigma. While their research did not specifically target LGBTQ individuals, their findings have implications for that community. Clair et al. (2005) suggest that individuals who have nonvisible stigmatized social identities will have different interactional experiences at work than those with visible differences, even though they belong to the same stigmatized group, and that these differences may vary greatly. In addition, individuals with nonvisible (or undetected) stigmas may constantly struggle with whether or not to reveal their stigma in an organizational setting, and this emotional indecision can cause them increased anxiety or stress. This could have

implications for LGBTQ interpreters because the LGBTQ community is not exclusively visible or nonvisible, which means their experiences in the workplace could vary despite belonging to the same stigmatized group.

### **Boundary Theory and Role Management.**

Boundary theory suggests that individuals manage various roles (for instance, personal and professional) through strategies known as segmentation or integration (Fisher, Bulger, Smith, & Tetrick, 2009; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). In a process known as role management, people will either compartmentalize their roles and keep them separate from one another – segmentation, or they will incorporate these roles and allow them to overlap – integration.

In the workplace, there are advantages and disadvantages to each role management strategy. For instance, “employees might desire greater integration because blurring role boundaries allows them to accommodate multiple identities in the workplace, resolving tension that arises with multiple roles,” (Rothbard et al., 2005, p. 245). Research has found that when employees feel their company cultivates an environment that celebrates integration, there is a greater commitment to the organization (Rothbard et al., 2005). Alternatively, employees might prefer greater segmentation because it allows them to preserve their personal/nonwork lives and helps keep things professional in the workplace.

This interaction between professional and personal roles has been widely studied over the years. Fisher et al. (2009) investigated a concept known as role interference. This occurs when “two (or more) sets of pressures occur at the same time such that compliance with the demands of one set makes compliance with the other more difficult” (Fisher et al., 2009, p. 442). So, while accumulating multiple roles can enhance people’s lives by allowing them to fulfill and serve

various functions, it can also cause strain when role interference occurs, which is especially common in balancing professional and personal roles.

The ways in which employees navigate this balance and transition between roles has also been found to be related to job performance. Interestingly, findings of Smit, Maloney, Maertz, and Montag-Smit (2016) suggest that integrating roles may be a better long-term strategy for employees because it minimizes self-regulation efforts, resulting in a higher level of role congruency and harmony. On the other hand, when individuals have to use self-regulation techniques to separate their various roles (segregation) it can dissipate their attention and energy and impair job performance. For LGBTQ video relay service interpreters who would prefer to integrate their work/nonwork roles but have fear of disclosure or have had negative past experiences with disclosure regarding their stigma, this could create barriers to achieving true role integration in the workplace.

### **Pride, Professionalism, and Disclosure.**

Managing personal and professional roles in the workplace becomes even more complicated for members of the LGBTQ community. Connell (2015) argues that there is a "fundamental incompatibility between demands of contemporary LGBT[Q] politics, which center on the ethos of gay pride" (p. 14) and the norms of professionalism. This is because of the perceived oversexualization of the LGBTQ identity, which significantly influences how these individuals experience their professional lives. Connell's (2015) research explores the perspectives of gay and lesbian teachers in the K-12 arena, and she found that some teachers respond to this clashing of expectations by trying to keep their personal life separate from their professional life – in other words, they strive for segregation of these roles. The result of this

strict distinction is that they split into different versions of themselves, a challenge that does not arise in the same way for their heterosexual colleagues.

This dilemma is seen in the medical field as well with LGBTQ employees. For instance, although a nationwide study by Lee, Melhado, Chacko, White, Huebschmann, and Crane (2008) found that "close to 70% of respondents felt that a provider's sexual orientation was private and not to be shared" (p. 145), these same respondents were only opposed to knowing about their doctors' sexual orientation if the doctor was LGBTQ. This may mean that LGBTQ medical professionals feel a pressure to keep their personal lives private in a way heterosexual providers are not expected to. For instance, if a heterosexual doctor displays photos of their family, this would not be considered a breach of professionalism, even though the doctor is essentially announcing their sexuality. In fact, because heterosexuality is considered so normal, these traditional family groupings are not generally perceived as carrying any kind of sexual implication. Another example is that heterosexual workers can wear wedding rings at work without appearing the least bit sexual (Williams & Giuffre, 2011). It is only when people deviate from the socially acceptable norm of sexual identity that it can become a problem, especially in the workplace.

Another finding in the study conducted by Lee et al. (2008) was that one-third of the respondents said they would change providers if they did happen to discover that their doctors were gay or lesbian, noting that the most common concern was doubting the provider's competence and feeling uncomfortable with a gay or lesbian provider. In line with this study are the findings from Eliason, Dibble, and Robertson (2011), which show that some doctors will choose to intentionally pass as heterosexual to avoid potential problems with patients. This creates new challenges, though, since providers must "choose between honesty, dishonesty, or

‘vaguer’ (not being dishonest but not full disclosure)” (Lee et al., 2008, p. 146), which can jeopardize patient-provider relationships.

LGBTQ individuals in the workplace who decide to be honest and disclose typically do so in order to attain congruency in their public and private lives which leads to a positive sense of wholeness and well-being. By disclosing one’s undetected stigmatized identity, individuals can feel “relieved of the debilitating strain of secrecy involved with leading a double life” (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 1104), even though this may be seen as a breach of propriety or professionalism by others, which carries its own risk. In the video relay service environment, sometimes LGBTQ people must decide if integrating their roles in the workplace is worth the risk of sacrificing their perceived professionalism and propriety.

#### **Individualist and Collectivist Clashes.**

The norms of professionalism adopted by individuals in the workplace can also be dictated by their cultural values and whether or not they align with the individualist or collectivist ideals mentioned earlier. Cultural norms, for instance, can heavily impact one’s decision to integrate or segregate personal and professional roles while at work.

Uhlmann, Heaphy, Ashford, Zhu, and Sanchez-Burks (2013) found that potential job candidates who used integration strategies for their personal and professional roles in an attempt to build rapport during interview sessions were evaluated negatively by American interviewers (individualist culture), but evaluated positively by Indian interviewers (collectivist culture). This suggests that cultural differences impact views of professionalism and may influence someone’s tendency to integrate a personal/nonwork role in the workplace. This study also indicates that there is “a cultural norm in the United States of minimizing references to nonwork roles in workplace contexts that is associated with perceptions of professionalism” (Uhlmann et al.,



2013, p. 872). As such, Americans define appropriate workplace behavior that keeps references to personal lives to a relative minimum, which can go against collectivist cultural norms.

In another study about culture and role management, Yang (2005) looked at the work and family domains in America (individualist) compared to People's Republic of China (collectivist) and found that Americans were more likely to compartmentalize between work and family roles. Yang (2005) noted that while Americans prefer a clear separation between work and family roles, Chinese professionals prefer more integration since they are concerned with interdependence and group harmony. "In Collectivist society, the self is more likely considered as a unitary whole. In an individualistic society, separations of different selves (private self versus collective or public self of a person) are more likely" (Yang, 2005, p. 234).

In Ferracuti's (2017) doctoral dissertation, he explores the boundary expectations of deaf consumers (who generally adhere to collectivist cultural norms) working with sign language interpreters. He notes that interpreters constantly face challenges with establishing and navigating boundaries depending on each unique situation (Ferracuti, 2017), which suggests that there is no easy answer to approaching boundary issues when different cultures overlap. Cultural influences of role boundaries could have additional implications for video relay interpreters. Interpreters may have expectations that differ from deaf consumers regarding how much of their personal lives they decide to share in an interaction where they are serving a professional role.

### **Role of the Organization.**

The role of the company or organization is also very important when thinking about the experience of LGBTQ professionals in the workplace. Unfortunately, "Heteronormativity continues to characterize many if not most workplaces" (Williams & Giuffre, 2011, p. 552), which can negatively impact LGBTQ employees. Studies have shown that heteronormativity in

the workplace can reinforce binary gender roles and uphold heterosexual norms (Williams & Giuffre, 2011). LGBTQ individuals are further at a disadvantage because “people who identify as queer often find themselves belonging to a gendered and sexualized minority typically not associated with professionalism” (Muhr, Sullivan, & Rich, 2016, p. 52). This can sometimes put queer professionals in a position where they must choose between honoring their LGBTQ status or adhering to traditional professional norms. Some research suggests that to achieve any sort of success in the workplace, LGBTQ individuals must appear ‘virtually normal’, that is, indistinguishable from heterosexuals (Williams & Giuffre, 2011). This can be a huge burden for LGBTQ individuals, making the workplace an inhospitable environment.

On the other hand, studies have shown that LGBTQ professionals report having positive experiences in the workplace when they receive support from colleagues and feel included in a supportive and accepting organizational culture (Muhr et al., 2016; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). These employees do not feel pressure to appear heterosexual at work by making their LGBTQ status invisible. As a result, supportive organizations “develop paradigms and practices that are truly inclusive and accepting of all types of differences” (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001, p. 1256). LGBTQ employees feel that they are able to honor themselves and still have positive workplace experiences because they feel safe and welcomed as they are.

The LGBTQ status of fellow colleagues and supervisors can also impact experiences of LGBTQ employees in the workplace. In fact, in one study gay employees reported significantly less perceived workplace discrimination when they had gay colleagues and supervisors (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). It should be noted that while the presence of LGBTQ coworkers was found to buffer gay employees from heterosexist organizational environments, maintaining a supportive and accepting organizational culture was found to be even more important. (Ragins &

Cornwell, 2001). Understanding the role of the company (whether supportive or not) is important when considering the experiences of LGBTQ video relay service interpreters.

### **Interpreting in the Video Relay Service Setting**

#### **Video Relay Service Overview.**

Video relay service can be defined as “a form of Telecommunications Relay Service that enables persons with hearing disabilities who use American Sign Language to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment, rather than through typed text” (“Video Relay Services,” 2017). The video relay service interpreter serves as the middleman to facilitate communication between the deaf and hearing consumer. Historically (before the advent of video technology), sign language interpreting interactions took place in face-to-face settings – conferences, doctor appointments, business meetings, etc. When video relay service began, it changed the field of interpreting because video relay service interpreters were now exclusively handling telephone-only interactions.

Brunson (2008) notes that interpreting in the video relay service setting is inherently challenging because interpreters are no longer engaging with deaf people within their communities. Instead, because video relay service interpreters receive calls from all over the country (and sometimes internationally), the likelihood that they know the consumer is very low. On top of that, there is very little time or opportunity to develop rapport, which may be afforded in certain face-to-face interactions. This lack of rapport can lead deaf consumers to make snap judgments about whatever little information they are presented with, for instance, that the interpreter appears as LGBTQ.

Another unique feature in video relay service is that the interpreter and deaf consumer are connected through a videophone – a two-dimensional video screen, which creates a different

dynamic than face-to-face interpreting. Brunson's (2008) research identified unique challenges for interpreters in video relay service: "In a medium where people do not have to interact with us as complete people, only hearing our voice or seeing our face and hands on a two dimensional screen, it is easy for people to disregard us as human" (p. 180). In addition, video relay service consumers have the option to request a new interpreter on the spot (without explanation), and a new one will appear almost instantly. And, if the consumer is not satisfied or happy with the interpreter for whatever reason, they can ask to be transferred. Deaf consumers also have the option to request an interpreter of a specific gender, which is not necessarily guaranteed in face-to-face interpreting scenarios.

Despite being a relatively new technology, the logistics and policies governing video relay service have changed considerably over the years. Not long ago, for one particular provider, there were rules in place that prohibited interpreters from conversing or engaging with consumers except during the actual interpreting interaction (Brunson, 2008). Interpreters were not even permitted to say where they resided or give their names (only their interpreter identification numbers). In general, providers have become more flexible about these types of policies, and interpreters are able to be less robotic with deaf clients, who often prefer more personal interactions. While on hold, for example, it is not uncommon for a consumer to ask their interpreter questions like, "How long have you been interpreting?," "How was your weekend?," and "Are you married?," which opens the doors for more personal conversations and thus opportunities for interpreters to disclose their LGBTQ status.

Brunson (2008) explains that video relay interpreters are representing their companies and can be considered "the frontline employees of the video-relay service provider they are employed by ... [and] their primary responsibility is serving the customers" (p. 181). Providing

excellent customer service can become uncertain during non-interpreting interactions, which again, is being defined as any time the consumer is interacting directly with the interpreter. Generally, there are very few organizational guidelines to help interpreters navigate non-interpreting interactions with regard to what is appropriate to discuss about one's personal life and what is not, in part because the situations that can arise are far too varied to be institutionally anticipated and addressed. Because every video relay service interaction is unique, companies typically advise that their interpreters use discretion when interacting with consumers. As a result, interpreters must always be attuned to the intimacy preferences of individual deaf consumers, while still maintaining appropriate levels of professionalism in determining how to respond to questions about their personal lives.

A customer service environment like video relay service is further complicated when customers treat workers poorly or, in severe cases, when customers engage in harassment. Harassment "is generally defined as a course of conduct which annoys, threatens, intimidates, alarms, or puts a person in fear of their safety" ("Harassment Law and Legal Definition," n.d.). When harassment occurs in the workplace, but it is committed by an individual outside the company or organization, such as a video relay service consumer, it presents a unique challenge because the offender is not required to adhere to company policies and procedures. The harassment dynamic is even more complex in the service provider-client relationship (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007). "The customer exerts a powerful symbolic and functional influence in the service relationship" (Good & Cooper, 2016, p. 452) and has relational superiority, which can leave employees feeling powerless to respond to incidents of harassment. When this type of harassment occurs, some employees say that it can have implications for their work environment, with increased absenteeism and reduced productivity.

### **Stigmatized Identities.**

Olopade (2017) examined the treatment of another stigmatized identity possessed by interpreters in the video relay service setting: the African American identity. She found that 85% reported experiencing overt racism from consumers either slightly or moderately frequently. She also found that, along with being on the receiving end of racist actions or comments, many experienced racial microaggressions. Another common reaction was the consumer's request to switch interpreters, which, as mentioned earlier, is something that can be easily accommodated in video relay service.

Olopade (2017) also reports that “people belonging to minority groups tend to experience incivility rather than extreme behaviors from the majority group” (p. 16), but this can still be a source of stress and burnout for people in industries that work with consumers or clients. In fact, many of Olopade's participants reported physical and emotional burnout as a result of their treatment in the video relay service setting, some of whom have even left the field. While the experiences of someone who identifies as belonging to a racial minority cannot be compared to those of the LGBTQ community, Olopade's (2017) research outlines what it is like to work as a video relay service interpreter as a member of a stigmatized community.

### **Conclusion**

Because of the lack of research surrounding LGBTQ interpreters with experience working in the video relay service setting, this review of the literature used various perspectives from related research to frame the study. First, social stigmatization was explored as a context in which to view homosexuality and the wider LGBTQ community, including the processes of LGBTQ identity formation, managing a stigmatized identity, and handling microaggressions. The notion of gender as a social construct was discussed, along with the ways that gender

attribution can impact how LGBTQ individuals are treated. Following that discussion, individualist and collectivist cultures were investigated, including the deaf community's collectivist cultural norms. Additional research was presented about the workplace environment, addressing its impact on LGBTQ identity management; boundary theory and role management; and pride, professionalism and disclosure. Related topics were also discussed, such as potential workplace cultural clashes and the role the work environment plays. The review of the literature concluded with a description of the video relay service setting, its unique characteristics, and its effect on stigmatized identities.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The goal of this research project was to capture the lived experiences of LGBTQ interpreters who have worked in the video relay service setting. By applying a phenomenological framework, these experiences were uncovered through a mixed methods approach including qualitative and quantitative techniques. Phenomenology is the study of “individual experiences, with the research goal of finding meaning of a particular phenomenon through the lived experience of another from their point of view” (Hunt, 2015, p. 64). For this study, LGBTQ interpreters were recruited as participants to uncover their unique perspectives, perceptions, and feelings about their experiences working in video relay service. Seidman (2006) says, “In the process of asking participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience, researchers using a phenomenological approach ask participants to search again for the essence of their lived experience” (p. 17). This allows the researcher to better understand social phenomenon from the perspective of the individual.

This research approach also included elements of Smith’s (2005) method of institutional ethnography, which explores how the structures that are present in everyday life interact with one another and what effects these structures have on members’ experiences in society. Institutional ethnography was founded on the idea that society is governed by people in dominant positions, which in turn excludes those who are not. Using this framework of institutional ethnography, the investigation focuses on the experiences of a group that is *not* in a position of power (known as an “anchor group”) and then moves on to the web of social relations that are responsible for producing those experiences (Smith, 2005). With research involving the LGBTQ



community, it was important to consider the various ways dominant culture influences their lives in the video relay service setting.

The lived experiences of the LGBTQ participants were captured and analyzed by triangulating the data through the use of anonymous surveys (N=137) and semi-structured interviews (N=8). This section will review the two phases of the methodology (surveys and interviews) including the processes of participant recruitment, method logistics, and data collection and analysis.

### **Phase I: Survey**

#### **Recruitment.**

Because this study centers around a very specific group of people, there were four necessary requirements that had to be met in order to participate in the survey—a candidate must self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, they must have experience working as an interpreter in the VRS setting, they must be over the age of 18, and they must reside in the United States. Recruitment for this niche community was done using (a) a social networking site, Facebook; and (b) email.

Two Facebook groups of interest were identified, both of which had members who could potentially qualify to participate in the study: (a) *Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Video Interpreters Member Section (RID VIMS)*; and (b) *BLeGIT\* Queer Member Section of RID Interpreters*. The same recruitment information was used for both groups, which had written text explaining the study (including the survey access link) along with a flyer (see Appendix A). Additionally, a reminder was posted to each Facebook page one week before the survey was set to close in an effort to recruit any last-minute participants (see Appendix B).

At the time of recruitment, the *RID VIMS* Facebook page had roughly 1,100 members and was considered a closed group, which means anyone could find the group, but only members could see what was posted. The recruitment post did not require permission before it went live. The *BLeGIT\* Queer Member Section of RID Interpreters* had about 600 members and it was considered a public group, which means anyone could find it and see what was posted. The recruitment post on the *BLeGIT\** page, however, required permission from the page's administrator before it went live, which was granted shortly after the post was submitted for review.

The second method of recruitment was done via email using an internal email distribution list from a video relay service company (see Appendix C). This listserv is affiliated with a special interest group within the company, which was established as an LGBTQ resource group for interpreters to join on a voluntary basis. Prior to sending the recruitment information, permission was granted by the group's facilitator in order to use the company distribution list for the purposes of recruiting.

Recruitment officially began on January 15, 2019 with Facebook posts created on the pages for both groups (*RID VIMS* and *BLeGIT\**) and a recruitment email that was sent to the email addresses on the distribution list. The survey was open for one month and closed February 15, 2019. At that time, the survey was no longer accessible with the link.

### **Survey Design.**

Using surveys, or questionnaires, in research is a fairly common method to collecting large amounts of data. They are easy to create and can gather information quickly in a way that makes the data very accessible. "Surveys are excellent vehicles for measuring attitudes and orientations in a large population" (Babbie, 2016, p. 247). Furthermore, surveys have a specific

purpose in the realm of data collection. Hale and Napier (2013) note that “with any type of questionnaire, you are asking people’s opinions about different issues, and that is all...participant responses are purely subjective and will not be measured against any valid instrument” (p. 53). This characteristic of surveys fits well with the goals for this phenomenological research project because it is focusing on exactly that: experiences from the perspective of the individual.

The survey tool used for this research project was developed using an online platform, Qualtrics, and it included both closed- and open-ended questions (see Appendix D). Babbie (2016) notes that in closed-ended questions, participants must choose from a list of fixed responses whereas with open-ended questions participants are able to provide their own answers to questions. The survey was built with a total of 41 questions and included the consent information on the first page so that participants were able to read it before entering the survey (see Appendix E).

Although there was a total of 41 questions, each participant’s experience with the survey differed depending on how they answered certain questions. In other words, not all participants answered a total of 41 questions because logic features were used during survey development, including skip and reveal logic. This meant that providing certain answers to questions took the participant on a designated path through the survey based on their responses. For instance, the first question of the survey was whether or not the interpreter had experience in the video relay service setting. Those who answered “Yes” moved on to Question 2, and those who answered “No” were brought to the end of the survey, since they had not met the qualifications for participation. This feature is an example of skip logic and it was included in order to weed out any participants who had no experience in the video relay service setting. Additionally, reveal logic is a feature that allows certain questions to be revealed only to participants who pick a

specific response to the previous question. An example of this was with the question, “Do you currently have a spouse, partner, or significant other?” Those who answered “Yes” were presented with another series of questions whereas those who answered “No” were not shown those questions because they would not have been applicable. An example of a question only shown to those who answered “Yes” is “If a VRS consumer asks if you have a spouse, partner, or significant other but they assume the wrong gender, how do you respond?” Again, this question would not have been applicable for those participants without spouses, partners, or significant others.

Another feature of the survey was that participants were not required to respond to all questions and had the option to skip questions they did not wish to answer. In other words, not all questions required an answer in order to submit the survey. The participant did, however, have to click through to the end of the survey in order for their responses to be captured and considered in data analysis. Exiting the survey before clicking through to the end was considered a withdrawal and those responses were not included. It is important to note that this was explained thoroughly on the survey consent, which was the first page of the survey (see Appendix E).

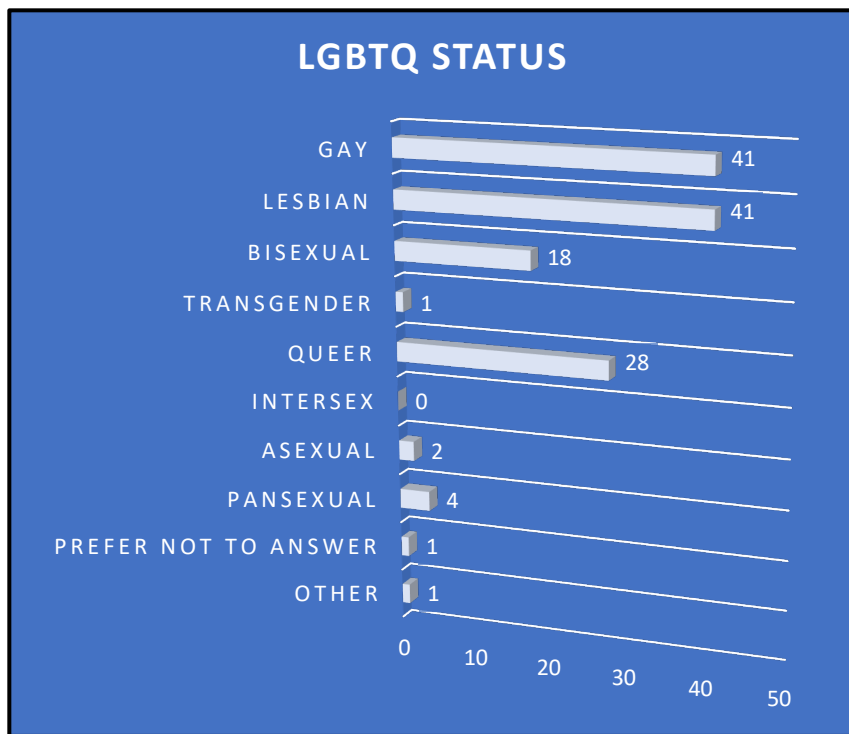
The survey was structured to include questions in three categories: factual, behavioral, and attitudinal (Hale & Napier, 2013). Factual information covered the demographic information of the participant including things like age, place of residence, and ethnicity. Because this study is focusing on the LGBTQ community, extra care was used to develop the questions regarding gender identity and sexual orientation identity to be inclusive. These questions also included the option for participants to fill in their own identifying term in case none of the options were appropriate. Behavioral questions included more open-ended questions about decision-making

and how interpreters react to certain situations. Questions about attitude (the third type of information solicited from surveys) explore participant opinions and beliefs, and these types of questions were included as well to inquire about topics like general thoughts about LGBTQ status disclosure in the video relay service setting.

### **Data Collection and Analysis.**

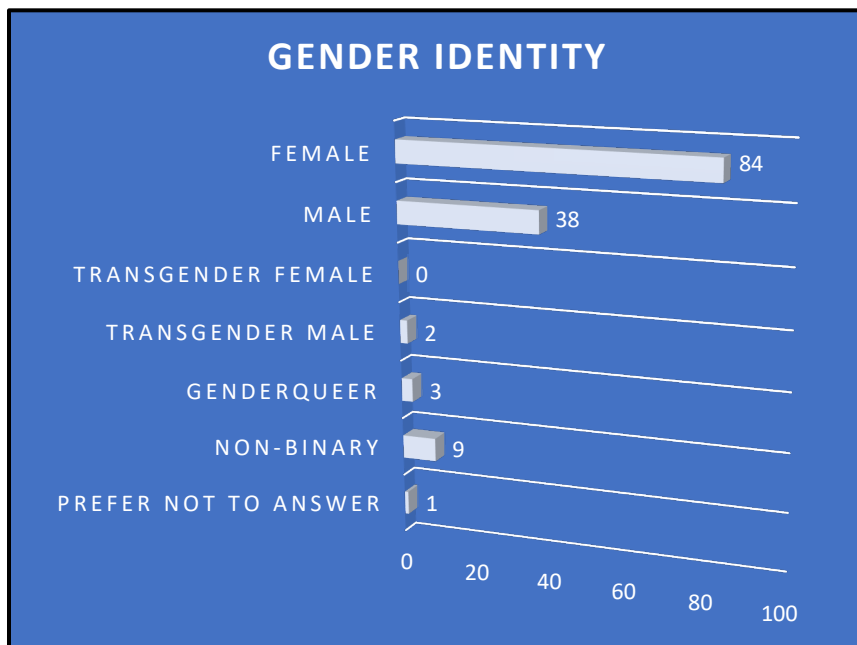
When the survey closed on February 15, 2019, there were a total of 168 anonymous responses. Of those 168 responses, three participants had no experience in the video relay service setting so they were automatically brought to the end of the survey using the skip logic features in Qualtrics mentioned earlier. Those responses were scrapped. There were also 28 survey responses in which the participant did not make it to the final question of the survey. These 28 responses were not included in the data analysis. Again, part of the survey informed consent information mentioned that if a participant wanted to leave the survey before it was completed, that would be considered withdrawal and those responses would not be considered. After the three responses from those with no video relay service experience and the 28 responses considered withdrawals were scrapped, this left 137 viable survey responses for analysis.

Several pieces of demographic information were collected as part of this survey, including information about LGBTQ status, gender identity, age, and geographic location. LGBTQ status is shown in Figure 3. The majority of participants identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer.



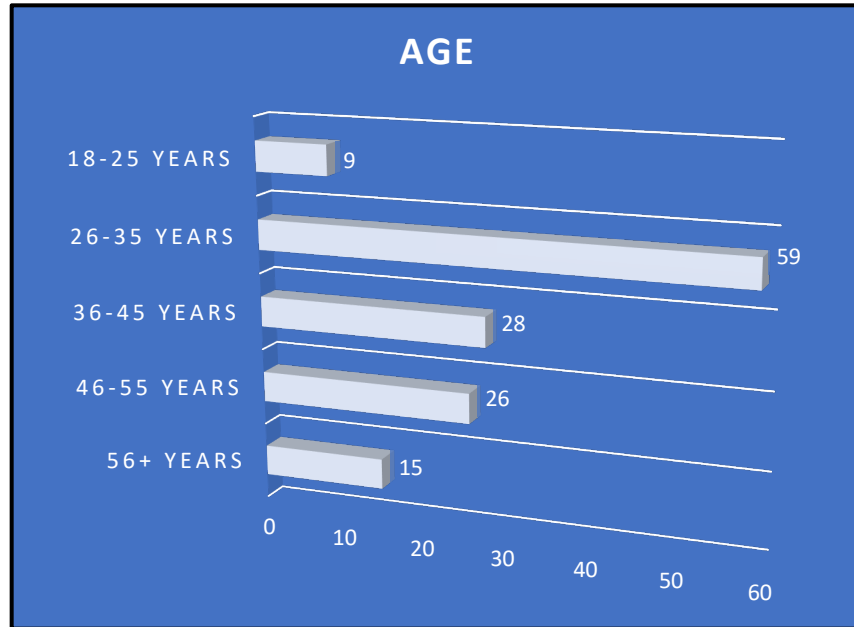
*Figure 3.* LGBTQ Status of Survey Participants.

Gender identity was another piece of data collected from survey participants. This is shown in Figure 4. The survey found that the majority of participants identified as female at 61%.



*Figure 4. Gender Identity of Survey Participants.*

Data about the age of participants were also collected through the survey (see Figure 5). Responses revealed that the majority (43%) were between the ages 26-31. The 18-25 years grouping had the smallest percentage of participants at 7%.



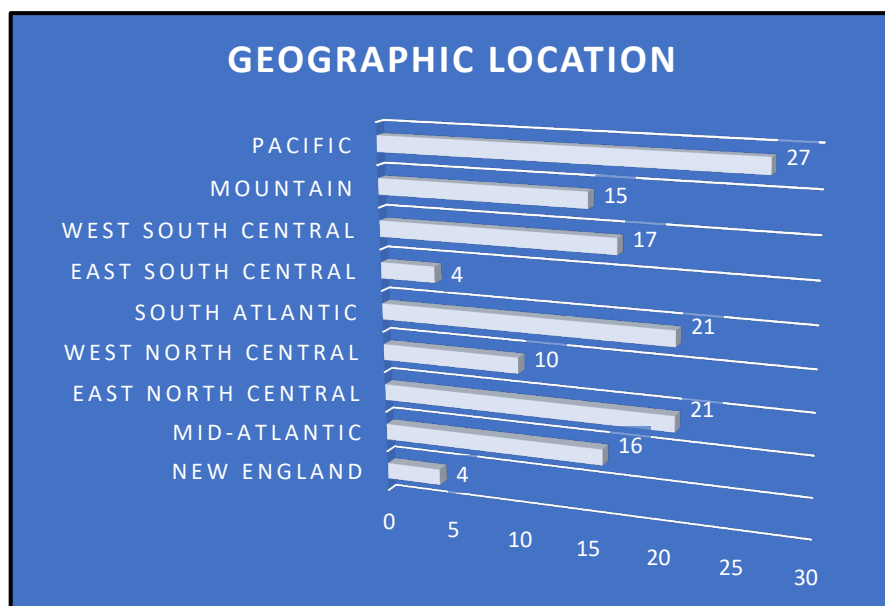
*Figure 5. Age of Survey Participants.*

For the geographic locations (see Figure 6), the United States was divided into nine regions:

- Pacific: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA
- Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, NV, WY
- West South Central: AR, LA, OK, TX
- East South Central: AL, KY, MS, TN
- South Atlantic: DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, PR
- West North Central: IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD
- East North Central: IN, IL, MI, OH, WI
- Mid-Atlantic: NJ, NY, PA
- New England: CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT

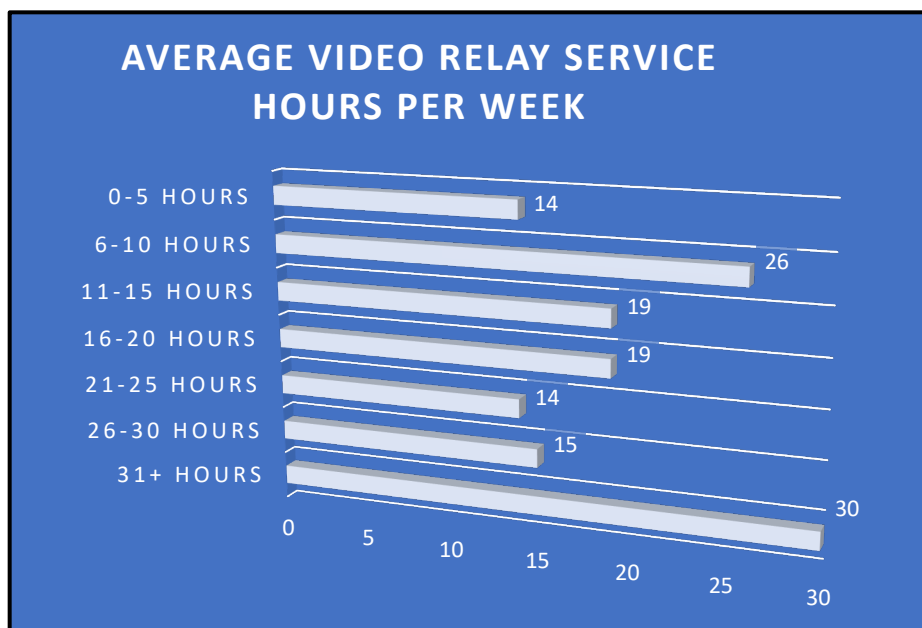


The Pacific region had the greatest number of responses at 20%. The regions with the fewest amount of responses include East South Central and New England, both at 3%.



*Figure 6. Geographic Location of Survey Participants.*

Information about the average number of hours interpreters work per week in the video relay service setting was collected in the survey as well (see Figure 7). Most participants fell into the category labeled “31+ hours,” which accounted for 22%. The next largest category was 6-10 hours at 19%.



*Figure 7. Average Video Relay Service Hours Per Week for Survey Participants.*

In addition, the total years of experience working in that setting was also collected. The participants (N=137) reported an average of 6.42 years of experience working in video relay service.

The open-ended survey responses were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. “The aim of data analysis is the discovery of patterns among the data, patterns that point to theoretical understandings of social life. The coding and relating of concepts is key to this process” (Babbie, 2016, p. 388). The coding of survey data revealed important concepts that could be explored further in the second phase of the data collection, which was the semi-structured interviews.

## **Phase II: Interview**

### **Recruitment.**

The recruitment for potential interview candidates occurred directly through the survey participation. At the completion of the survey, the final question asked the participant about their

willingness to participate in a one-on-one online interview. Those who were willing to be considered as an interview candidate were provided a link to click, which opened a new browser window where they submitted their sexual/gender identity and an email address to potentially be contacted. This link to a separate window was used so that participant responses on the survey could remain anonymous and answers could not be traced back to them.

Because the process of interview recruitment was tied to survey participation, the initial stage of recruitment for the interview (querying for willing participants) ended when the survey closed on February 15, 2019. There were 66 survey participants who were willing to be interviewed for the study. Interview candidate data were exported as an Excel spreadsheet and sorted by sexual/gender identity classification, which is considered purposive sampling.

“Sometimes it is appropriate to select a sample on the basis of knowledge of the population, its elements, and the purpose of the study” (Babbie, 2016, p. 187). This purposive categorization process was important to the research so that perspectives from multiple identities could be represented. The groups were labelled as follows: (a) Lesbian; (b) Gay; (c) Transgender; and (d) Bisexual/Queer/Other. Once the groups had been established on the spreadsheet, an online random number generator was used to select interview participants from within the sorted groups. The original aim was to recruit one or two participants from each group, totaling to between six and eight interviews overall. Ultimately, eight interviews were conducted but due to participant response, the amount of participants in each category ended up as follows: Lesbian (2); Gay (3); Queer (2); and Transgender/Queer (1).

There were a few important criteria to consider that guided the decision to conduct between six and eight interviews. This includes the notion of sufficiency – having adequate numbers to represent a range of participants – and saturation of information – no longer hearing

anything new (Seidman, 2006). For this research study, a third piece of criteria had to be considered – time constraints. It was important to balance the wealth of information to be gathered but also think realistically about the strict timeline for this research project.

Once candidates were selected using the random number generator, they were sent a preliminary email to check-in and confirm willingness to participate. Those candidates who expressed interest were sent the interview consent form via email and were asked to sign and return it (see Appendix F). Questions were encouraged during this part of the recruitment. When signed consents were received, schedules were coordinated and individual interview slots were reserved.

### **Interview Design.**

The interview portion for this research project was designed as a way to collect data that would supplement the data from the surveys and allow for further engagement with participants. Hale and Napier (2013) note that “if the interview is being conducted as part of a triangulation study, the questions may be developed to explore earlier data more in depth” (p. 98), which is another way to uncover these perspectives. The interview questions were related to the survey questions, but they allowed for more rich qualitative data and a chance to dig deeper into the lived experiences of LGBTQ interpreters (see Appendix G).

Of the three types of interview strategies (structured, semi-structured, and open-ended), semi-structured seemed to be the best fit for this research project because while it involves appropriate preparation, it also allows for flexibility during the interview (Hale & Napier, 2013). With a diverse group such as the LGBTQ community, lived experiences can be very different, which is why it was important to have that flexibility. This allowed for me (the interviewer) to use discretion with which direction the interview would take and help guide the level of follow-

up questions. These follow-up questions were important to develop in advance because “sometimes respondents in an interview will give an inappropriate or incomplete answer” (Babbie, 2016, p. 269), which is why a request for elaboration (or a probe) is important to have ready when those situations arise.

### **Data Collection and Analysis.**

The one-on-one interviews were conducted in spoken English using a video conferencing software program, Zoom. I was set up in a secured, private room to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Each session was recorded through Zoom and all files were saved to my computer hard drive, rather than to the Zoom’s cloud storage system. A second recording was made simultaneously through a computer program called Camtasia, which is a video editing tool. This was to ensure that there was a backup file in case the Zoom recording did not work.

Each interview began with a script that was read to all participants (see Appendix H). After short introductions, the interviews then transitioned into questions specific to the participants’ experiences in the video relay service setting. It was important for the interview participants to know that I also identified as LGBTQ in order to cultivate trust and understanding. Seidman (2006) notes:

Issues of equity in an interviewing relationship are affected by the social identities that participants and interviewers bring to the interview...To negotiate these variables in developing an equitable interviewing relationship, the interviewer must be acutely aware of his or her own experience with them as well as sensitive to the way these issues may be affecting the participants (p. 101).

By sharing an LGBTQ identity with the interview participants, I was able to create a more equitable relationship dynamic in an attempt to cultivate a welcoming environment in which

participants felt safe to share their stories. Building this rapport with participants was important for the gathering of information. Additionally, each interview was “modeled after a conversation between equals rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 102). The goal was to collect the appropriate information but in a relaxed, casual manner.

The method of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility during the process and allowed me to use discretion when choosing which follow-up questions fit best with the narrative being told. Certain details from participant responses were noted during the process and helped guide the flow of the interview.

By concentrating on the details of participants’ experiences, interviewers strive as best as possible to guide their participants to reconstitute their lived experience. Interviewers using a phenomenological approach are always trying to make the “was” come as close as possible to what was the “is” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18).

This idea of making the “was” become the “is” was important to this research study because the goal was for participants to reconstruct and reflect on their past experiences in the video relay service setting.

Being an active listener was an important skill for me to employ during the interviews.

Seidman (2006) notes:

Active listening requires concentration and focus beyond what we usually do in everyday life. It requires that, for a good part of the time, [interviewers] quash [their] normal instinct to talk. At the same time, interviewers must be ready to say something when a navigational nudge is needed (p. 82).

This is a fine balance (to listen or to nudge) that varied with each participant and depended on the topic being discussed – meaning some people needed more of a nudge than others at certain

times in order to uncover deeper meaning to their narratives. As mentioned earlier, often probing can be an important tool to use during interviews when a participant response is incomplete.

While probing is generally thought of as a follow-up question, in fact, sometimes silence is the best probe and that was also a strategy used during the interview process (Babbie, 2016).

There were several participants who commented that while they had many years of experience working in the field of video relay service, they had never considered the unique perspective they brought as a member of the LGBTQ community. This aligns with Taylor et al. (2016) who say:

By virtue of being interviewed, people develop new insights and understandings of their experiences. They may not have thought about or reflected on events in which the interviewer is interested, and even if they have, they interpret things a bit differently each time (p. 114).

Many found the process of being interviewed cathartic and had positive responses to the opportunity to talk about their experiences with a fellow member of the LGBTQ community.

The eight interviews were conducted between March 4, 2019 and March 28, 2019. Each interview varied in length, but on average each lasted about 45 minutes. Below is the interview participant information (see Figure 8). Note that pseudonyms were used (and chosen by the participants) to maintain participant anonymity.

<b>Interview Participant Information</b>			
<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Preferred Pronouns</b>
Crystal	Lesbian	Female	She/Her*
Barbie	Lesbian	Female	She/Her
Sarah	Gay	Female	She/Her
Alex	Gay	Male	He/Him
Charles	Gay	Male	He/Him
Jane	Queer	Female	She/Her
Jay	Queer	Non-binary	They/Them**

Avery	Transgender/Queer	Non-binary	They/Them
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*\*Crystal does not mind if others use They/Them*

*\*\*Jay does not mind if others use She/her since the They/Them singular pronouns can be challenging for some*

#### 8: Interview Participant Information.

During this interviewing phase, I transcribed each interview recording within 24 hours of the interview being conducted so that the memory of the event was fresh. This aligns with Taylor et al. (2016) who note that “when researchers transcribe the data themselves, the process often produces many insights along the way” (p. 170) and this was true in the case of all eight interviews. Each transcription process allowed for a deeper understanding of the responses and allowed for themes and patterns to be identified more readily.

Transcriptions were analyzed in order to identify overarching themes and patterns. Often the themes noted from the interviews were similar to the ones already noted in the survey responses. The nature of the interview process allowed for these themes to be explored more in depth and become more well-developed. Using a mixed methods approach can highlight the strengths of each method and produce more enhanced data when used in conjunction with one another than when used alone (Creswell, 2009).

The interview transcriptions were also coded in order to recognize commonalities and important concepts. Many themes and patterns from the survey responses were also noted in the interview data. The triangulation allowed for a deeper understanding of complex topics. Through this process of interview data analysis, “what were initially general insights, vague ideas, and hunches are refined, expanded, discarded, or fully developed” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 181). This



is when the many patterns identified were grouped together and the main themes of the research were developed.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of a phenomenological framework is to uncover how people construct their realities. “Phenomenological approaches are particularly concerned with understanding behavior from the participants’ own subjective frames of reference. Research methods are chosen, therefore, to try and describe, interpret and explain events from the perspective of the people who are the subject of the research” (Hale & Napier, 2013, pp. 14-15). That was the goal of triangulating the data collection process through the use of anonymous surveys (with closed- and open-ended questions) and semi-structured interviews. The survey responses were analyzed for quantitative data as well as qualitative data in order to identify themes and patterns presented in the open-ended responses. Interview transcriptions were also used to find themes and allowed for a deeper understanding of some of the information that had also been shared in the survey data. The phenomenological approach is “committed to understanding social phenomenon from the actor’s own perspective and examining how the world is experienced” (Taylor et al., 2016, pg. 3) and through this mixed methods study, the experiences of participants were captured in an effort to honor this approach.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion**

This study investigated the experiences of LGBTQ interpreters who have worked in the video relay service setting using Goffman's (1963) stigma theory as the framework to guide the research process. Applying stigma theory to the data was intended to serve as a reminder that an LGBTQ identity is considered to be tainted or undesirable by members of a society, which may be an influencing factor on the LGBTQ interpreter experience. This chapter will review the findings identified from data collected through anonymous surveys (N=137) and semi-structured interviews (N=8). Three main themes were identified stemming from the data, including (a) gender attribution as it relates to the LGBTQ community, which refers to the categorization of others into gender classifications (Kessler & McKenna, 1978); (b) the process of disclosure (sharing an LGBTQ identity with another person); and (c) the role of the video relay service company on the LGBTQ experience.

### **Gender Attribution and the LGBTQ Community**

One overarching theme that persisted throughout the survey responses and interviews was the concept of gender attribution, which is the process of categorizing people into gender labels – something that humans are continually engaging in, even at a subconscious level (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). The way that society constructs gender is done using discrete, binary classifications, meaning there are certain norms that males and females are expected to adhere to (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014). While LGBTQ status is not inherently overt or covert in society, sometimes the ability to detect LGBTQ status in someone else correlates to that person's rejection of traditional gender norms (Pfeffer, 2014). As a result, LGBTQ individuals who choose to challenge the binary framework of gender may be more recognizable as LGBTQ.

According to the findings, for LGBTQ interpreters working in the video relay service setting, consumers have had varying reactions and responses to gender norms being challenged. This section will review the gender preference feature offered to consumers in video relay service; the misgendering of interpreters, which means “fail[ing] to acknowledge and refer to a person in their identified gender” (Kia, MacKinnon, & Legge, 2016, p. 813); interpreter appearance as it relates to the LGBTQ community; and finally, the potential benefits of being recognized as LGBTQ.

### **Gender Preference Feature.**

In video relay service, there is an option that allows consumers to choose the gender of their interpreter – a feature required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which is the governing body that regulates video relay service (“Telecommunications Relay Service,” n.d.). While it is not required to choose a gender, this is an option available to all consumers. The FCC has established two gender options for consumers to choose from: male or female. At the company level, employees report their gender identity, which is used to put them in either the female or male category, also called the queue. This limited view of gender aligns with the societal norms that dictate that gender is binary (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014). According to the findings, the binary gender preference feature can be problematic and sometimes create additional demands on LGBTQ interpreters.

One problem that arises within this binary framework is that not everyone identifies as either male or female. For interpreters who identify as non-binary, being placed in a male or female queue can be a challenge. Avery, who identifies as non-binary, explained their experience with deaf consumers:

For a while, I was still in the female queue, and so I would come up and they're, like, really confused and so then I requested, "Can you put me in the male queue? Because I feel like they're getting really upset when they see me and they ask to transfer again." So, then I was into the male queue (long pause) and honestly that one made me just as uncomfortable.

Recently, Avery's company began allowing its employees to forego the male/female choice and instead choose a third non-binary gender option in the company's internal system. This means that those interpreters will not receive calls in which a gender preference is selected. Avery recalled getting the email announcing the new non-binary option and feeling so relieved about it. This was a significant workplace stressor that Avery no longer had to worry about.

The findings from this study suggest that the focus on a binary gendered system also puts added pressure on those who do, in fact, identify as male or female, but do not fit a traditional male or female gender role. For instance, if a deaf consumer requests a female interpreter, that consumer may have a predetermined idea of what a female interpreter should look like. If the deaf consumer is matched with an interpreter from the female queue who happens to appear more masculine, this may cause the deaf person to become confused or even irritated with the interpreter.

One participant from the anonymous survey who identifies as female shared in her written response that the deaf consumer questions about her gender identity were so incessant, she decided to switch her gender identity to non-binary just to avoid being assigned consumers who had specifically requested a female. "To save myself the questions and explanations I changed my identity although in my life I don't identify that way."

Another unique experience noted by some male LGBTQ interpreters, who are in the male queue, is the pressure to “be masculine.” As one gay survey participant shared:

When I worked in [video relay service], so often I would get calls transferred to a male interpreter (me) because the Deaf consumer wants a "man voice" to call an auto shop or conduct business. This would create so much pressure on me to "butch up" my interpretation. It was a really big stressor for me.

This consumer expectation of male interpreters to fulfill the traditional role of a man was a common theme noted in the findings, which is not to suggest that this situation occurs exclusively within the LGBTQ community. Non-LGBTQ males may feel the same pressure, but it is included here because it was prevalent in the findings.

Jay, who identifies as non-binary, works for a company that does not offer the non-binary option and mentioned their uneasiness with being listed as a man in their company’s system. Jay shared:

Sometimes folks will ask to transfer to a male interpreter because they want to talk about a “man topic” (Jay used air quotes here) like cars or sports and I have no idea (long pause) that person (pause) kicked a ball? I have no idea what’s happening.

Alex, who identifies as a gay man, echoed Jay’s sentiment about not knowing about traditionally masculine topics, saying, “That is not something I have any desire to learn or any interest in so don't expect that I can *do* cars.” This seems to suggest that some LGBTQ interpreters who are listed as “male” with their company feel the additional pressure to know about topics typically associated with being a man. Another gay male participant in the anonymous survey shared:

I get nervous when callers request a male. I feel that the option is used incorrectly all the time. Instead of using it for gender matching to the consumer, consumers use it to pick an

interpreter that they assume is going to interpret "masculine" topics fluidly. I am male, I present as male, while there may be somethings that I know about, (male anatomy and physiology), that doesn't make me an expert in auto mechanics, hunting, or sports.

In a heteronormative society, men are expected to know about topics such as cars or sports and according to the findings, it is this linguistic expectation that seems to be an influencing factor in how deaf consumers are using the gender preferred feature.

It was also reported that the gender preference feature is being used to shop around for male interpreters who appear to have (what participants refer to as) "a real man's" voice. Some deaf consumers will continue requesting a different male interpreter until they see one who they feel embodies a real man, which means consumers are assuming the interpreter's appearance somehow informs how their voice will sound. One male survey participant, who identifies as gay, reported that some deaf consumers have looked him over and asked him to transfer their call to another male because they "don't want to sound gay." Deaf consumers are using the appearance of their male interpreters to make assumptions about whether or not their voice is acceptable. This fits with the research of Nadal et al. (2016) that gay and bisexual men are exposed to negativity surrounding their speech and mannerisms. This suggests that appearance and aesthetic is not the only variable evaluated by deaf consumers when using the gender preference feature. Overall, the gender preference option is a feature some LGBTQ interpreters find problematic, and in many instances, it results in an extra layer of pressure.

### **Misgendering and Gender Confusion.**

Regardless of whether a deaf consumer decides to use the gender preference feature, they still engage in the process of gender attribution, which can lead to misgendering or gender confusion with regard to their interpreter. To misgender an individual means to refer to them

using gender identifiers that do not match their gender identity (Kia et al., 2016). The results of the survey for this study revealed that of the total number of participants (N=137), 35% reported having been misgendered by video relay service consumers, with 12% of the respondents reporting that it happened often. Responses revealed that this can happen with deaf consumers who rely on visual information and/or with hearing consumers who may misgender an interpreter based on the sound of their voice. For the 35% who reported having been misgendered, when asked whether or not they corrected the consumer about the mistaken gender label (n=48), 31% of responders corrected every occurrence; 42% corrected only sometimes; and 27% never corrected.

Gender confusion refers to an individual's inability to categorize someone's gender identity. When the everyday process of gender attribution is disrupted in this way, it can lead to feelings of not only confusion, but annoyance and even anger on the part of the individual attempting to engage in this process (Schilt, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The findings from this study revealed that interpreters perceive the deaf consumer questions about gender identity to be very bold at times, which supports the work of Mindess (2014) that the deaf culture can sometimes be viewed as blunt. LGBTQ interpreters reported being asked the question, "Are you a man or woman?" by deaf consumers in video relay service more often than in any other realm of their lives. For a community that values clear communication (or, as many in the deaf community characterize it, "straight talk"), it makes sense that deaf people would attempt to directly resolve ambiguity whenever it occurs.

Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact on interpreters who process many video relay calls and serve many consumers in any given shift. LGBTQ interpreters who constantly face questions about their gender identity often feel they are being scrutinized, almost like they

are under a microscope. Survey participants reported that this kind of attention can be traumatizing for those interpreters who deal with it incessantly. Some interpreters noted that they have often felt consumers focusing on every detail of their appearance. They felt that the focus was no longer on their interpreting skills, but how they look and which gender category the consumer was attempting to place them in. One queer survey respondent expressed the impact that these questions have on them:

I think there is a major issue when the most stressful part of my job is not the job itself but just existing as myself in that space. The amount of questions involving my gender and sexuality in situations where it isn't relevant to the call, or it's clear the intention behind asking are negative, is absurd. It is a boldness that is particular to the [video relay service] setting.

For this individual, the scrutiny from consumers about their gender identity has proven to be an added stressor for their experience in the workplace. Serano (2013) refers to this concept as gender policing, in which one's gender is "constantly critiqued and demeaned by others" (p. 259). The findings of this study show that video relay service consumers (both hearing and deaf) can engage in gender policing when interacting with LGBTQ interpreters.

Fielding questions about gender is something that can also impact the transgender and non-binary community. Transgender participants noted that questions from consumers about gender increased during their transitioning periods, which is the process individuals undergo in order to change the way they present physically to match their preferred gender identity. Avery reflected on their experience with this:



Well, it definitely happened right when I was transitioning. Me first starting hormones and everything (pause) that was actually a really tough time for me because I didn't really have my identity truly, like, pegged in a way that I was comfortable.

Avery went on to say:

On screen, I still looked really feminine, but I'm, like, dressed as a guy and people would just straight up ask me "Are you guy or are you a girl?" "Are you guy or are you a girl?" "Are you guy or are you a girl?" "Which one, which one, which one?"

For Avery, this time of transition was particularly challenging because they were coming to terms with their own gender identity and having to field pointed questions about gender felt very invasive. Feeling pressure to answer probing questions was an additional demand in the workplace.

Misgendering or gender confusion occurring for interpreters in the video relay service center does not exclusively come from deaf consumers; it also occurs with hearing consumers. The interpreter's voice can sometimes cause confusion for hearing consumers attempting to attribute their gender. The findings show that this happens particularly with cisgender gay males, as well as transgender and non-binary individuals. An example of this would be a hearing representative calling a man "ma'am" or asking the interpreter in the middle of the call, "Wait, is this a man or woman?" Participants noted that being misgendered, or getting questions about their gender during a call, can be challenging because it disrupts the flow of the call. In addition, the interpreter is usually unsure how to handle the situation appropriately, since they are in the process of interpreting.

The findings suggest that for the most part, being on the receiving end of comments about gender confusion or being referred to as the wrong gender can be upsetting and hurtful; however,

not all participants shared this sentiment. Crystal, who identifies as female and queer, noted that her short hair and masculine clothing have often elicited questions about her gender from deaf consumers; however, she does not take offense to these questions. Instead, Crystal noted:

That's them realizing a queer indicator and trying to know what to do with that kind of information. Especially with some callers . . . they are just now learning these kinds of things. So, I definitely don't deny them that access to seeing all different kinds of people and that's the beauty of our communities, that [they are] not restricted by any region or ethnicity or religion and there's an inherent diversity.

Crystal saw these questions as opportunities to explain her identity. In that she has never had any negative experiences during moments like this, Crystal plans to approach future questions in the same manner.

The idea of increasing gender awareness among deaf consumers was a sentiment shared by Avery. As Avery pointed out, there are some deaf people who have never been exposed to the concept of a non-binary identity, and they may be simply looking for an explanation. A challenge for Avery, however, was how to explain the non-binary identity in a succinct manner – how to answer the question “Are you a man or woman?” in a way that was “short and sweet” and did not cause further confusion.

When interpreters are misgendered by consumers (or there is confusion or ambiguity about their gender identity), it adds a unique challenge to their experience interpreting in the video relay service setting. For an interpreter whose gender identity is under scrutiny or being questioned it is not only a distraction from the work, but the findings suggest it can be invalidating.

### **Responses to Interpreter Appearance.**

Sometimes, the gender of the interpreter is not necessarily ambiguous to the deaf consumer, but the interpreter's nontraditional appearance can still disrupt the normal process of gender attribution. When an interpreter presents in a nontraditional way (that is, in a way that challenges gender norms), this can be a way for consumers to identify interpreters as members of the LGBTQ community, or at least have their suspicions. The divergence from societal gender norms through feminine masculinity or male femininity can manifest in different ways from attire to hair styles.

In this study, survey participants were asked whether they had experienced any negativity from consumers regarding their appearance that they believed was related to their LGBTQ status (N=137) and 26% responded "Yes." As just one example, participants who identified as female, but who had short or masculine haircuts, were frequently challenged with comments such as: "You should have long hair if you are a girl!"; or, "If you are a woman, why do you have short hair?"; or "Why do you have short hair? You look like a man. If you had longer hair, I wouldn't be confused." Another survey participant reported, "Being an LGBT interpreter in the [video relay service] community is tricky sometimes, especially [because] of my appearance. It got to a point where I started growing my hair a bit [because] I was sick of answering questions." Women also receive negative feedback from consumers when they are not wearing enough make-up. "Need lipstick" was a comment noted by a participant, who had received this criticism multiple times.

Some of the 26% of participants who reported experiencing negativity about their appearance noted that the negativity had occasionally escalated to full blown hostility and harassment. One survey participant noted, "I've been called a 'dyke' and 'lesbian' in a

derogatory way.” Another mentioned being told, “Lesbian? Gross!”, while others mentioned being called “a faggot” or other disparaging insults.

For these interpreters, their stigmatized identities were detected by consumers using visual cues. This resulted in unique (mostly negative) experiences that seem to differ from those LGBTQ interpreters who are able keep their LGBTQ status undetected (Clair et al., 2005). In fact, when asked “Have you ever felt that you were asked to transfer interpreters because the VRS consumer assumed you are a member of the LGBTQ community?” 23% of participants (N=137) answered, “Yes.”

Additionally, interpreters who are victims of harassment in video relay service due to their appearance may find it challenging to know how to respond because consumers are essentially customers that the interpreters are serving. This dynamic of working with individuals outside of the organization, who are not held to the same company standards, can make it hard for interpreters to know how to respond to harassment committed by consumers (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

### **Benefits of Being Recognized as LGBTQ.**

Being recognized as LGBTQ by consumers in video relay service can be an unpleasant experience, whether it means persistent questions about gender identity or being called derogatory insults. But the findings also show that there are moments when being recognized as LGBTQ can have a very positive impact on the interaction. This typically occurs when the deaf consumer also identifies as LGBTQ. One survey participant noted:

I love it when queer [deaf] callers share their identity with me, and we have either an explicit or implicit moment of connection before or after the call. Sometimes they

directly ask and I'm happy to affirm that I'm also queer, and it feels like a fleeting positive moment.

Another survey participant echoed this sentiment: “When I see a Deaf caller that ‘looks like me’ or is obviously a gay man we ‘recognize’ each other and I get big smiles.” These findings suggest that LGBTQ deaf callers feel more comfortable when their interpreters also identify as LGBTQ, which, in turn, can build trust and rapport – a tricky thing to cultivate in video relay service when interactions tend to be brief.

Avery also reflected on instances when LGBTQ deaf consumers have been happy to see them on the screen: “They are really excited when they see me and I think they automatically just feel more comfortable because it’s like, ‘Oh look ... you get me. You understand this.’” As one survey respondent noted, “I see relief in the eyes of some LGBTQ callers when they get me because they assume by appearance that I’m part of the community.”

These positive responses on the part of LGBTQ deaf consumers (upon recognizing a shared identity) are a stark contrast from some of their negative past experiences with non-LGBTQ interpreters. In fact, for some LGBTQ deaf consumers, when they recognize a shared identity with the interpreter they feel comfortable confiding in them about these negative experiences. Crystal vividly remembered a transgender deaf consumer opening up to her after recognizing Crystal’s LGBTQ identity:

I've been told kind of different awful stories, like, some interpreters have told them to change [into] clothes that match their biological gender at birth that was assigned to them before [the interpreter will] continue with the call or suggestions to go to church or refusal to use the deaf callers preferred pronouns.

These stories suggest that LGBTQ interpreters are not the only players in video relay service on the receiving end of negative treatment; LGBTQ deaf consumers also experience oppressive behavior from interpreters as well.

Some interpreters noted that serving in this supportive role for LGBTQ deaf consumers is an important part of their job. One survey participant recognized that these are unique opportunities for LGBTQ interpreters to form connections and have a positive impact on the experiences of the deaf consumers:

I imagine and hope, especially in very personal conversations, that they feel more comfortable knowing they have a queer interpreter who will not judge them or make incorrect assumptions about them.

Similarly, Charles noted, “I think it's been an asset to be a member of the community [because my] identity has been beneficial for me to interpret more effectively.”

Alternatively, *not* being recognized as LGBTQ by the deaf consumer can be disappointing for interpreters. Barbie explained:

I think part of it's, like, a frustration of “I'm not identifiable” so it's not like I can wear something that signifies, “Hey, I'm a part of this community.” And then there was some guilt with that if I got calls that were from someone in the community and then they couldn't recognize me as an ally. You know, like, if you're getting ready to come out in a call (pause) if you knew that I was family maybe you would feel a little bit better about this experience because you're already have a third party. I want you to be able to identify with me like we're family, like, you can trust me, it's fine.

Barbie used the phrase “family,” which implies “chosen family” and is a common term used within the LGBTQ community. “A chosen family is a group of people who intentionally choose

one another to play significant emotional roles in each other's lives" (Neuman, 2017), although it has evolved to signify basic in-group belonging. Barbie's struggle with not being identified as LGBTQ, and thus missing out on opportunities to connect, draws attention to the special bond that can form between interpreters and consumers who share an LGBTQ identity. These findings also align with the research of Pfeffer (2014), in which lesbian participants found it problematic to be misrecognized as heterosexual because it was invalidating and caused them to miss out on opportunities to engage as an in-group member of the LGBTQ community.

As this section showed, some LGBTQ interpreters have unique experiences when their LGBTQ status is recognizable by consumers (hearing and/or deaf). This is usually due to a divergence from traditional gender norms on the part of the interpreter, which challenges consumers attempting to engage in gender attribution. In conclusion, when a deaf consumer recognizes or suspects that an interpreter identifies as LGBTQ, the result can be negative – leading to insults or unwelcomed probing; or positive – leading to the cultivation of a welcoming environment for the LGBTQ deaf community.

### **To Disclose or Not to Disclose?**

Occasionally, opportunities arise in the video relay service setting when interpreters whose LGBTQ identity is not readily recognized by consumers must decide whether or not to disclose their LGBTQ status – specifically deaf consumers, as these opportunities do not usually occur with hearing consumers. The approach taken regarding this decision to disclose is known as stigma management, because an individual is managing who has access to their identity information (Cain, 1991; Cass, 1979). If interpreters are afforded this decision, it means they are not automatically detected by consumers as members of the LGBTQ community. In general, the opportunity to disclose tends to come up when the deaf consumer asks about the interpreter's

relationship status. Depending on how they respond, interpreters can either continue to conceal their LGBTQ identity by avoiding disclosure or engage in disclosure and reveal a stigmatized identity.

When asked on the survey whether the participants felt it was appropriate for interpreters to share their LGBTQ identities with consumers (N=137), 15% answered “No”; 12% answered “Yes”; and 73% answered “It depends.” This section will explore what impacts the choice to disclose or not and the implications of that decision. It will include reasons LGBTQ interpreters believe that disclosure should never occur; the unknowns surrounding the decision to disclose; the impact of past experiences on disclosure; non-LGBTQ privilege (which refers to an advantage or special right available to a specific group of people) and how that influences feelings about disclosure; and, finally, LGBTQ visibility and authenticity.

#### **No Gray Area.**

As mentioned above, 15% of participants responded that it is never appropriate for interpreters to reveal an LGBTQ identity, regardless of the circumstances. This is considered a strategy to manage personal and professional roles by keeping them segmented (or separated) and thus, not integrated (Fisher et al., 2009; Rothbard et al., 2005). Respondents who felt it was inappropriate to share an LGBTQ identity in the video relay service setting gave a variety of reasons, the most common falling into the following categories:

- \* It is not relevant to the work
- \* It is not professional
- \* Interpreting should focus on consumers, not interpreters
- \* Interpreters should remain neutral
- \* Sexual and gender identity is private information



One way that these participants avoid revealing their own LGBTQ status to consumers is through the use of a strategy that Lee et al. (2008) refer to as vaguery, which is one of the three options LGBTQ individuals have when faced with the opportunity to disclose – the other two options being (a) honesty (full disclosure) or (b) dishonesty (concealment). Vaguery is a way to pass without being fully honest or dishonest.

Survey results show that these participants will be honest with consumers about having a spouse, but will refrain from mentioning the spouse's gender or not correct a consumer who makes an incorrect assumption about the spouse's gender in order to avoid disclosure. This notion of withholding information about one role (personal) while fulfilling another role (professional) can be considered an example of role interference (Fisher et al., 2009). For these respondents, they feel that one of their roles – an LGBTQ individual – is not able to comply with the demands of another role – an interpreter in the video relay service setting, and thus they reconcile that through either vaguery or dishonesty in an effort to pass as non-LGBTQ.

The notion of passing in a call center environment to conceal a stigmatized identity is not unique to the video relay service setting. Rahman (2009) explored the notion of passing in call centers with regard to spoken language use in Pakistan. He was able to show that certain accents were adopted to match desired foreign identities when sales workers engaged with clients over the phone—in other words, those agents attempted to pass as native speakers of a more elite dialect in certain contexts for various purposes, one of which being the avoidance of language discrimination.

In a call center setting, because interactions are relatively brief and conversations are generally kept at surface level, people may be afforded more opportunities to pass than in other circumstances. In this case, for the LGBTQ interpreters who pass visually as non-LGBTQ but

face the decision to disclose their identity in other ways (for instance, during a chat with a consumer about their relationship status), some participants felt it was important to engage in strategies to keep that identity concealed.

### **The Unknowns.**

For interpreters who felt the decision to disclose depended on the situation, a general feeling of uneasiness was expressed about what would occur following the disclosure. The uneasiness about disclosure of an LGBTQ identity most often related to fear of how the consumer would react and/or how the disclosure would impact the interpreting interaction. This uncertainty of how the disclosure process will play out keeps many interpreters in the video relay service setting from sharing their LGBTQ identities with consumers.

On the topic of sharing personal information with deaf consumers, Alex explained, “[My approach] was always guarded because ... you don't want to out yourself or get too personal because you don't know specifically how that person is going to react.” These findings support the current research that some LGBTQ individuals are always aware that disclosing could prompt a negative or threatening reaction from others so they may avoid disclosure (Cass, 1979). As one survey participant noted, “I also don't want to be put in a position where I'm yelled at or scorned by the Deaf consumer if they don't agree with me.” Other concerns about disclosure related to the process by which deaf consumers can file formal complaints against interpreters to the company. These interpreters worried that disclosure of an LGBTQ identity would prompt a formal complaint. King et al. (2017) identifies this strategy of concealment (hiding a stigmatized LGBTQ label) as a way to manage one's identity based on the perceived chance of rejection from others.

These potentially negative reactions can have lasting effects for interpreters. Jane, who identifies as a lesbian, noted that despite the fleeting, superficial interactions that occur in the video relay service setting, deaf consumers can play a significant role in the interpreters' daily lives. "As inconsequential as [the deaf consumers] are, their words are not." Fear of backlash or negativity has led some interpreters to avoid disclosure altogether, regardless of who the consumer is.

Another sentiment shared among participants was the notion that they may only interact with deaf consumers for minutes at a time and then never see again, so why risk sharing something personal if the result will end badly? This aligns with the work of Orne (2011) regarding what LGBTQ individuals will consider when faced with the decision to disclose – one of the considerations being what he calls social distance, or the importance of the person in the interaction. He found many people will avoid disclosure with what he calls transitory figures, or those who are not meaningful to the individual.

Other concerns surrounding disclosure had less to do with the consumer's potential reaction and more with how disclosure could have an unnecessary impact on the deaf consumer or on the call itself. For instance, when asked about disclosure, Charles mentioned:

I guess my biggest concern is that it's not going to be disruptive to any relationship that I've already developed with the caller and it's not going to . . . impede on my ability to interpret effectively for them or them to have me interpret their phone call. So, those are the things that I look at to make sure that, you know, I feel like I'm good if I choose to share that and it's not going to disrupt anything for the call.

Many LGBTQ interpreters expressed that their purpose at work was to serve the consumer and make each call the most successful experience possible. One survey participant mentioned, "You

don't want to indirectly make the consumer feel uncomfortable. Deaf consumers have enough to deal with while using [video relay service].” Other interpreters echoed the sentiment that their primary goal was to facilitate communication, and that they did not want to add any unnecessary complications to the relationship dynamic. These interpreters reluctantly recognized that homophobia and transphobia exist in society, and that by concealing their LGBTQ identity they were able to form connections with consumers that might not otherwise occur if they had decided to disclose.

There are, however, increased feelings of uneasiness that arise when LGBTQ interpreters do not disclose with consumers who turn out to be prejudice against the LGBTQ community. For instance, if the content of the conversation being interpreted becomes homophobic or transphobic, LGBTQ interpreters noted that they feel deceitful or fraudulent by concealing their identities. One survey participant mentioned, “I feel like a double agent about to be found out because if they knew who I was, they wouldn't want me there.” Some interpreters worry that they will be found out or discovered as LGBTQ, which is an additional burden.

Some interpreters reported feeling overwhelmed by the uncertainty surrounding the decision to disclose – whether or not it is appropriate and if it will have any negative impacts on the call. Jane noted the myriad of questions that swirl through her mind when faced with this decision:

I think it's always on the mind whether really forefront or in the back but there's always this “Do I, don't I say something?” Should I tell something? Should I not? Is this going to impact the conversation in a negative way? Is it going to impact me in a negative way, in a positive way?

To conclude, the process of disclosure in video relay service can impact the interpreter who discloses; the deaf consumer; and the call itself. Some interpreters decide not to disclose in order to avoid dealing with the unknown implications, and may even mislead the consumer (as when they lie about the gender of their spouse) in order to uphold the impression that they are not members of the LGBTQ community.

### **Impact of Past Experiences.**

The unpredictable implications of disclosure keep many interpreters from disclosing their LGBTQ identity, but past experiences were also found to be an influencing factor in the decision to disclose. Sarah shared her experiences as someone who came out many years ago and how that has impacted her decisions in the video relay service setting:

I think for me maybe it's because I have been out since [year redacted]. I was [age redacted] years old. I have lived through when it was not okay. Now we're getting where it's okay, like, I never thought gay marriage would happen in my life. All this kinda stuff, so I come with that baggage you know (pause) it's not usually a positive experience.

This feeling was also shared by Jane:

I mean I think everybody in the community has had someone whether family member, friend, stranger, someone who has said some either mean things about you specifically or about the [LGBTQ] community or in general. I've already had that experience and I've already felt what that feels. I, (a), don't want to feel that at work, and (b) if I can prevent it, I will.

These comments suggest that it is not negative past experiences exclusively in video relay service that impact their decision to conceal an LGBTQ identity, but negative past experiences in general. A survey participant also noted, "I am older and times were different and I had

experienced discrimination and harassment when I was younger, so I keep things like that private.” These findings align with current research which suggests that negative past experiences with disclosure will have an impact on future decisions to disclose (Orne, 2011).

### **Safety.**

The findings of this study suggest that an interpreter is more likely to disclose an LGBTQ identity to a deaf consumer when they feel safe with that person, although the concept of safety can mean different things to different people. Here is one explanation provided by Jane about feeling safe in the video relay service setting, “So, I guess *physical* safety, no big deal. We’re on a phone call. But my own mental health and my own personal safety.” She went on to say:

There’s that added level of emotional wellness and health, which I think is super important. I think they go hand in hand. And for me, I don’t want to put myself in a position where my mental health is compromised.

Jay offered another interpretation of the word “safe”:

When I say safe I don’t really mean, “Is this person going to threaten me?” Is that person not, like, queer-antagonistic, not trans-antagonistic. Is this person, like, if I mention in passing my partner and something in my sign indicat[es] his gender, is that going to cause a problem? Is that going to make this person angry? Because that’s a thing that happens out there unfortunately. I don’t know that it would happen if I were to talk about my partner and his gender, but that’s what I mean by is this person safe. Is this person going to harbor biases if I talk about my personal life? Are they going to react strongly and negatively?

The challenge is that a safe person is not always easily recognizable. As such, interpreters have developed other means to figure out whether or not they believe someone to be safe. Barbie

noted that she is more inclined to share her LGBTQ identity with younger deaf consumers and lie about her identity to older consumers. Barbie mentioned that this generational difference (of younger people being more accepting of the LGBTQ community) is something she has observed in the world outside of interpreting, so she decided to apply that “rule” to video relay service. Interestingly, Barbie admitted that she realizes older deaf consumers might be absolutely fine and accepting of an LGBTQ interpreter, but she still holds back and in general does not trust them enough to disclose.

Barbie was not the only participant who shared strategies to identify safe consumers. Other participants mentioned looking for visual indicators, such as a deaf consumer who has a rainbow flag hanging in the background, or maybe the presence of two deaf female consumers on screen together who look like they could be romantically involved (and thus possibly LGBTQ). Another strategy noted was an increased awareness of any political comments or insinuations made by the deaf consumer, either during the interpreting interaction or while interacting directly with the interpreter. Those who seem to sway left and express more liberal views are generally labelled as safe. Many interpreters also mentioned that if consumers disclose an LGBTQ identity first, then the interpreters are much more likely to disclose in return. This is not only because the consumer is now recognized as a safe person, but to potentially build greater trust and rapport as someone who is also “family.”

Alternatively, some interpreters have also learned how to identify those they consider *not* safe. One survey participant noted that he would not disclose, for example, to a deaf consumer wearing a MAGA (Make America Great Again<sup>5</sup>) hat. Others mentioned when the content of the call becomes anti-LGBTQ, then they do not feel safe to disclose if given the opportunity.

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<sup>5</sup> “Make America Great Again” is President Donald Trump’s slogan.

Feelings of safety can also be impacted by what is happening on a broader scale, outside the video relay service environment. For instance, when asked about potential impacts on the decision to disclose, Jane said:

I also think it depends on the world environment and the political climate. And that kind of thing depends on who is the president, what laws are in place, things like that. I mean, like, right now to be honest, stuff is kind of icky (pause) and now compared to maybe in 10 years from now or 20 years from now when we have different laws in place and different mindsets have shifted, people have become more open minded, hopefully, then maybe there would be more willingness to but especially right now I don't feel comfortable.

Sarah also mentioned the idea of political climate and the potential connection between the “general sense at the top of not being accepted” and her own resistance to disclose. This shows that safety is not only impacted by what is felt on a micro level (between the interpreter and consumer), but also on a macro level based on what is happening in society.

### **Non-LGBTQ Privilege.**

In this context, privilege is defined as “an advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups” (“What is Privilege?,” n.d.). For 12% of survey participants who answered “Yes” to the question of whether it was appropriate for video relay interpreters to share an LGBTQ identity (N=137), many referenced a comparison to non-LGBTQ video relay interpreters facing similar circumstances and the privileges afforded to them as the members of the majority group. One example of this is when non-LGBTQ interpreters are asked about a spouse or significant other. A survey participant mentioned, “Straight interpreters are permitted (encouraged!) socially to share



about their opposite sex spouses, which infers they are straight, LGBTQ [interpreters] should have the same social right.” This parallels the research of Williams and Giuffre (2011), which highlights the idea that non-LGBTQ individuals in the workplace can wear wedding rings or display family photos, for example, and it is seen as nothing out of the ordinary.

Another survey participant noted this double standard, “Straight people mention their partners, why can't we? I think the ‘yesterday my boyfriend and I...’ colloquial story opener shouldn't be only appropriate for female-presenting people to say.” This was a sentiment shared by many interpreters. Jane noted a disconnect in the way that non-LGBTQ people are generally inclined to mention a husband or wife with ease (even with strangers or acquaintances) versus her own internal struggles with sharing that same information in similar circumstances.

What I've observed and I don't know if you've observed the same things (pause) “Oh, my husband...” all the time, easy. Or “My wife...” It's super easy and I'm sitting here going “I have agonized over this for 20 minutes whether to tell you I'm married to a woman or not.”

It is important to recognize that non-LGBTQ interpreters must also make decisions about how much of their personal lives they bring into the workplace – this is not purely an LGBTQ issue. However, for LGBTQ interpreters, mentioning a same sex partner or spouse means disclosing a stigmatized identity, so the stakes are a little higher. Many research participants felt that regardless of the stakes, LGBTQ interpreters should be afforded the same opportunities to speak of spouses and families that their non-LGBTQ colleagues have, which is why they believe that disclosing in the video relay service setting is appropriate.

### **LGBTQ Visibility and Authenticity.**

There were additional reasons mentioned by participants who believed that LGBTQ identities should be disclosed to video relay service consumers, which included the goal of challenging heterosexual and cisgender societal norms and increasing the visibility or awareness of the LGBTQ community. When asked about the appropriateness of disclosure in video relay service, Alex explained:

How do you get people who are uncomfortable with XYZ to be okay with XYZ? If you have them meet people that are like that (pause) and then you realize that, you know, they are human beings with a similar interest and they're not all bad or they're not all good.

This suggests that by becoming more visible as an LGBTQ interpreting community in the video relay service setting, consumers can have more exposure and increased awareness of that community. Similarly, a survey participant mentioned:

When I have had a nice conversation with a bigoted person, I enjoy talking about my transgender wife. It is great to see their brains think back on the perfectly "normal" conversation, and how nice and like-minded I seemed, and see their minds open just a little bit more.

This suggests that by being more visible in the video relay service sphere, LGBTQ interpreters can perhaps challenge pre-conceived ideas of what the LGBTQ community is. This also supports Orne's (2011) argument that stigmatized individuals may welcome hostile reactions in order to challenge the views of others.

Alex also noted that by being dishonest about an LGBTQ status, it can perpetuate the heteronormativity that is already so pervasive in society. He reasoned:

It's just that assumption of, like, when I have a female interpreter I'm going to, in my

mind, just pair them up with a male or I'm going to pair them up with this person and if you don't (pause) or I don't break that, I'm supporting it ... we're just perpetuating this heteronormative.

As mentioned earlier, Avery also shared this feeling that a consumer's confusion with something (for instance, a non-binary identity), is not necessarily coming from a place of hostility. As Avery said, "I feel like education is never a bad thing, you know? If someone really has no idea (pause) just letting them know, like, 'Hey, you know (pause) just so you know, I'm non-binary.'"

Crystal noted that while she appreciates those opportunities to educate and likes "seeing that lightbulb," expecting LGBTQ individuals to constantly fill an educational role can be challenging. As she explained, "It's such a big ask to somebody to kind of take on this responsibility of constantly educating those around them about the community."

Another challenge that Alex brought up is the related concept of the burden of representation (Lim, 2006). Regarding disclosure, Alex said, "I don't want to have to represent everybody, you know what I mean? But sometimes unfortunately we, we do." The burden of representation is the concept that the actions, behaviors, or identity of one person is seen as representing the entire community and can occur with members of a minority group. "Compared to many minority groups, homosexuals may have a greater stake in the issue of representation because the tropes for the construction of their sexual identities are not always available or immediately recognizable" (Lim, 2006, p. 45). The pressure of representing an entire community can increase LGBTQ interpreters' resistance to disclose, as expressed by Alex.

For some, however, not disclosing can feel inauthentic. One female survey participant noted that when asked about her "husband" she has conflicting feelings: "I'm uncomfortable when answering these types of questions because I've experienced the fall-out. However, there is

a part of me that feels less authentic when doing so.” This fits with the research of Kaufman and Johnson (2004) who found that humans tend to want congruency among their private and public identities.

There was also a general sentiment shared by many participants who wished the video relay service setting could be a more accepting place where LGBTQ interpreters could be more authentic. Jane wishes people could be more open with regard to who they are. Similarly, Barbie recognizes that identifying as LGBTQ “is a huge part of who we are and ...well, we feel like we can’t just be who we want to be.”

When asked about disclosure in general for LGBTQ interpreters, Barbie pondered what it would be like if more decided to disclose: “I think that it’s something we should do. I think the more of us who do it and we talked about our positive experiences, the more we're going to do it and then it one day it's just not even going to be a thing anymore.”

Disclosure of an LGBTQ identity is a complex, lifelong process with no definitive end (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Each interaction with a new person is an opportunity to disclose or conceal this stigmatized identity. It should also be emphasized here that this section on disclosure is not to suggest that one approach is superior to another. There is no right or wrong way to approach disclosure, and it can be a deeply personal decision – a decision that is only for the LGBTQ individual to make.

### **The Role of the Company**

Although this research investigated the video relay service interpreter experience specifically regarding interactions with consumers, the role of the video relay service company was a topic that came up so frequently it deserved its own section. As Williams and Giuffre (2011) note, “Heteronormativity continues to characterize many if not most workplaces” (p.

552), which can have a negative impact on LGBTQ employees. This section will review the ways interpreters have come to characterize their workplace as either supportive or unsupportive (and even oppressive), which the findings show can impact interpreter experiences with consumers.

### **Support (or Lack of Support) Behind the Scenes.**

Based on the data collected in this study, the level of support that LGBTQ interpreters receive from their company, coworkers, and supervisors can impact their experiences on the phones with consumers. When the workplace is an accepting, non-judgmental environment, interpreters feel they are better able to navigate the unpredictable, sometimes unpleasant experiences with consumers. When the workplace feels unsafe or hostile, LGBTQ people do not feel supported, which can make it harder to navigate the experiences with consumers.

Jane is someone who feels very supported as an LGBTQ employee by her company. As she observed, “I think (pause) for me, if I have support behind the scenes then I don’t necessarily need that support in front of the camera.” For Jane, regardless of whatever adverse things may happen while on the phone, she finds comfort knowing that her colleagues and company support her. Crystal also mentioned having a supportive workplace environment, which includes an overall responsiveness to LGBTQ issues, as well as an assistance program for employees that offers counseling, which she has taken advantage of a few times.

Similarly, Avery expressed that they have felt tremendous support from their company as a non-binary employee. “Everyone is super supportive. Like, my directors now are so amazing.” Avery goes on to say, “I had top surgery<sup>6</sup> [number redacted] years ago and I had to take some time off of work and they were so supportive.” Avery also mentioned a special interest email

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<sup>6</sup> Top surgery in this context refers to breast removal

group set up for LGBTQ interpreters, which was another way their company was able to show support. Overall, Avery was able to feel supported and welcomed which has made experiences on the phones more positive as well.

Charles mentioned the impact of LGBTQ leaders within his company and how that leadership can trickle down. He noted that many LGBTQ have been able to fill positions of leadership, which sets the tone for the company, another example of how companies can be inclusive, supportive, and accepting of their LGBTQ interpreters. These findings support previous studies, which show that cultivating a supportive organizational culture leads to LGBTQ employees reporting more positive experiences (Muhr et al., 2016; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

Unfortunately, not all LGBTQ interpreters have felt supported in their video relay service work environment. Jay, who identifies as non-binary, noted issues with colleagues in their center. Colleagues do not use the correct pronouns and refer to Jay as male, despite Jay being very explicit about their preferred pronouns. Jay even includes their preferred pronouns in an email signature as a reminder to colleagues. Additionally, the company only uses two genders for their employees and Jay is automatically listed in the system as a male. The company also uses Jay's legal name, which is their dead name – in other words, the name a person was given at birth that they no longer use (Duff, 2019). It is automatically assigned as part of Jay's email and serves as a constant reminder that their preferred name is not being honored. These types of oppressive workplace factors can be very invalidating and make work a hostile environment.

Alex, who identifies as gay, was another participant who noted negative experiences in his center. Alex recalled a situation when he approached his supervisor to discuss an upsetting and frustrating experience. The supervisor referred to him as a “diva” and insinuated the

situation was no big deal and he was overreacting. Alex recognized, “If I was another very straight person in the center, she would not have ever used that term so I don't know why she thought it was okay to use that with me.” Alex also noted that working with colleagues who are unsupportive of the LGBTQ community can have a negative impact, especially during situations when they must work together. If Alex has a second interpreter supporting him on a call (known as teaming) and the call content is very sensitive, it is helpful to debrief afterward. When a colleague is not supportive of LGBTQ individuals, Alex asked:

How can I trust you and be vulnerable with you? Because (pause) you've told me straight up that you do not respect, agree with, anything else like that. So how can I come to you even with something that might be considered miniscule to you but it's important to me.

Another example Alex provided was when he married his now husband and his husband took Alex's last name. Colleagues had a really hard time processing and accepting that, even though it is something heterosexual couples do all the time. Again, these types of behaviors can be frustrating and invalidating.

The level of support coming from within the video relay service company can impact the LGBTQ interpreter experience with consumers. A lack of support can make it extra challenging for LGBTQ interpreters to navigate the workplace. Alternatively, working for a supportive company can allow an LGBTQ interpreter to feel better equipped to handle the sometimes unpredictable interactions with consumers.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to fill a gap identified in the current body of research by investigating the experiences of LGBTQ interpreters in the video relay service setting, specifically during interpreter-consumer interactions. By employing a phenomenological framework, LGBTQ interpreters were recruited as the research participants in order to uncover their lived experiences. Data were gathered using a mixed methods approach of anonymous surveys (N=137) and semi-structured interviews (N=8) and analyzed for patterns by applying Goffman's (1963) stigma theory in order to frame the findings.

There were three themes identified stemming from that data. First, the findings suggest that the social construct of gender and the process of gender attribution is very applicable to the LGBTQ experience, especially as it relates to consumer detection of an LGBTQ identity. A second theme emerged about the decisions interpreters face to disclose or conceal an LGBTQ identity and the implications of those decisions. These first two themes – the first referring to those with a detected (or suspected) LGBTQ status and the second referring to those who tend to pass as non-LGBTQ – support the current literature, which proposes people with stigmas that are typically not detected will have different experiences in the workplace than those people with stigmas that are detectable (Clair et al., 2005). The third theme suggests that the role of video relay service companies and the environment they cultivate (either supportive or oppressive) can be very significant for LGBTQ interpreter experiences with consumers.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations identified in this study, which include limitations surrounding the recruitment process along with the overall research process. Recruitment was conducted using two Facebook groups (one that targeted LGBTQ interpreters and one that



targeted video relay service interpreters) and an email blast that was sent to interpreters on an internal LGBTQ listserv from a video relay service company. While this method of recruitment yielded a decent number of participants, the findings of this study would have benefitted from more perspectives. Recruitment could have occurred beyond Facebook and the internal email distribution list in order to reach a wider range of potential participants. For instance, a request for dissemination could have been sent to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf<sup>7</sup> in order to target a larger audience.

Another limitation identified was the strict timeline set for this thesis project, which dictated many of the research decisions and impacted the processes of data collection and analysis. The decision to interview only eight participants, for instance, was largely influenced by the time constraints. As a result, there was a noticeable perspective missing from the interview pool of participants, which was that of interpreters who have had overtly negative or hostile experiences involving consumers. All eight of the interview participants had mostly neutral or positive experiences overall. Participants expressed they had never experienced anything that escalated to harassment committed by consumers, even though that was a theme identified within the survey. This gap in the data may have been mitigated by conducting more than eight interviews, which again, ties back to the limited timeline.

The limited time to complete this project also did not allow for a careful, comprehensive analysis of the data gathered from both the anonymous surveys and semi-structured interviews. Additional time would have made it possible for a more complete analysis of the data and thus, potentially allowed for more themes or patterns to be identified.

## **Recommendations**

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<sup>7</sup> Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is the national membership organization for sign language interpreters in the United States

Based on the findings from the study, there are a few recommendations to suggest. The first recommendation is for LGBTQ interpreters to think critically and thoughtfully about their experiences in the video relay service setting. It is my hope that they consider whether any of these research themes resonate and why. Some interview participants mentioned that before this study, they had never given their identity much consideration as it relates to their work in the video relay service setting. For some, it was the first time they had considered the question, “Why *am* I so inclined to avoid disclosure with consumers?” For others, it was the first time they opened up with anyone about their LGBTQ experience in video relay service, simply because it was the first time anyone had asked. I believe reflecting on these topics is essential. Self-reflection on these topics can be powerful, but reflection with others can be even more potent. If an LGBTQ interpreter feels isolated in their center or community, they should feel empowered to seek out others systems of support. Finding “family” can be incredibly meaningful. I implore LGBTQ interpreters to keep this dialogue going, by whatever means that can happen.

An additional recommendation is that video relay service companies continually strive to create a better workplace culture for their LGBTQ interpreters, which can occur in various ways. For instance, all companies should aim to add a non-binary category for their interpreters, so that those interpreters do not receive calls intended for a male or female based on the FCC-mandated gender preference feature. Interpreters who identify as male or female should also be allowed to be exempt from the gender preference feature if they decide it is not creating a safe environment for them. Companies should honor the name an interpreter chooses to use rather than defaulting to a legal name. Supervisors and upper-management should engage in training on how to better support their LGBTQ interpreters and cultivate a non-judgmental, supportive space. Overall,

companies should make concerted efforts to be more inclusive of their LGBTQ interpreters and create a safe center culture where LGBTQ interpreters feel welcomed as they are.

### **Directions for Future Research**

First and foremost, I believe future research should explore the perspectives of LGBTQ deaf consumers using video relay service. The data collected for this study touched briefly on the experiences of LGBTQ deaf consumers, but even so, they were filtered through an interpreter lens. Thus, further research should be conducted in a similar fashion, but instead focus on deaf LGBTQ consumers.

Another area that would benefit from further research is an investigation into the experiences of non-LGBTQ interpreters in video relay service. Certain findings from this study were not necessarily exclusive to the LGBTQ community – for instance, the pressure on male interpreters to be familiar with traditionally male-related topics, unsolicited comments about interpreter appearance, interpreters not adhering the socially constructed gender roles, interpreters fielding personal questions about one's relationship status, etc. These are important themes worth exploring in communities beyond just LGBTQ. In addition, studying the way non-LGBTQ interpreters handle these experiences can provide something with which to compare the findings from this study.

Finally, I think a deeper, more exploratory study into some of the findings from this study would yield even more meaningful data regarding the experiences of LGBTQ interpreters. For example, further investigation into the impact of consumer harassment based on interpreter appearance or the implications of disclosing versus not disclosing an LGBTQ identity. A more in-depth ethnographic approach to studying these topics could provide a better understanding of the LGBTQ experience in the video relay service setting.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Recruitment Facebook Post

Group 1: The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Video Interpreter Member Section: RID VIMS

Group 2: RID special interest group for LGBTQ interpreters: BLeGIT\*

\*\*\*\*



**Attention!**

**Are you an LGBTQ  
interpreter who works  
(or has worked)  
in the VRS setting?**

**I need you!**

This research has been approved by St. Catherine University's Institutional Review Board—Chair: Dr. John Schmitt, (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

(Accompanying message below)

Hello Interpreters!

My name is Elizabeth (Liz) Donovan and I am a sign language interpreter in Portland, Oregon. I am also a graduate student in the Master of Art in Interpreting Studies and Communication Equity (MAISCE) program at St. Catherine University. I am conducting my thesis research on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) sign language interpreters working in the video relay service setting and I am requesting your participation in a short survey. As an LGBTQ interpreter who has worked in video relay service for eight years, I realize that I have a unique perspective which has been the inspiration for this research. Through this survey, I will be collecting information from fellow LGBTQ interpreters about their experiences in video relay service, more specifically their experiences with consumers during non-interpreting interactions.

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. This study has been approved by The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. Catherine University (#1175). Our MAISCE Program Director is Dr. Erica Alley (elalley@stkate.edu). If you have any questions or comments about this study, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at eadonovan324@stkate.edu.

I will collect responses until February 15, 2019 and after that date, the survey will be closed. If you agree to participate, simply click on this to begin the survey: [INSERT LINK HERE]. Thank you in advance for your support! Your participation will be so valuable.

Sincerely,

Liz Donovan, NIC, Ed:K-12

## Appendix B

### Survey Participation Reminder Facebook Post

*\* used one week before the survey closed*

#### Facebook Posts

Group 1: The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Video Interpreter Member Section: RID VIMS

Group 2: RID special interest group for LGBTQ interpreters: BLeGIT\*

\*\*\*\*\*



Hello Interpreters,

The LGBTQ VRS survey closes on February 15, 2019, which means there is only a week left! If you haven't had a chance to fill it out, please do so! The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and cannot be traced back to you.

Here is some additional information about my study:

My name is Elizabeth (Liz) Donovan and I am an interpreter in Portland, OR. I am also a graduate student in the Master of Art in Interpreting Studies and Communication Equity (MAISCE) program at St. Catherine University. I am conducting my thesis research on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) sign language interpreters working in the VRS setting and I am requesting your participation in a short survey. As an LGBTQ interpreter who has worked in video relay service for eight years, I realize that I have a unique perspective which has been the inspiration for this research. Through this survey, I will be collecting information from fellow LGBTQ interpreters about their experiences in video

relay service, more specifically their experiences with consumers during non-interpreting interactions.

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. This study has been approved by The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. Catherine University (#1175). Our MAISCE Program Director is Dr. Erica Alley (elalley@stkate.edu). If you have any questions or comments about this study, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at eadonovan324@stkate.edu.

I will collect responses until February 15, 2019 and after that date, the survey will be closed. If you agree to participate, simply click on this to begin the survey: [INSERT LINK HERE]. Thank you in advance for your support! Your participation will be so valuable.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Liz Donovan, NIC, Ed:K-12

## Appendix C

### Survey Recruitment Email

To: Members of the LGBTQ Special Interest Group

\*\*\*\*

Hello [group name redacted] Members!

My name is Elizabeth (Liz) Donovan and I currently work as a Video Interpreter in the Portland, Oregon Center. I am also a graduate student in the Master of Art in Interpreting Studies and Communication Equity (MAISCE) program at St. Catherine University. I am conducting my thesis research on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) sign language interpreters working in the video relay service setting and I am requesting your participation in a short survey. As an LGBTQ interpreter who has worked in video relay service for eight years, I realize that I have a unique perspective which has been the inspiration for this research. Through this survey, I will be collecting information from fellow LGBTQ interpreters about their experiences in video relay service, more specifically their experiences with consumers during non-interpreting interactions.

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. This study has been approved by The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. Catherine University (#1175). Our MAISCE Program Director is Dr. Erica Alley (elalley@stkate.edu) and is the faculty advisor for this study. If you have any questions or comments about this study, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at eadonovan324@stkate.edu. ***As a courtesy to the other members, please do not "Reply All" to this thread, but again feel free to email me any time.***

I will collect responses until February 15, 2019 and after that date, the survey will be closed. If you agree to participate, simply click on this to begin the survey: [INSERT SURVEY LINK]. Thank you in advance for your support! Your participation will be valuable to this study.

Sincerely,

Liz Donovan, NIC, Ed:K-12

## Appendix D

### Survey Questions

Q1 Do you currently or have you previously worked in the VRS setting?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = No*

---

Q2 How old are you?

- Under 18 years (1)
- 18-25 years (2)
- 26-35 years (3)
- 36-45 years (4)
- 46-55 years (5)
- 56+ years (6)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Q2 = Under 18 years*

---

Q3 What is your gender identity?

- Female (1)
- Male (2)
- Transgender female (3)
- Transgender male (4)
- Genderqueer (5)
- Non-binary (6)
- Prefer not to answer (7)
- Other (8)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q3 = Other*

Q3, part 2 Other: Please specify your gender identity.

---

---

Page Break



Q4 How do you identify?

- Gay (1)
- Lesbian (2)
- Bisexual (3)
- Transgender (4)
- Queer (5)
- Intersex (6)
- Asexual (7)
- Pansexual (8)
- Prefer not to answer (9)
- Other (10)

---

*Display This Question:*  
*If Q4 = Other*

Q4, part 2 Other: Please specify how you identify.

---

---

Page Break

Q5 Please specify your ethnicity:

- White (1)
- Hispanic or Latino (2)
- Black or African American (3)
- Native American or American Indian (4)
- Asian or Pacific Islander (5)
- Prefer not to answer (6)
- Other (7)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q5 = Other*

Q4, part 2 Other: Please specify your ethnicity.

---

---

Page Break

Q6 In which US region do you live?

- New England: CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT (1)
- Mid-Atlantic: NJ, NY, PA (2)
- East North Central: IN, IL, MI, OH, WI (3)
- West North Central: IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD (4)
- South Atlantic: DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, PR (5)
- East South Central: AL, KY, MS, TN (6)
- West South Central: AR, LA, OK, TX (7)
- Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, NV, WY (8)
- Pacific: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA (9)

Q7 Which of the following interpreting certifications do you have? Check all that apply.

- NIC (1)
- CI/CT (one or both) (2)
- NAD (3)
- Ed:K-12 (4)
- SC:L (5)
- BEI (6)
- None of the above (7)
- Other (8)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q7 = Other*

Q7, part 2 Other: What certification do you hold that wasn't listed?

---

---

Page Break

Q8 What is your highest level of education?

- High school diploma or GED (1)
  - Bachelor's degree (2)
  - Master's degree (3)
  - Doctoral or professional degree (4)
- 

Q9 Are you a Deaf Parented Interpreter

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
- 

Q10 Which VRS companies have you worked for? Check all that apply. *\*Note: This question has only been included to ensure that there are responses represented across multiple companies. The responses will not be formally analyzed or shared with others, and no company names will appear in the final report.*

- Sorenson Communications (1)
  - ZVRS/Purple (2)
  - Convo (3)
  - Global VRS (4)
  - Other (5)
-

*Display This Question:*

*If Q10 = Other*

Q10, part 2 Other: Which VRS company have you worked for that wasn't listed?

---

---

Page Break

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Q11 How many years of experience do you have in the VRS setting? Please use a numeric value.

---

Q12 On average, how many hours do you work (or did you work if you don't currently) in your VRS center per week?

- 0-5 hours (1)
- 6-10 hours (2)
- 11-15 hours (3)
- 16-20 hours (4)
- 21-25 hours (5)
- 26-30 hours (6)
- 31+ hours (7)

Q13 Do you believe you have a unique experience as an LGBTQ interpreter in the VRS setting compared to interpreters who don't identify as LGBTQ?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)

---

Page Break

**End of Block: Block 1**

---

**Start of Block: Block 2**

**The remaining questions refer to your experiences on the phones interacting with the VRS consumers, either hearing or deaf/hard-of-hearing. This means when you are not interpreting—meaning before the call occurs, during the call (e.g., when it is placed on hold or anytime a consumer is engaging directly with you, the interpreter, rather than the other consumer), or after the call has ended.**

---

Q14 Select the sentence that best describes your interaction with VRS consumers. If you have worked for multiple VRS companies, please use the most recent company you have worked for.

- I feel **very comfortable** sharing personal details. (1)
  - I feel **very comfortable** sharing personal details, but technically my company policy doesn't allow me to share. (2)
  - I feel **somewhat comfortable** sharing personal details. (3)
  - I feel **somewhat comfortable** sharing personal details, but technically my company policy doesn't allow me to share. (4)
  - I **don't feel comfortable** sharing personal details and try to avoid it whenever possible. (5)
  - I **don't feel comfortable** sharing personal details and try to avoid it whenever possible, but my company policy doesn't allow me to share anyway. (6)
  - I **refuse** to share any personal details. (7)
  - I **refuse** to share any personal details and my company policy doesn't allow me to share anyway. (8)
- 

Page Break

---



Q15 Do you think it's appropriate for a VRS interpreter to share their LGBTQ identity with VRS consumers?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- It depends (3)

---

Q15, part 2 Please explain your answer.

---

Page Break

Q16 If directly asked, do you feel comfortable sharing your relationship status?

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
  - Sometimes (3)
  - My company policy doesn't allow me to share (4)
- 

Q17 Do you currently have a spouse, partner, or significant other?

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If Q17 = Yes*

Q18 If a VRS consumer asks if you have a spouse, partner, or significant other but they assume the wrong gender, how do you respond? An example would be if a VRS consumer asked a female interpreter about her husband when, in reality, she had a wife or female partner.

- Answer yes, but not correct their gender assumption (1)
  - Answer yes and correct them with the appropriate gender (2)
  - Lie and say no (3)
  - Say that you prefer not to answer (4)
  - Tell them that my company policy doesn't allow me to say (5)
  - This has never come up (6)
-

*Display This Question:*

*If Q18 = Tell them that my company policy doesn't allow me to say*

Q19 Is this, in fact, the policy?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)

---

Page Break

Q20 Have you ever been misgendered--the VRS consumer assumes you are a different gender than how you identify?

- Yes, often (1)
  - Yes, but not often (2)
  - Yes, but very rarely (3)
  - No, never (4)
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If Q20 != No, never*

Q21 Do you correct their misunderstanding?

- Yes, every time (1)
  - Yes, sometimes (2)
  - No, never (3)
- 

Page Break

---

Q22 Has a deaf VRS consumer ever made negative comments about your appearance that you believe were tied to your LGBTQ identity?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Q22, part 2 Please include any additional comments about your selection.

---

---

Page Break

---

Q23 Has a VRS consumer ever asked if you were part of the LGBTQ community?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Q24 Have you ever felt that you were asked to transfer interpreters because the VRS consumer assumed you are a member of the LGBTQ community?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Q25 Have you ever disclosed your LGBTQ identity to a VRS consumer and then been asked to transfer to another interpreter?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Page Break

---

Q26 Have you ever experienced any of the following from VRS consumers during non-interpreting interactions? -Questions about whether you are male or female; comments towards you about traditional gender norms; someone commenting, "That's so gay!"; the use of derogatory LGBTQ insults (even if not directed at you personally); intrusive questions about your LGBTQ personal life; being told, "You don't look LGBTQ!" or "But, you're so pretty!" after disclosing your LGBTQ identity; questioning or doubting of your LGBTQ identity?; etc.

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Q26, part 2 Please include any additional comments about your selection.

---

Page Break

Q27 Have you ever been called derogatory names by a VRS consumer because of your LGBTQ identity?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Q28 Have you ever been harassed by a VRS consumer because of your LGBTQ identity?

Yes (1)

No (2)

---

Page Break

---



Q29 You have almost reached the end of the survey. Please use this opportunity to add anything else about your experience as an LGBTQ interpreter working in the VRS setting.

---

---

Page Break

---

Q30 Are you willing to participate in an interview in the future using online video conferencing technology? If so, please click "Yes" below and you will be redirected to a new link where you will enter your email address to be contacted. *\*Note: Your email address will not be linked to the responses from this survey so your responses will still remain anonymous.*

Yes (1)

No (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Q30 = No*

---

Q30, part 2 The following link will allow you to enter your information to be contacted about an interview. This link will open a new window.

Click [\\*here\\*](#) if you would be willing to participate in an interview.

*After you click the link, please don't forget to return to the survey on the current page and click to the end so that your responses will be captured. Thank you!*

**End of Block: Block 2**

---

Q1 How do you identify?

- Gay (1)
- Lesbian (2)
- Bisexual (3)
- Transgender (4)
- Queer (5)
- Intersex (6)
- Asexual (7)
- Pansexual (8)
- Other (9)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Q1 = Other*

Q2 Other: Please specify how you identify.

---

---

Page Break



Q3 Please enter your email address here:

---

**End of Block: Default Question Block**

---

## Appendix E

### Survey Consent

#### *Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Sign Language Interpreters Working in the Video Relay Service Setting*

Thank you so much for your interest in this survey. My name is Elizabeth (Liz) Donovan and I am the researcher conducting this study. As an LGBTQ interpreter working in video relay service I began to consider what a unique position I am in. This has inspired me to learn more about the experiences from the wider LGBTQ community also working in this setting. That's where you come in! The survey will open with a few demographic questions and lead into questions that ask about your experience working in video relay service—more specifically about your interactions with consumers during non-interpreting interactions. It should take between 10-15 minutes to complete.

Your participation is completely voluntary and there is no compensation available for completion of the survey. Your responses will be completely anonymous. The questions included in the survey may cover some sensitive and personal information that could be triggering for some who have had negative experiences in video relay service due to their LGBTQ status. If you decide to stop at any time you may do so. Exiting the survey before it is completed will be considered a withdrawal and all previous responses will be scrapped. If you come across questions you do not wish to answer, you may skip them and as long as you click to the end of the survey those responses will be captured. It is important to note that the survey will ask which video relay service companies you have worked for, however, these responses will not be formally analyzed for the research and specific company names will not be used or shared with others. This question has only been included to ensure that there is representation across multiple companies.

If you have any questions about this survey or the research please contact me, Elizabeth A. Donovan (eadonovan324@stkate.edu) or our Program Director, Dr. Erica Alley (elalley@stkate.edu). This research has been approved by St. Catherine University's Institutional Review Board—Chair: Dr. John Schmitt, (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu. By responding to questions in this survey you are giving your consent for your anonymous responses to be used for future research and publications.

Clicking the button below will start the survey and indicate your consent to participate. Thank you!

## Appendix F

### Interview Consent

Study Title: *Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Sign Language Interpreters Working in the Video Relay Service Setting*

Researcher(s): Elizabeth A. Donovan, NIC, Ed: K-12

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is called *Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Sign Language Interpreters Working in the Video Relay Service Setting*. The study is being done by Elizabeth A. Donovan, a Master's student at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. She is a student in the Masters in Interpreting Studies and Communication Equity (MAISCE) program.

The purpose of this study is to explore the unique experiences of LGBTQ interpreters in video relay service. This study is important because there has been no research conducted about this particular group of interpreters who currently work (or have previously worked) in the video relay service setting and the results of this study could benefit many communities.

Approximately 6-8 people are expected to participate in the interview component of this research. The questions will ask about your experience working in this setting as someone who identifies as LGBTQ, more specifically about experiences with consumers during non-interpreting interactions. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

#### **Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You are being asked to participate in this portion of the study because you completed the survey for this research project and expressed willingness to be interviewed. You have also self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ community and as an interpreter with experience in the video relay service setting.

#### **If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Schedule a time and date to meet with the researcher through Zoom, video conferencing technology.
- Sign consent forms to participate in the interview and have the session recorded.
- Have a conversation/interview that lasts approximately one hour with the researcher.

In total, this study will take approximately one hour over one session.

#### **What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not give your verbal consent. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and we will end the interview. You may withdraw at any time until the interview is complete, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible. Your decision of whether or not to participate

will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There is some risk to this study because it deals with topics that could potentially be sensitive or triggering for some. In other words, the questions could ask about negative past experiences. The topics involve personal information about your LGBTQ identity and your experiences in the video relay service setting (positive and negative), which could elicit bad or even painful memories. If you seem to be uncomfortable with any of the questions while you are providing your responses I will ask if you are okay, offer breaks, suggest moving on to another question, and/or remind you that you can withdrawal at any time. This study is also considered to have some risk because the information that you provided could be associated with you, although the researcher has implemented strategies to mitigate that risk.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

There is no direct benefit to the participants. This research could help people understand the unique experiences of a marginalized group, which could positively impact several different communities—video relay service interpreters (LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ), providers and even consumers. This will be the first research of its kind so you may benefit from knowing that you are contributing in that way.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

There is no compensation for participation.

**What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?**

The information that you provide in this study will be captured through our recorded interview, which only I will have access to. I will conduct the interviews in my private office with the door closed. I will also ask that subjects do the same and participate in a private space. It is recommended that you use a personal computer as opposed to a company computer. The interview will be analyzed with other interviews of LGBTQ interpreters in the VRS setting and used as data for the research project. I will be personally transcribing the video recordings. You will be able to choose a pseudonym which will be used in identifying your data so that your name can be removed. I will keep the research results on my personal laptop that is password protected. Only I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by June 1, 2019. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications.

**Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?**

If during the course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

**How can I get more information?**

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at eadonovan324@stkate.edu. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Dr. Erica Alley at elalley@stkate.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be video recorded and have my data be used in future publications.

My signature indicates that I have read this information and my questions have been answered. I also know that even after signing this form, I may withdraw from the study by informing the researcher.

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Signature of Participant Date

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Signature of Researcher Date

## Appendix G

### Interview Questions

- 1) How do you identify? What are your preferred pronouns?
- 2) Tell me a little bit about your time working in the VRS setting? Do you currently work in the VRS setting currently? How long? If not, when did you work in the VRS setting? What VRS company do you work for/did you work for?
- 3) Can you tell me about how you generally interact with VRS consumers when you are not interpreting? For instance, sharing personal details about yourself. Do you approach these interactions the same with all consumers? If not, what impacts your approach and decision-making?
- 4) Can you tell me how you think these interactions that occur when you're not interpreting affect your interpreting during the call?
- 5) What are your thoughts on video interpreters sharing their LGBTQ identity with VRS consumers?
- 6) Can you tell me about a situation when a caller asked you about your LGBTQ identity or a time when your appearance led to a discussion about your LGBTQ identity.
- 7) Can you tell me about a situation when you believe your LGBTQ identity had a positive impact on your interaction with either caller.
- 8) Can you tell me about a situation when you believe your LGBTQ identity had a negative impact on your interaction with either caller.
- 9) Have you ever been misgendered? In other words, the VRS consumer assumes you are a different gender than how you identify. Tell me more about these experiences. How do you react/respond when this happens? How does this affect the call?
- 10) Can you tell me about a situation when you felt offended as an LGBTQ individual by something a VRS consumer said or did?
- 11) Can you tell me about a time when you have been called derogatory names or harassed by a VRS consumer because of your LGBTQ identity?
- 12) Any other comments about your experiences in VRS?

#### ***Potential follow-up comments/questions:***

1. Please tell me more about that.
2. Why do you think that is?
3. How does that make you feel?



4. Please share specific examples.

## Appendix H

### Interview Script

*This will be read aloud to each participant before the interview begins.*

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To ensure that all of the participants receive the exact same information, I need to read from this script, okay?

First, thank you so much for your participation in this research study the experiences of LGBTQ VRS interpreters. Before we begin I want to ask if you have any questions about the Interview Consent Form that you recently signed.

Your participation in this interview should take less than one hour. I'll be asking you some questions about your experiences as a VRS interpreter. If you feel you need a break at any time or you wish to withdrawal from the interview, please let me know. Ready to begin?

Great! Let's begin.