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African American Interpreters in the Video Relay Service Setting

By

Taiwo Olopade

A thesis submitted to Western Oregon University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:  
Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies  
April 2017



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**WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE GRADUATE FACULTY OF  
WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY HAVE EXAMINED THE ENCLOSED**

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- Thesis
- Field Study
- Professional Project

Titled: African American Interpreters in the Video Relay Service setting

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Graduate Student: Taiwo Olopade

Candidate for the degree of: Master of Arts, Interpreting Studies

*and hereby certify that in our opinion it is worthy of acceptance as partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of this master's degree.*

**Committee Chair:**

Signatures Redacted for Privacy

Name: Dr. Elisa Maroney

Date: April 12, 2017

**Committee Members:**

Name: Amanda Smith

Date: April 12, 2017

Name: Erica West-Oyedele

Date: April 12, 2017

---

**Director of Graduate Programs:**

Name: Dr. Linda Stonecipher

Date: 6-7-17

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April 2017

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## ABSTRACT

### African American Interpreters in the Video Relay Setting

By

Taiwo Olopade  
Masters of Arts in Interpreting Studies  
Western Oregon University  
April 2017

This study focuses on African American Sign Language video interpreters (VIs) working in the video relay service (VRS) setting in the United States. No study has been carried out to date that explores the experiences African Americans have when interpreting in VRS settings, where there is little or no autonomy due to policies governing the VRS companies by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). Coupled with the rules and regulations from VRS companies and the FCC, African American interpreters also experience racism and racial microaggressions from VRS users and from their colleagues. This study was carried out using qualitative methods. Three African American female VIs were interviewed about their experiences working in the VRS setting. Their stories show that racism and racial microaggressions are a part of their working landscape. Their narratives also disclosed that there is a lack of diversity in the workplace and in the interpreting profession as a whole. The African American VIs interviewed reported that their interpreting programs failed to discuss issues of multiculturalism in the field, and their access to mentors from similar cultural backgrounds was limited. These participants suggested that courses in cultural awareness be offered in interpreter

education programs and to their colleagues at work. Likewise, they believed African Americans could benefit from training that helps them cope with the systems of racism and racial microaggressions they face in the workplace.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

In 2010, two years after graduating from my interpreter training program (ITP), I decided to work in the video relay service (VRS) setting. During my time in the ITP, the instructors advised interpreting students to avoid working in the VRS setting immediately after graduating from the program. We were advised to wait at least five years to gain experience working in other interpreting settings, such as K-12 educational settings. This advice created fear in me as well as in other interpreting students in my cohort.

The reason I decided to go into VRS without waiting for the five years was two-fold. First, as a recent graduate of an ITP, I needed mentorship training. On my own, I was not successful in finding a mentor to support my need for skilled-based mentoring, and—more importantly—one who understood my cultural background. I hoped I could be successful in the VRS company I applied to because they provided a mentorship program that I believed would cater to my needs. The second reason was that I needed to build up my skills to take the National Interpreter Certification (NIC) exam. A former classmate of mine encouraged me to apply and convinced me that this was the best route to take.

On starting my work in the VRS setting, I quickly became aware of how stressful the work was (Brunson, 2011; Bower, 2015; Taylor, 2005), and I was reminded of the advice given by my faculty shortly before we graduated. Not only is working in VRS linguistically and emotionally challenging, it is technologically challenging as well. Working in VRS exposed me

to a variety of signers, varied interpreting settings, and exposure to unfavorable situations having to do with racism and racial microaggressions in the course of a day's work.

On the linguistics aspect, video interpreters (VIs) process calls for a multitude of Deaf users with varied communication styles ranging from American Sign Language to oral interpreting. Some styles are challenging for VIs to navigate, since the deaf caller may not be a fluent signer or have a disability that prevents them from articulating their signs clearly, or the interpreter may struggle because their interpreting skills are not advanced enough to work in VRS. VIs need to have sufficient skills to process signs produced by a variety of deaf callers. When they do not, they may struggle to keep up, resulting in stress from the challenge of making meaning from the conversations that occur between the Deaf and Hearing consumers.

VIs struggling to keep up with call content often experience stress from the pressure of having to keep up with the message (Zenizo, 2013). The stress can lead to burnout if not kept in check. The content of the message being interpreted could also cause stress for the interpreter and eventually lead to vicarious trauma and burnout (Zenizo, 2013).

Since 2005, the field of VRS has taken off exponentially requiring VRS companies to hire in a frenzy (Gretchen & Samar, 2015). VRS companies try to meet this demand by hiring as many interpreters as possible, which inadvertently reduces the quality of interpreters recruited. Some interpreters struggle with processing calls because they have not had enough training.

In my experience as a VI, it is hard enough to focus on interpreting. Adding technology into the mix adds another level of complication. Interpreting between two languages, English and American Sign Language (ASL), requires fluency and competence in both languages. In VRS, there is the traditional phone to communicate with the hearing people, the video phone (VP) with high speed internet to communicate with the deaf users, a webcam, and the computer

that utilizes a specialized software to connect both the hearing caller and the deaf caller. The VI is also equipped with a headset/microphone to speak to and hear from the hearing caller. For a novice who is not technology savvy, this is quite challenging to maneuver, in addition to interpreting the call content, which in itself is very complicated. Interpreters—especially novice VIs—have to worry about the right buttons to push on the equipment as they are simultaneously interpreting for the deaf callers. A person must learn how to multitask to survive in VRS. Eventually with time, VIs master the technology aspect of interpreting in VRS and have one less demand to worry about.

In general, the work of a sign language interpreter can be very taxing on the body and even more taxing depending on the setting the interpreter works in. For example, K-12 interpreters work long hours and sometimes do not have a team to share the workload. Dean, Pollard, and Samar (2010) compared the conditions of interpreters working in three settings: VRS, K-12, and staff/community settings. They came to the conclusion that all three settings were fraught with physical exertion. Gretchen and Samar (2015) cited Fischer, Marshall, and Woodstock (2012) in their study saying one in every four sign language interpreters has experienced some form of musculoskeletal pain that has impeded their work abilities. In addition to the linguistic and technology challenges VIs face, VIs also experience emotional challenges that include having to process calls that may cause VIs to experience emotional roller coasters. VIs experience a wide range of emotions, which could range from highly elated conversations to depressive/traumatic conversations (Wessling & Shaw, 2014).

After a couple of months of working in the VRS setting, the stress coming from both the linguistic and technology arena dissipated, but I was faced with a new emotional stress factor. I was experiencing racism and racial microaggressions from deaf consumers as I attempted to

process their calls. Racial microaggressions and racism came in the form of repeated hang-ups from the deaf callers, inappropriate questions about my physical features, or inappropriate comments about me as the VI, questioning my credentials before I had the opportunity to interpret the call, and so on.

With this fear of being abused by VRS consumers, I started to ponder on the possibility of this phenomenon happening to other Video Interpreters (VIs) of color. I met with a few African American interpreters who work in VRS companies from different parts of the United States, and I asked them if they had experienced racial microaggressions from VRS consumers. Everyone I spoke to indicated that they had experienced some form of racial discrimination. At the same time, I came across African American VIs who no longer worked in this setting because they could not cope with working in that type of inimical environment. They also reported experiencing racism and racial microaggressions from their colleagues at work. In one personal communication with an African American Sign Language interpreter, she reported that she left the VRS setting because of her experience with racial microaggressions. She stated that “I could not take the abuse any longer, I had to quit.”

As a video interpreter, I also experienced microaggressions from my co-workers. At that time, I was the only African American working at the center, which left me helpless to the point that I started doubting whether I was really experiencing racial microaggressions at all. When I tried to report the incidents, I did not get any feedback from management about the incident reported. This made me doubt myself even more. This, in itself, was racially microaggressive.

Race has always been a hot topic of discussion in our society. Mastro (2015) stated that “Race and ethnic relations in society continue to be among the most challenging and controversial issues of the 21st century” (p. 1). The more people claim to be impartial or neutral,



the more their behavior counteracts those statements. President Bill Clinton's Race Advisory Board came to several conclusions about race in the United States: (a) racism is among the most disruptive forces in the United States, (b) racial traditions of the past continue to plague current policies and practices that foster inequality between minority and majority groups, and (c) racial inequalities are deeply entrenched in our society, so much so that it is virtually invisible to the White majority (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). People of color, especially African Americans, experience racism almost on a daily basis. In the media, African Americans are rarely portrayed in a positive light (cultural racism), and, unfortunately, this perpetuates the problem of stereotyping (Lewis-Cole & Constantine, 2006).

Racial microaggressions are a form of covert racism. According to Sue et al. (2007), racial microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color" (p. 1). Racism comes in various forms but can be categorized into two major groups: overt/blatant and covert/aversive racism. African Americans experience racism at their places of work, most often in the covert/aversive form of racial microaggressions (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Video relay service (VRS) is a fairly new industry that provides communication between deaf callers and hearing callers. Sign language interpreters in the VRS setting are exposed to a variety of call contexts that can be emotionally extreme, either positive or negative. Being exposed to this emotionally charged content can affect the wellbeing of VIs physically, emotionally, and mentally. According to a study by Schwenke et al. (2014), when excessive job demands are paired with inadequate coping strategies, burnout is bound to occur. This burnout

contributes to the national shortage of interpreters as a whole and of African American interpreters, specifically (Schwenke et al., 2014). I would argue that this is because African American VIs who work in the VRS setting often have to deal with the demands of the job and the impacts of racial microaggressions and racism from VRS users and their colleagues. Some African American VIs have quit working in this setting (Cancel, personal communication, October 9, 2010), and others are struggling to keep going in the midst of racism and racial microaggressions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

African American VIs working in VRS settings cannot avoid encountering racism or racial microaggressions. They are currently left powerless when it comes to what they can do to mitigate this problem while on the job because of the policies set by the VRS companies for whom they work and because of the rules and regulations imposed by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) that regulate the video relay service industry. Some VRS companies have policies in place to take note of deaf callers who exhibit any form of indecency, abuse, or overt racial discrimination toward VIs in the workplace, but to date, no policies exist to deal with the covert racism, which is sometimes difficult to prove. Reporting incidences of racism to the VRS call center manager still does not deal with the impact already made on the VIs. Once a VI encounters a racial microaggression, the harm has already been done. The purpose of this project is to shed light on the experiences African American sign language interpreters face while working in VRS settings. Their stories will give other cultural groups a glimpse into the lives of the participants in the study and what they go through on the job.

## **Theoretical Bases and Organization**

The underlying framework for this project is based on critical race theory (CRT). CRT suggests that racism is permanent in all areas of our society, especially in the educational setting. Its construct is used as a tool to examine structural issues and their impact on a larger scale such as policy decisions (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In this paper, CRT is used to explore how encounters with racial microaggressions and racism impact African American VIs in the workplace on an individual basis. Solorzano (1998) stated five tenets of CRT; I draw the basis of my research on one tenet: the experiential knowledge of African American video interpreters working in the VRS setting. Knowing how racism and racial microaggressions impact African American VIs can provide insight on how to develop strategies to cope with them and explore how stakeholders involved can come up with viable solutions to lessen the negative impact on African American VIs. To gain this insight, this study uses qualitative research methods. Since little or no research has been carried out on this subject, my research study included surveys and interviews to gather data on how African American VIs who have worked or are still working in the VRS settings handle racism and racial microaggressions. I also researched other professional fields to see how racial microaggressions have been addressed in their industries.

## **Definition of Terms**

The following terms will be used throughout this paper.

*Video relay service (VRS)*: According to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), Video Relay Service (VRS) is a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that allows persons with hearing disabilities who use American Signed Language (ASL) to communicate with voice telephone users through the use of video equipment, instead of using typed text.

Video equipment connects the VRS user with a TRS operator—called a “communications assistant” (CA)—so that the VRS user and the CA can see and communicate with each other in signed conversation.

*Video interpreter:* A VI is a sign language interpreter who works in the VRS setting interpreting phone conversations between the deaf consumer and the hearing consumer. Another name for video interpreter (VI) is communication assistant (CA).

*Racial microaggressions:* “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

*Hearing consumer:* This is an individual who is not deaf and who can communicate through speech and sound.

*African American:* Refers to people residing in the United States of America, from African descent, who identify themselves as Black, African, or African American.

*Deaf consumer:* This is an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing and uses interpreting services to communicate with the majority hearing population. The capitalization of the term *Deaf* refers to a group sharing the same language (ASL) and culture. The term *deaf* refers to the audiological status of an individual.

*Sign language interpreter:* This is an interpreter whose working languages include two languages where one is a signed language. For the purpose of this study, the languages are English and American Signed Language (ASL).

*Team/Team interpreting:* This is when two interpreters work together to support each other, using their strengths to create a fluid interpretation (Russell, 2011).

*Racism:* Racism is any attitude, action, or institutional structure or any social policy that subordinates persons or groups because of their color. It is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination, because it involves the power to carry out systematic discriminatory practices in a broad and continuing manner.

*People of Color:* This is a group of people belonging to a minority group or non-dominant group, including African Americans/Blacks, Asian, Latino, and others.

*Racial macroaggression:* “the set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination” (Huber & Solorzano, 2014, p. 303).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **History of the VRS Setting**

Sign language interpreting is a fairly new profession in the United States. Prior to the 1960s, sign language interpreting services were seen as a community service devoid of monetary compensation (Ball, 2013; Frishberg, 1986). It was not until the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by the federal government that the field of sign language interpreting became recognized as a legitimate profession. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (also known as the “Rehab Act”) “prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs run by federal agencies; programs that receive federal financial assistance; in federal employment; and in the employment practices of federal contractors” ([https:// www.ada.gov](https://www.ada.gov)). As a result, American Sign Language interpreters became visible and have now been labeled as professionals, no longer considered volunteers.

Video relay service (VRS) is in its infancy at a little over a decade old. VRS came into being as a result of a mandate in the ADA to facilitate the provision of equal access to individuals with disabilities over the telephone network. VRS is a mode of communication used by deaf, hard-of-hearing, and speech-impaired individuals to communicate with hearing people in real time using videophones and similar technologies through a video interpreter. VRS, even though started in 1997 in Sweden, only became nationally developed in the United States in the beginning of the 2000s. VRS companies are regulated by the FCC. Among its many regulations are the governing of the standards the VRS companies and their VIs must follow when handling calls to ensure they are completed ethically and appropriately.

According to Holcombe (2014), some students in ITPs report being advised by faculty to look for other avenues to work and not consider work in the VRS setting, which is what I experienced while I was in the ITP. Rainey (2013) also stated that recent graduates of ITPs do not enter the field of VRS until they have acquired some years of experience in other settings. What warrants this advice?

Rainey (2013) shed more light on why interpreting students are advised to avoid working in VRS for their first few years after graduation. First, VRS is a fairly new industry, and not much about it is taught in ITPs. In the absence of curriculum for VRS training, how is an interpreting student to be trained prior to working in VRS? Second, most VRS companies require interpreters to be certified before they can be hired. Most students do not get certification upon graduation but rather gather some work experience before taking the certification test. This leads to the third reason why recent graduates of ITPs are not encouraged to work in VRS as their first point of call: VRS requires “real world” experience that recent graduates often lack (Oldfield, 2009, as cited by Rainey, 2013).

As with any new profession, research in the field of sign language interpreting is minuscule. To date, there has been no study carried out to understand the unique experiences African American/ Black VIs have working in the VRS setting. Due to the scarcity of literature specific to African American VIs, I will be reviewing literature from other disciplines rich in related information such as customer service, racism, and racial microaggressions to support my research.

## **Burnout**

The deaf population is comprised of individuals from a myriad of different backgrounds. Within this population are members of the Deaf community who consider themselves part of a

linguistic and cultural minority group. These are individuals who are deaf and communicate using ASL. Because their primary language is not the language of the majority, they have shared cultural experiences based on the oppression they face on a regular basis from the majority group who can hear. Frequently, sign language interpreters are the medium through which Deaf and hearing people communicate with one another. Sign language interpreters see the ins and outs of some of the most significant deaf/hearing interactions, witnessing the highs and lows of the lives of many Deaf consumers. These highs and lows may impact the interpreter either positively or negatively (Wessling & Shaw, 2014).

Sign language interpreters work in different settings such as education (K-12), medical, legal, community, and video relay service, to name a few. The focus for this literature review is on American Sign Language interpreters working in the video relay service (VRS) setting. Working in the VRS setting as a sign language interpreter is very different from interpreting in the community, K-12 settings, or legal settings. VRS is a customer service industry, and the goal of video interpreters (VIs) in general is customer satisfaction. Yet, customer incivility is a problem and is known to be a source of job stress and burnout in customer service (Kern & Grandey, 2009). Incivility is “a low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, as cited by Kern & Grandey, 2009, p. 46). Kern and Grandey attributed race as one of the factors contributing to incivility in the workplace.

Kern and Grandey (2009) carried out a study with approximately 130 employees at a retail store. Of the 130 employees at the store, about half belonged to minority groups. The study was focused on the intersection of race, customer incivility, and customer service. Kern and Grandey arrived at the conclusion that members of minority groups were more likely to



receive mistreatment than people in the majority group (Whites). The mistreatments may be insignificant or unintentional, but that does not mean the target groups do not feel stressed out when experiencing mistreatment. Being exposed to these mistreatments on a daily basis, over an extended period of time, leads to burnout.

Whereas Kern and Grandey (2009) focused on incivility within the organization, Jaarsveld, Walker, and Skarlicki (2010) studied incivility outside of the organization. Jaarsveld et al. (2010) concluded that employees' uncivil attitudes toward customers caused customers to be uncivil towards them in return. They attributed employees' incivility toward customers to job stress and emotional exhaustion.

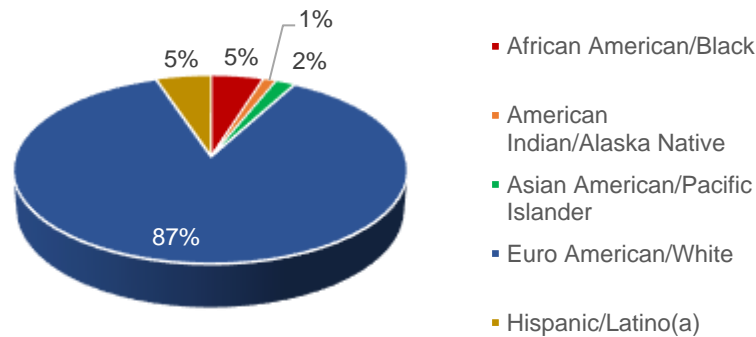
Research in the field of interpreting has identified interpreting in the video relay service industry as having one of the highest occupational health risks (Dean, Pollard, & Samar, 2010). Other research has been carried out in the VRS setting on topics related to burnout and work station ergonomics, but there has been no study of interpreters belonging to a minority group working in VRS to help us understand the experience and potentially added level of stress interpreters of color face as a result of racial microaggressions. Interpreters of color, specifically African American/Black interpreters, experience racism both from their fellow VIs and VRS consumers (Wessling & Shaw, 2014). These interpreters have their plates full when it comes to stressors they are likely to encounter during the course of a day's work. According to Wessling and Shaw (2014), there has been a steady decline in the number of interpreters in general working in the VRS setting. This decline can be attributed to the stressors experienced by VIs, which often leads to burnout.

## **Racism and Racial Microaggressions**

Adding to the stressors mentioned above is the impact of racism and racial microaggressions in the workplace. The effect of racism and racial microaggressions can be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of those experiencing it (Brondolo, Brady Ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009). There has been little work done on racism and race in the interpreting field (e.g., Nakahara, 2016; Obasi, 2013; West Oyedele, 2015) but none specifically targeting racism in the VRS setting. There is no literature on VRS interpreting and racism/racial microaggressions. This lack of research can be attributed to how young the profession is and how young the VRS industry is. Interpreters of color generally face a unique challenge in that they belong to a minority group. In belonging to a minority group, interpreters of color are prone to experiencing racism and racial microaggressions. Some research has been carried out related to African American interpreters working in the field of sign language (Obasi, 2013; West Oyedele, 2015). None has been specifically directed at African American/Black interpreters working in the VRS setting. For this reason, I have chosen to focus my research on this topic.

According to a research study carried out by West Oyedele (2015), there is not enough cultural capital in the field of sign language in the United States of America. The Deaf community is a diverse group consisting of different cultural groups. As diverse as the Deaf community is culturally, the interpreting community should also be diverse in order to meet the needs of the Deaf community at large. According to the 2016 annual report given by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), out of 15,185 members of RID, 487 identified as African American/Black; this represents only 4.89% of the total population. In comparison, Euro American/White comprises 86.88% (8,649 members). Figure 1 shows the diversity in the membership of RID.

## RID Membership Demographics 2016



*Figure 1.* RID Membership as of 2016

When asked to choose between an African American interpreter with marginal linguistic skills and a White interpreter with proficient linguistic skills, one of the African American Deaf participants in West Oyedele's study indicated they would prefer to use the African American/Black interpreter. This was because the African American/Black interpreter was perceived to be more culturally competent than a White peer, making her more qualified due to the shared cultural experience between the African American interpreter and the African American Deaf consumer.

Unfortunately, many African American/Black interpreting students get their training from White instructors who belong to a cultural group other than their own (often White). West Oyedele (2015) said that interpreting students belonging to minority groups often find the faculty not able to meet their needs, which may lead minority group students to drop out of school. When such students drop out, this reduces the pool of potential interpreters of color in the profession. This is one of the reasons why West Oyedele concluded that the lack of cultural capital in the interpreting field in the United States impacts African American/Black Deaf consumers.

Racial discrimination is a daily occurrence in the lives of African Americans/Blacks (Sue, 2014; Utsey, 2000). Racism occurs in every aspect of African American/Black lives. It occurs on the job, in public, and even in families where different races come together to form a union (Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006). In the 1950s, overt racism was predominant, in which physical harm was done to minority group members by those in the majority group; verbal insults were commonplace in the 1950s and 1960s. This “in your face” blatant type of racism is much less likely to occur in our world today, compared to the 1960s; covert acts of racism are much more prevalent.

The racism commonly experienced by minority groups today is covert, as stated by Kern and Grandey (2009). People belonging to minority groups tend to experience incivility rather than extreme behaviors from the majority group. In their research, Kern and Grandey (2009) studied minorities working in a national retail company. The workers comprised of several minority groups with the majority of the minorities being African Americans/Blacks. The majority of the customers they catered to were White. They found that White customers were more likely to be uncivil towards minority employees than towards White employees.

Obasi (2013) carried out a qualitative study with 12 sign language interpreters of African descent in the United Kingdom to find out the extent of racism and its impact on how Black interpreters were perceived. Through questionnaires, telephone interviews and semi-structured interviews with Black interpreters and students, Obasi found that stereotypes were built on the assumptions that Black interpreters are of inferior status. The participants in his study reported being questioned by White Deaf consumers on their sign language qualifications. They were presumed inept to sign even before putting up their hands to interpret. Obasi stated that Black interpreters are left in the distressing position of being visible and invisible at the same time.

Even though the Black sign language interpreters in the study did not witness racism on a daily basis, the effects of racism did have a negative impact on their practice. This negative impact on the performance of the participants further bought into the stereotype already established by the majority culture. In Obasi's study, participants stated they experienced racism from both consumers and colleagues. They described such racist acts as:

1. The presumption by deaf consumers of an inability to sign before work commenced.
2. Deaf consumers questioned the sign language qualifications of Black interpreters.
3. Some Black interpreters felt they were overlooked in terms of areas of higher profile jobs, which were offered to their White colleagues.
4. Stereotypes built on the assumptions that Blacks are inferior to their White counterparts.

Likewise, in a qualitative study, Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) interviewed 17 highly educated African American/Black women holding a minimum of a Master's degree. The purpose of the study was to find out how these women found meaning in the microaggressions they experienced. Participants complained about their competence being challenged by peers, undergraduate students they taught, and professionals. This result is in line with Obasi's study of Black interpreters having similar experiences when White consumers questioned their qualifications or their ability to do the job at hand.

On the other hand, when a person belongs to a minority group that is viewed as being inferior, that person is placed in a precarious position. This is because there is an added stress being placed on that individual to "represent" their race in a good light and not disappoint or confirm the stereotype being placed on them. In Milner and Woolfolk's (2003) case study on African American teachers' self-efficacy, stereotype threat, and persistence, they mentioned there is an added emotional and cognitive load placed on people belonging to minority groups.

This load has to do with the fear of confirming the stereotype being labelled. This has nothing to do with whether that individual is competent or not or believes the story being told about them. Coupled with this stress, the individual's performance would be undermined thereby confirming the said stereotype.

West Oyedele (2015), in her thesis *The persistence of African-American signed language/Black interpreters in the United States: The importance of culture and capital*, talks about the lack of social capital in terms of interpreters of color. In this context, social capital refers to the representation of African Americans in the field and their ability to access relationships with other peers in the field and those in leadership roles, who share the same cultural background. This lack is also represented in interpreter education curriculum. Lack of such capital means that the issues of racism, discrimination, and racial microaggressions are not addressed in the curriculum as taught in interpreting programs. She also discussed the lack of cultural competence among those from the dominant culture who hold these leadership positions. Not being aware of these issues does not prepare or equip African American interpreters with the tools necessary to cope with the issues of racism, racial microaggressions, and discrimination when they go out into the field to work. Nor does it equip their colleagues with the tools to recognize when such acts occur.

As previously mentioned, to date there has been no study carried out to understand the unique experiences African American/Black VIs have working in the VRS setting. I believe these experiences are unique because these interpreters belong to a racial minority group and they belong to a profession that serves the needs of another minority, the Deaf community. Given this unique position in the field, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of African American/Black interpreters working in the video relay service (VRS) setting.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there has been no study on the experiences of African American interpreters working in VRS. The purpose of this study therefore is to shed light on the experiences of African American interpreters in the United States working in VRS. This study attempts to answer the research question “what unique experiences, if any, do African American Video Interpreters go through when working in video relay service (VRS)?”

The study used qualitative data collection; this study is classified under behavioral studies as illustrated by Williams and Chesterman (2011). The interactions between African American VIs and VRS consumers and with fellow VIs render this a social situation. Data was collected using the interview method and online survey. The data is derived from self-reported experiences of the participants in my study. As an interpreter belonging to the group being studied, I am mindful of the biases I possess. Having that in mind, my goal was to adhere strictly to the data collected to the best of my abilities and be cognizant of those biases and how they affect the interpretation of the data collected.

As stated in the literature review, no study has been carried out about African American VIs working in the VRS setting. This research is focused on stories told by individuals who are African American and work in the VRS setting. Therefore, the data collected from their stories was used to generate a general narrative about the experiences of African American women working in VRS. And the conclusions may not be generalizable based upon the very small sample size.

## **Participants**

This study explores the experiences of African American interpreters. All participants had to be at least 18 years old with experience working in the VRS setting. Before gathering data, I applied to Western Oregon University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted the permission to work with human subjects. Data was collected in two phases, first through an asynchronous online survey and then through synchronous interviews, which were conducted online.

**Online participants.** The online survey was opened to sign language interpreters who are at least 18 years of age. The participants had to be of African descent and must have worked either in VRS or be currently working in VRS.

**Interview participants.** Renee is between 40-60 years of age and currently works in a VRS company in the Midwest region of the United States. She has a Bachelor's degree. She averages about 11-20 hours a week working as a VI. She works part-time as a VI and teaches several interpreting courses at a local college part-time. She has been working in the VRS setting for at least 11 years.

Adele is between 40–60 years of age and currently works in a VRS setting and will be leaving the interpreting field very soon. She works in a VRS company located in the Great Lakes region of the United States. She has a Bachelor's degree and has been working in this setting for the past 14 years. She works part-time, and she works 24 hours a month (eight hours a week). She has held offices in interpreter organizations in the past.

Collette is between 30–40 years of age and works in the VRS setting on the Northeast Coast. She has a bachelor's degree and quit working in VRS after more than seven years.



Before she quit, she was working an average of 20 hours per week but gradually cut down her hours to the bare minimum, then quit.

### **Online Survey**

During the first phase, I designed an online survey using Google Forms. The participants had to be African American interpreters currently working in VRS or have had experience working in VRS. The survey consisted of 14 multiple choice questions and yes/no questions. The purpose of this survey was to gather potential candidates for the interview portion of the study and to collect demographic information about the population. Most of the participants were female African American video interpreters. There were 30 females and six males; 30 participants self-identified as African American, two self-identified as Black, one participant self-identified as African, and another self-identified themselves as “other.”

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

The second phase of the data collection was the interview portion. The interview was conducted using open-ended questions and follow-up questions when clarity was needed. Participants had to be female; and they had to have worked at least five years in VRS. The rationale for selecting female interpreters and not male is because male African Americans respond or react to racism or racial microaggressions differently from how female African Americans react (Jang & Johnson, 2005). Also, looking at the demographics given by RID 2016 annual report, out of a total of 15,185 members, male interpreters account for 1,482 of the membership. On the other hand, female interpreters account for 9,239 members. From these numbers, it is clear to see that the profession is dominated by female interpreters.

The participants' ages were between mid-thirties to mid-sixties. Interview participants were required to have at least a five-year experience to ensure that the participants had enough

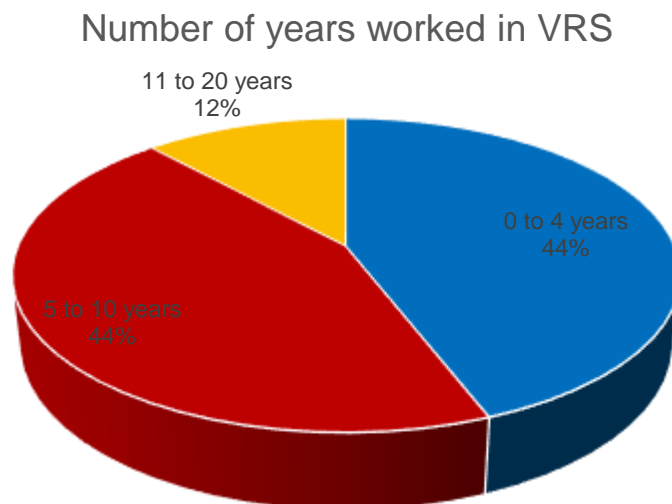
possible exposure to the various experiences under study. To achieve as much homogeneity as possible in my subjects to gather more concrete data, the interviewees had to have received formal training through an interpreter education program. The reason for this was to find out to what extent interpreters were trained if any to work in VRS. There was no discrimination as to the duration of the formal training program the participants attended; either a two-year or a four-year program was acceptable for the sample. The interviewees also had to have some form of national certification, such as the National Interpreter Certification (NIC), and have experienced racial microaggressions in the workplace. The reason for requiring certification was to assume a level of proficiency in interpreting.

### **Research Design**

Data was collected over a period of six weeks. The first phase of the data collection consisted of an online survey. The survey was designed using Google Forms (See Appendix A) and consisted of 15 questions. A consent form was attached to the survey (See Appendix B), which indicated that by answering the questions, participants gave their consent. The online survey was a demographic survey used to select participants for the second portion of the study, the interview portion. As part of the questions, participants were asked to provide their email address if they were interested in participating further in the study. The online survey was posted on Facebook pages, which included Discover Interpreting, Video Interpreters Member Section (VIMS), Interpreters and Transliterators of Color (ITOC), National Association of Black Interpreters-District of Columbia chapter (NAOBI-DC), and Oregon Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (ORID). The online survey was also sent to VRS companies to disseminate the survey to their video interpreters who may not possess Facebook accounts.

The online survey was open to participants for a period of six weeks after which it was closed to the public. A total of 36 responses were received. From the results of the online survey, two of the responses had to be discarded because the participants either did not identify as working in the video relay service setting or did not specify their ethnicity.

The demographic breakdown of interpreters who responded to the online survey can be seen in Figure 2 below. Of the 34 responses, 44% (15 interpreters) have worked in VRS less than four years while another 44% (15 participants) have worked in VRS 5-10 years. The remaining 12% (4 participants) have worked in VRS for at least 11 years.



*Figure 2.* Years of Working in VRS

Of the 34 responses analyzed, 24 were willing to participate in the interview portion of the study. Those willing to participate were asked to include their email addresses in the survey. Out of the 24 responses, 13 were eligible to participate in the interview portion of the study as per the inclusion criteria for the study. Five names were randomly selected from the 13 eligible candidates, and emails were sent to each of the participants. Along with the emails, a consent form was sent along with the description of the study and criteria for eligibility (see Appendix

D). In the email, I requested a date and time to schedule the interviews. By the participants replying to the email, it indicated consent to participate in the study.

Four individual interviews were conducted, even though only three were needed for this study because of the specification of the IRB agreement. The fourth interview acted as a backup just in case there was a mishap with either the interviewee or the technology used during the interviews. Keeping to three interviews allowed me to keep the amount of data to be analyzed within manageable limits. The interviews were conducted over the span of two weeks and scheduled at the convenience of the interviewees.

The interviews were conducted using Google Hangout on my laptop and a webcam. The interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions presented to the participants as well as follow up questions (See Appendix C). The interviews were recorded using a digital camcorder and an iPhone app called “Recorder,” which was used to record the audio part of the interview. The Recorder app was used as a backup in case something went wrong with the camcorder. It so happened that one of my interviews was not captured on the digital camcorder, but it was captured on my iPhone recording app.

## **Data Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, data were analyzed using a qualitative approach. The data analyzed were collected from both the online survey instrument and the interview portion of the study. The video recordings were transcribed by me using Microsoft Word. The transcriptions were printed out on hard copies and carefully read multiple times to get familiar with the data. I started out with a list of *a priori* codes to guide me in categorizing the codes from the data. The *a priori* codes included “racism/racial microaggressions,” “coping mechanism,” and “improvements in the workplace.” I also looked out for emergent codes arising from the

transcript data that was not on my list of *a priori* codes. This type of coding is called open coding (Creswell, 2013).

After all the transcripts had been coded, I took each question and compared the answers given by all three interviewees for that particular question looking for similarities or differences. This constant comparison, which is also known as grounded theory, led to new categories that were further analyzed repeatedly until I arrived at broader concepts. This helped provide a general explanation to the experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell, 2013; Hale & Napier, 2013). During this process themes emerged that were grouped into larger overarching themes using axial coding. This is identifying the relationships between open codes.

Here I expanded the data resulting from the connections discovered from the various pieces of codes. With the number of themes still too large for this study, I further looked for more relationships between themes and came up with five themes. The themes that emerged during the open coding process of the data were “diversity in VRS” and “VRS support of African American VIs.” These will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

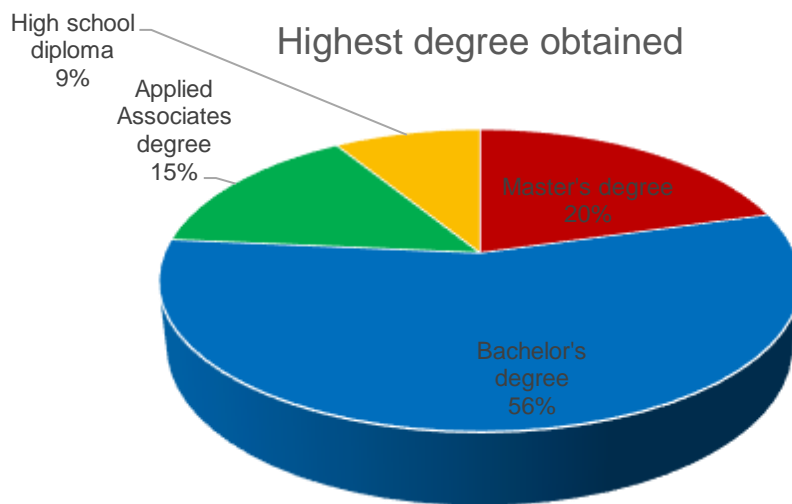
### **Online Survey Results**

The participants targeted for this study are African American video interpreters who currently work or have worked in the video relay service setting. For this study, a demographic survey was administered online and a total of 36 responses were collected as mentioned earlier but two responses were discarded. Apart from collecting demographic information, this online survey was used to gather information about what phenomena African American Sign Language interpreters experience working in VRS such as racial microaggressions in the workplace, their educational background including certifications, and whether they attended a formal interpreter education program.

The participants between the ages of 21 and 30 were 6 in number. Twelve participants belonged to the 41 and over age group, while the majority consisting of 16 participants belonged to the 31–40 age group. Out of the 34 participants who completed the survey, 29 were female and five were male. Eleven of the participants live in the Great Lakes region, five participants reside in the West/Pacific including Hawaii, eight participants live in the Northeast region, four participants reside in the Southwest, four participants reside in the Southeast, and two participants reside in the Midwest.

The educational background of participants ranged from high school diploma to masters degree. About 56% (19 participants) hold bachelor degrees, 15% (5 participants) hold associates degrees, another 9% (3 participants) hold high school diplomas, while 20% (7 participants) hold masters degrees. Twenty-four of the participants reported having attended a formal interpreter

training program while 10 of the participants reported not attending a formal interpreter training program. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of the educational background of the participants.

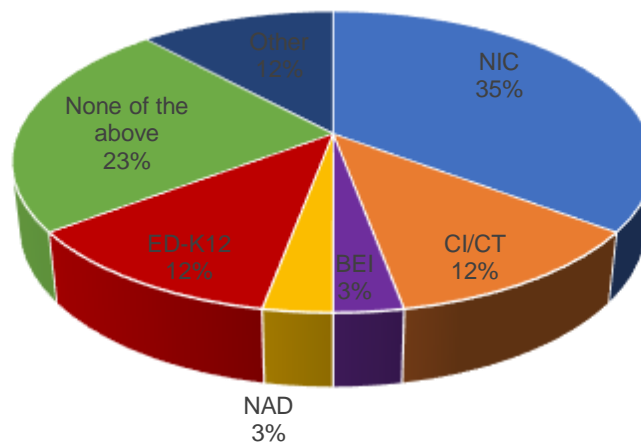


*Figure 3.* Educational Background of Participants

Of the 34 participants in the online survey, 29 identified as African American, one identified as African, two identified as Black, one identified as multiracial, and another identified as Caribbean Canadian. The participants who responded to the online survey consisted of a wide range of certifications.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of certification participants possessed at the time the survey was taken. Thirty-five percent (12 participants) acquired the National Interpreter Certification (NIC). Twelve percent (4 participants) possessed CI/CT certifications, 12% (4 participants) possessed other certifications not mentioned in the survey questions, 23% (8 participants) did not possess any certification, 12% (4 participants) possessed ED: K-12 certification, 3% (1 participant) possessed a Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) certification, while another 3% (1 participant) possessed NAD certification. In general, about 80% of the participants possessed a form of certification given by a nationally recognized institution or organization.

## Certification held by participants



*Figure 4.* Certifications Held by Participants

In terms of how long the participants have or had worked in VRS, 44% work or had worked less than five years. Those who have worked between 5–10 years constituted 44% of the sample. Those who worked 10 years or longer comprised of 12% of the sample. When asked if they considered themselves to have a unique experience working in VRS as African American, 26 participants answered yes that they believe they do have a unique experience. One participant replied “no,” and six participants had no idea if they do or do not have such a unique experience. The question was left vague in order to find out if the participants considered their experience working in VRS to be at all similar to other VIs belonging to other racial group especially the majority (White) culture.

When asked if they have ever experienced racial microaggressions at work, 30 of the participants answered yes while 4 participants answered no. When asked how often they experienced racism, 31 participants reported having experienced racism in varying degrees while 3 replied that they have not experienced racism in the workplace. From the numbers above, the data shows that they consistently experience racial microaggressions or racism.



Figure 5 depicts the frequency with which African American VIs experience racism in the workplace. From the figure below, six percent (2 participants) reported being exposed to overt racism very frequently. Thirty-five percent (12 participants) reported being exposed to overt racism moderately frequently. Fifty percent (17 participants) reported being exposed slightly frequently and nine percent (3 participants) reported no exposure to overt racism.

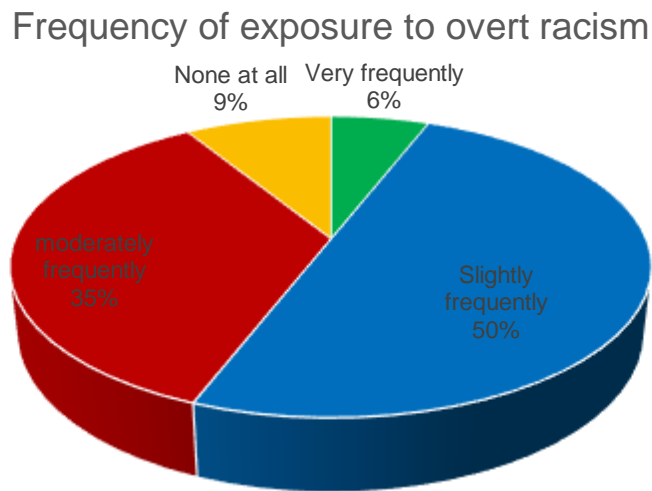


Figure 5. Frequency of Exposure to Overt Racism

### Semi-structured Interview Results

Four female African American video interpreters were interviewed to gain insight into their experience working as a minority in a predominantly White population as noted in chapter two. Even though there were four interviews, only three were used as per the contents of my IRB application. A fourth interview was done as a backup in case something happened to any of the other interviews. The fourth and final interview was left out of the data analysis. The interviews were recorded using a camcorder and an audio recording app on an iPhone. The interview was conducted using Google hangouts. To protect the identities of the interview participants, pseudonyms will be used. Their specific location will also be kept vague to keep their identities confidential, and there will be no mention of what VRS companies they work for,

especially since the African American interpreting community in the United States is so small. Keeping this information private will prevent identification of the participants.

Each of the three semi-structured interviews was conducted one-on-one, independent of each other. After the interviews were conducted, transcripts from the three interviews were created using Microsoft Word. The transcripts were analyzed using open coding (Creswell, 2013; Hale & Napier, 2013). Pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewee: Renee, Adele, and Collette. Renee, Adele, and Collette are African American VIs nationally certified (NIC) by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). They all attended a formal interpreter education program in the United States.

After the interview data transcripts were analyzed and coded, I came up with five themes and eleven codes. The themes and the respective codes are listed in Table 1. These themes will be discussed below.

Table 1

*Themes and Codes*

Themes	Racial micro-aggressions/ Racism	VRS company support of African American VIs	Coping with racial microaggressions /racism in VRS	Diversity in VRS	Cultivating safe working conditions
Codes	Racial micro-aggressions from VRS users  Racial micro-aggressions from colleagues	Inadequate resources for minority VIs	Quitting  Self-talk  Support groups  Internalization	Lack of diversity in VRS centers  Mentorship  Cultural education in ITP	Training

## **Racial Microaggressions and/or Racism**

The first theme discussed here is racial microaggressions/racism. As defined by Sue et al. (2007), “racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 273). All interviewees were asked if they have experienced racial microaggressions and/or racism while working in VRS; they all responded affirmatively. This was no surprise to me, since this was supported in the literature review. Racism is a daily occurrence in the lives of people of color in the United States. All three interviewees stated that racism is a common occurrence that happens in the life of African Americans as evidenced by their comments. Collette said: “Racism is something that occurs so often for black interpreters.” Adele reported that “you know, I have experienced racism for so long.” Renee talked about having interpreted for more than 11 years and that in the beginning of her working in VRS, racism/racial microaggressions bothered her a lot. This suggests that racism/racial microaggressions have been going on for quite some time.

Even though racism is an unpleasant event to experience, all three interviewees said that they just have to deal with it. Under the racial microaggressions/racism theme, I was able to identify two codes. The first code is “Racial microaggressions/racism from VRS users,” and the second code is “Racial microaggressions/racism from colleagues.” By colleagues, I mean fellow VIs working in the same VRS center.

I was not surprised with this finding, especially given the current racial climate present in the United States. Much of the literature, some cited in the literature review section, indicates that racism is institutionalized in the United States (see, for example, Delgado & Stancic, 2012; Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Racism permeates the society in which we live, even though some

believe that racism is a thing of the past. In three experiments carried out by McConahay, Hardee, and Batts (1981), White male students were tested to see if racism had declined in America. In their experiment, there was what is called “old-fashioned racism” and “modern racism.” Old fashioned racism included examples such as segregations, not inviting a Black person to your house for dinner, resistance to affirmative actions. This type of racism predates the civil rights movements. On the other hand, modern racism emerged after the civil rights movements, focusing on issues such as the rights of African Americans forcing themselves in situations where they are not wanted, such as positions of power. Another example is the belief that African Americans are getting more financially stable or more attention than they deserve.

The results of the McConahay et al. (1981) study were that old-fashioned racism seemed to be on the decline. They said people who exhibit this type of racism believe that ideals such as segregation are constitutional. With modern racism, on the other hand, it was more difficult to predict that there was a downward trend in its occurrence. But people did believe that racism is a thing of the past and that African Americans should not be fighting for rights. African Americans, on the other hand, see the denial of the existence of racism by White people as evidence of the existence of racism and their hypocrisy. This trend ensures the continuing cycle due to the permanence of racism in the United States (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016).

**Racial microaggressions and racism from VRS users.** All three interviewees reported experiencing racial microaggressions or racism from White Deaf callers who use VRS to communicate with the hearing world. Adele said that “Sometimes a person sees my face on the screen and sometimes they hang up with almost a disgusted look like they cannot wait to disconnect it because of my color.” Collette also gives an instance when she had similar experiences as Adele. She said “I mean people can be like, ‘oh black? No!’ and they hang up.”

Renee also narrated that “they say I don't want a black.” Table 2 gives other instances of the interviewees perceiving VRS users of racial or microaggressive behaviors. Appendix E also gives examples of racial microaggressive behaviors reported by the participants from the online survey.

Table 2

*Racist/Microaggressive Behavior Toward African American VIs from VR*

---

“People do look at you and hang up.”

“You want to hang up on me all day long, that’ll be fine”

“They are kinda ‘oh, wait what, I wouldn’t talk to a black person, so why would I want them to interpret for me?’”

“Where are you from?”

“Oh, no I mean like where are your ancestors from?”

“Oh, you are kind of tan to be an American.”

“Are you Mexican?”

“Who are you?”

“Where are you from?”

“Are you American?”

“Ok, I don’t mind if you are black”

“That’s fine as long as you are from the United States”

“Switch to a female interpreter”

“What are you?”

“why does my hair look like that?”

“I can’t see, it’s too dark”

---

One commonality experienced among the interviewees was when a Deaf caller would call in and have the African American VI switch interpreters. Oftentimes, African Americans

are viewed as inferior to their White counterparts (Obasi, 2012). The literature suggests several possibilities for such views. One could point to the portrayals of African Americans in the media in a negative light. Especially in today's world where the world has become a global village due to social media connecting people who are geographically worlds apart. Movies and TV programs are also tools used to inform people about other cultures from different parts of the country and the world at large. According to Dubriel (2008), African Americans were often misrepresented on television. Researchers found that African Americans were more likely to be placed in roles depicting criminals. Even though many studies (Dixon & Linz 2000; Fujioka 1999; Rada 2010) have been focused on how African Americans are depicted on television, only a few went further into finding out what effects it has on the public viewers' perceptions.

Dubriel's (2008) study suggested that how African Americans are portrayed in the media affects racial attitudes. This could contribute to the perception by the majority or other cultures that African Americans are not trustworthy or are inferior to the majority culture. Even when addressing African Americans on television, they are more likely to appear poorly dressed and come off as uneducated (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, and Haung, 2000).

Even though Adele reported experiencing racial microaggressions from VRS callers, she attributes some of these behaviors to people being mean or rude. Examples of such instances include:

- “The perceived discrimination is that just overall rudeness as if you are a non-person.”
- “Just being mean for no reason.”
- “I think peoples' attitude have changed nowadays. We are living in critical times and people's' attitudes are just not agreeable.”

From most of the reports above, it would be fair to say that not all VRS users intend to cause harm. The important thing to note here is how their racial microaggressive actions or behaviors are perceived by the African American VIs and the impact it has on them. The perceived notion of racial microaggressions could also impact the performance of the VIs at the moment the behavior is observed. When this happens, the belief that African Americans are inferior to members of the majority culture becomes a reality as mentioned in the literature review.

### **Racial Microaggressions and Racism from Colleagues in VRS**

The interesting thing I found from the interviewees was that the worst racial microaggressions they experienced were from their fellow video interpreters working in the same centers. Of the three interviewees, Adele mentioned that she never experienced racial microaggressions from her colleagues. This could be true, or it may be that Adele being the oldest of the interviewees has experienced more of the old-fashioned, blatant type of racism, and may not perceive racial microaggressions as a form of racism. She said she did not experience racism from her colleagues.

Another factor that could play a part in her not encountering or recognizing racial microaggressions from her coworkers may be that she spends the barest minimum hours working in VRS and does not necessarily interact with her co-workers. For example, she said:

I am friendly but not sociable, I am very friendly with my colleagues but I'm not interested in being friends with many people. So, I come in and do my little job, do my few hours and then I'm gone. So, I think a lot of times, people like that being with each other, they go out ... things like that. So I don't ... I think my relationships are very professional relationships... I don't have a problem letting people know I'm not your friend, I am your co-worker.

Collette on the other hand reported that the worst racial microaggressions she experienced were from her colleagues. She made several comments along these lines:

- “The worst microaggressions are not only from the callers is from your colleagues.”
- “I wish you were here because people were here talking black slang and you could have helped us with the call.”
- “You know, when you have people, trying to imitate black speech on a call when they are clearly uncomfortable with using Black English. Um... so, then they ask me, ‘what can I do to improve ...’ I tell them to interpret in English, the language that you know.”
- “And then one person in the center, I don’t know what caused her to just spark a conversation about umm voicing for black individuals versus white individuals. She says: yeah, if I see this sign if they are black I will say ‘weed’ and if they’re white, I will say ‘pot.’”
- “I have so many black friends.”
- “I was teasing my co-worker who is white and has a black adopted sister. So, we were just teasing and I said, ‘you are an honorary black’ and another colleague walks over and says ‘oh, I am 1/8th ... (Native American)’ and I said ‘oh, you are not white?’ and she was like ‘what? No! no! no! I am white’ and I am like, ‘no, no, so you’ve been passing as white this whole time.’ I said, ‘you write ‘white’ on your form?’ And she said ‘no, no, I don’t even claim that side of my family’ you know. And I was like, oh I said ‘well, you know I don’t get to put it off and on when I want to.’”



Renee also reported experiencing racial microaggressions from her colleagues at her VRS center. Here are examples of her statements depicting her experience.

- “Someone touched my hair without my permission and asked, ‘what is that?’”
- “When the first-time President Obama...anything relating to Obama... the first time he was elected especially they said ‘I know you voted for him, right?’”

These statements might seem benign but studies have shown how these microaggressive behaviors perceived by African Americans can impact their health and wellbeing (Nadal, 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso 2000; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2000). Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit and Rasmus (2014) studied the impact racial microaggressions have on the mental health of people of color. Their results showed that racial microaggressions did have a negative impact on the health of people of color and was also shown to have a correlation to depression. Nadal et al. (2014) also cited other studies having similar results to theirs. They cited literature from studies such as Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, and Brody (2004) who concluded that racism has been linked to substance abuse. Nyborg and Curry (2013) also linked lower self-esteem to the effects of racism. While there are many studies done on the impact of racism on identity development and the mental and psychological health of people of color in general, there were other studies that denied the existence of racial microaggressions and the impact on people of color. Thomas (2008, as cited by Nadal et al., 2014) claimed that there is no such thing as racial microaggression. Another author went as far as to study people of color and explain their experiences with racial microaggressions, but no focus was placed on their perceptions of such behaviors or their racial realities in the process in validating their experiences (Harris, 2008, as cited by Nadal et al., 2014).

Collette reported that even when she tried to seek help from her colleagues, she experienced further microaggressions. She said:

Then you might have some white interpreter colleagues that sort of get it. Umm, you might be able to talk to them but really all they can say is “aww, I am sorry that happened to you.” But they can’t really relate. Or sometimes they say, “are you sure that’s what they meant, are you sure that’s why?”

### **Coping with Racism/Racial Microaggressions in VRS: Quitting VRS**

Interviewees were asked why they were still working in VRS despite their experience with racism and racial microaggressions in the VRS setting. This section will deal with how the interviewees cope in the VRS setting. Coping, for the purpose of this theme, is “a process where an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding one’s resources” (Utsey et al., 2000, p. 73). According to Brondolo et al. (2009), there are three ways of coping with racism: Anger suppression and expression, racial identity development, and social support seeking. The following will show what types of coping strategies the interviewees employed.

Collette reported that she actually quit working in VRS after many years of working there. She said she gradually started reducing her hours until she totally quit her job as a VI. The reason for quitting her job in VRS was because of the physical and emotional burnout she experienced. She made several comments related to this:

- And I really do think that VRS has a lot to do with my physical burn out pretty much exiting my field...and I will never interpret VRS even though I miss the actual call like the content, the um you know doing different things. I can’t do it, I mean if you

are going to do that kind of volume, you really should have a team they should give you like 30 minutes per hour, 20 minutes. It was mostly the burnout.

- I was done with not being able to give my opinion umm you know say something back to a person
- In talking in content that is racist often and feeling that inside because a lot of times what is coming from your voice, what is coming from your hands. It feels like it's inside of you and you are talking about yourself, or your own people. Umm, you get hang ups, you get "switch to a female interpreter" and I'm like ok.
- Ok then I'm like I don't want to even work with these folks. That's how it makes you feel sometimes.
- So, um, we kind of have those internalized. People are always going to mistreat you. Whether you are upset or not you just take it.

Collette indicated that with the VRS companies are imposing more demands on its VIs; she felt it was not worth the hassle. She also stated that the pay rate working in VRS was not worth it. She said "There are plenty of assignments in the community that pay better but yet, they are easier types of assignments. So, why would I continue to do VRS for a low rate." She did admit there were pros to working in VRS such as flexible hours as well as helping to hone your interpreting skills. She also said she enjoyed the linguistic diversity that the job provides. She also stated that

I felt like that every time I went into VRS, 30 minutes in, I'm like I'm ready to go home. You know. So. The fact that they have ibuprofen and all these stuff in the break room, three types of pain medications says something too.

Adele, even though she said she was leaving the field soon, also reported there were times she threatened to quit her job but did not. Adele said the pay and, like Collette, the flexible hours are the reasons she still worked in VRS. She said:

Pay, flexible hours. Umm, even though I'm leaving soon), I think it's a good thing for extra income, so, that's the only reason I have not quit. Because I work maybe 10 hours a week. But there's not a day that passes that I don't say "this is my last day" but ... this is my last... I'm too old for this.

Adele told me that she was looking forward to retiring as an interpreter but would still be involved in the Deaf community.

Renee was also asked the same question and she replied:

I thought about it maybe not from the deaf callers so much because I feel like you know it's easy to be brave with your negativity from a distance. But dealing with microaggressions from the center from the people (the interpreters), Yes! So not so much from the deaf but from the interpreters because I feel like I have a strong personality so I feel like I have to quit before I say something that would get me fired.

Renee's statement about having to quit before she says something is something a lot of people of color face with regards to reacting to racism or racial microaggressions and the constraints that come with rules and regulations that need to be followed by all VIs in the workplace. Nadal et al. (2014) reported that victims of racial microaggressions have to make a decision with regards to how to react to perpetrators. The victims have to decide either to confront the perpetrators or ignore them. Before making a decision to do something, several factors have to be considered. One factor is, what are the repercussions? Will there be backlash for reacting in a certain way?

Will their safety be guaranteed or not? If the victims decide to take action, will the action taken involve verbally confronting the transgressor or behaving in a passive aggressive manner?

### **Self-Talk**

When asked what their coping mechanism is for working in a setting such as VRS, Renee mentioned using self-talk. She said:

I just thought after a while, I am either going to stay here and figure out how to deal with it or I can't do it anymore. And I decided why would I let someone else take away money that I can use for my family by their negative self-image.

Renee also stated, "After 11 yrs I have put as that is their problem not mine" and "I just try to be positive, try to think of positive things." Collette said, "yeah, you kind of missed out one of the better interpreters you were gonna get... So, I don't care. You want to hang up on me all day long, that'll be fine because then I won't have to work so hard."

According to Kross et al (2014), using self-talk, or using a non-first-person language leads people to assess future stressors or triggers face down in a less aggressive way. Self-talk is a way to distance one's self from an event that causes anxiety or stress. Kross et al. concluded that this method of coping with stressors did influence how people assess social stressors. They concluded their study saying:

Self-talk is a ubiquitous human phenomenon. We all have an internal monologue that we engage in from time to time. The current research demonstrates that small shifts in the language people use to refer to the self as they engage in this process consequentially influences their ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behavior under social stress, even for people who are dispositionally vulnerable to social anxiety. (p. 321)

## Support Groups

In terms of a support structure, Renee says that at her VRS center, of about 200 VIs, there is one other African American VI who works on a different shift than hers. This means that they never get to meet or form a relationship if needed. She also said:

I have a couple of black interpreter friends that do not live in in my area but I can call and talk to them or my family but as far as interpreting, other VIs. Actually, I met through my VRS company one of the meetings they had ... black interpreters' meetings. So, when I met some of those people now ... over the years I have been able to keep in touch so that helps a lot.

When Collette was asked about her support structure, she also stated that family was her source of support. She said:

Maybe your boyfriend and kind of just vent at the end of the day. You know, you talk in the break room to another black interpreter, you send them a message. Occasionally, maybe I'll talk to my mom. Once in a blue moon, I would talk to some of my other black interpreter colleagues or when I'm on a community job.

At Collette's VRS center, there are approximately 40 VIs with about 5–10 African American VIs. When she did have experiences with racism or racial microaggressions, she said she used instant messenger to contact other African American VIs in her center. She said:

We kinda formed our own support network where you can kinda send someone a message "uh, just got another hang up" or (laughs) or someone in the center would make a remark and you are like "really?" You know, you would have to interpret racially charged comments you know and things like that.

Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) supported this interaction. They suggested that victims of racism or racial microaggressions tend to look for others who have experienced or witnessed racism or racial microaggressions for support. These people can shed light in helping them process their emotional and cognitive responses. Mellor (2004) and Utsey et al. (2000) found that seeking social support was one of the strategies used by groups who experienced discrimination or racial microaggressions. This is understandable in that one would want to seek guidance from others who they can identify with. Nadal et al. (2014) stated that “victims of microaggressions need to feel validated when a microaggression occurs” (p. 63).

Adele, on the other hand, when asked about her support system, stated that she never asked for help either from the company or from colleagues. In Adele’s VRS center, there are about eight African American VIs who have been together in the same center for many years. When asked the question, she replied:

I have never ever asked for assistance, I just kind of deal with it myself... So, I just suffer in silence but never once have I gone to debrief, never gone to the employment program.... To be honest with you, I don’t look for support. I mean, I may have some because of course for confidentiality we can’t discuss calls. I can only discuss my reaction to it. So, of course I don’t. Because I work so infrequently, I don’t get those types of calls that maybe continuation calls that people kind of develop to report.

From Adele’s narrative above, her not needing assistance could be attributed to possessing an “adaptive multidimensional perfectionism.” Schwenke, Ashby, and Gnika (2014) defined adaptive perfectionism as the ability to be less critical when a person’s goals are not met or realized. Sign language interpreters tend to be critical about their work, always analyzing and

working on improving on work. People with insufficient coping strategies to cope with stressors are said to have “maladaptive perfectionism.”

Looking at Collette’s narrative, it can be deduced that she had a difficult time working in VRS. This is evidenced by statements such as, “VRS is a very tough place to work in general...I don't know why they are still allowed to run. I really don't.” She also said:

“For me, it was the physical demands. It’s very stressful. So, they don’t give you adequate breaks.”

“I quit due to physical and emotional burnout.”

“I would say that, to be honest with you, I don’t think that I did a great job in self-care while I was in VRS.”

Schwenke et al. (2014) stated that African Americans remain in VRS because they possess adaptive multidimensional perfectionism. Adele could be an example of African Americans who remained in the field for this long. She may be exhibiting adaptive perfectionism in that she does not get stressed out that much and hence avoids burnout. She shows that she has the necessary coping resources that have sustained her this long in the profession. On the other hand, Collette could be a representation of African Americans who do not possess this trait, or as Schwenke et al. put it “maladaptive perfectionism.” This is a personality trait associated with burnout. People with maladaptive perfectionism lack the necessary coping resources to deal with work related stress that later result in burnout (Schwenke, 2012).

Brondolo et al. (2009), comparing the results from different studies on how social support buffers the effects of racism, said that the results were mixed. African Americans with high levels of support showed no negative impact on their health while those with lower social support showed poorer health (Finch & Vega, 2003, as cited by Brondolo et al., 2009). In two



other studies, social support did have a buffering effect when African Americans were exposed to low level racism (Clark, 2003; Clark & Gochett, 2006, as cited by Brondolo et al., 2009).

When asked if they were aware of what supervision is, and if they participated in supervision, all three interviewees answered “no.” Adele did say she participated in something similar many years ago. She said “No, I have in the past but not now. I used to be actively part of NAOBI... SO, we have done this type of Demand-Control Schema before it was called that but not recently. No.” Collette said,

Yeah, I am familiar with the concept, it is not something I have participated in but I think Dean talks about it. So, I have never done any type of supervision because I graduated from my ITP in 2005 and I started practicum in 2004 so I don’t think that was a heavy topic of discussion at that time. It started coming up later with the newer interpreters.

Renee, when asked the same question, responded by saying “no.”

Supervision is a term used in the sign language interpreting field as a way for sign language interpreters to talk about their work. This could be likened to case-conferencing, which is used in other professions. Importance is placed on being able to discuss issues that arise at the workplace. Following the Code of Professional Conduct (CPC), personal information or content of the interpreting event has to be kept confidential. The goals of supervision are professional development and effective practice (Dean & Pollard, 2013). From Collette’s comment about supervision being popular with the newer interpreters, more experienced interpreters such as those in this study do not utilize this tool. Dean and Pollard first began publishing on the topic of the Demand Control Schema (DC-S) in 2001, but it is likely that DC-S did not make its way into curricula for these interviewees until after the completion of their interpreter training. They should be encouraged to take trainings on this practice.

The good news is that more and more workshops are being offered to interpreters in the reflective practice of supervision. Western Oregon University (WOU) in Monmouth, Oregon infuses supervision in the curriculum and provides practice for their interpreting students. A program called the Professional Interpreter Supervision Program (PSIP) was created to cater to their recent graduates as they begin their professional journey as sign language interpreters (Smith & Maroney, 2010). There is another organization recently established October 15, 2016 called Interpreting Institute for Reflection-in-Action and Supervision (IIRAS). Its purpose is to promote the quality of supervision and reflective practice among interpreters. As supervision continues to gain popularity, it would be expeditious for interpreters who have been in the field for quite some time to adopt this practice (Smith, personal communication, October 10, 2016).

### **Internalizing**

Adele mentioned internalizing some of the racial microaggressions she encounters while working in VRS. Statements such as these are examples of coping strategies: “I just kind of deal with it myself,” or “so, I kind of internalize it,” and “I just suffer in silence.” She also said: “I have experienced racism for so long that it doesn’t have the same impact that it has on the younger interpreters.” Collette’s comments regarding internalizing her experiences are thus: “People are always going to mistreat you. Whether you are upset or not you just take it.”

In a study of African American women, Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, and Felicié (2008) wanted to find out the impact of racial microaggressions and racial macroaggression on African American/Black women. They stated that with frequent occurrence of microaggressions, Black women or African American women could become desensitized to racial microaggressions and may react less than if they were exposed to infrequent macroaggressions. This could be why Adele does not have a huge negative impact when it

comes to her experiences with racial microaggressions compared to Renee and Collette. She did say that she interprets infrequently in VRS and hence has less exposure to the possibility of coming across such occurrences.

In the Donovan et al. (2013) study, the goal was to examine the impact of “Perceived Racial Microaggressions” (PRMi) and “Perceived Racial Macroaggression” (PRMa) on a female sample population. The result of their study was that PRMa was a huge problem for Black or African American women while PRMi indicated a universal problem not only for Black or African American women but also for people of color as a whole.

According to Mellor (2004), experiencing racism is not only painful but it also has a cumulative impact on the individuals experiencing it. He noted that in experiencing racism, there has to be an interpretation of the event as being racist. He studied 34 members of the Koori population in Australia to find out what their coping strategies were in regards to racism experienced from the majority white population. He noticed that the strategies mostly used by the participants did not deal directly with the issue of racism. Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, and Cancelli (2000) mentioned that there is an inverse relationship between racial discrimination experienced by African Americans and self-esteem and self-satisfaction.

Utsey et al. (2000) stated that avoidance coping strategy was a strong predictor of self-esteem and self-satisfaction. As a VI in general, one cannot use this coping mechanism because of policies set up by the FCC and the various VRS companies. VIs do not have the luxury of declining an incoming call or transferring a call to another VI except on two conditions. The first condition is that the consumer decides to have the call transferred to another VI. However, since the VI is the one experiencing the mistreatment, that option is not a viable one. The second condition is that the VI has to stay with the caller for at least nine minutes before transferring the

call to another VI. Using this avoidance coping strategy is not a beneficial tool for VIs, because harm would have been done before the nine minutes has expired.

With regards to racial microaggression from other VIs, African Americans can choose to express their anger or suppress it. Depending on the location where the racial microaggressive event happened could dictate what responses to act out. For example, if the racist event occurs in a public place, the victim could respond either with a verbal attack or quiet resignation. In VRS, the probability of a verbal attack is low. This could be attributed to a reaction being too costly to the victim or a possibility of backlash being imminent (Feagin, 1991, as cited by Brondolo et al., 2009).

All three interviewees stated that their VRS companies provide professional assistance whenever their VIs need someone to talk to. Even though all three have experienced racism or racial microaggressions at their place of work, none of them actually took advantage of the resources provided by their companies. Besides Adele who said that she never asked for support from anyone, Collette and Renee reported that those resources do not meet their needs. This is because management at their centers do not share the same cultural background with them therefore would not understand their issues. Another reason was when they needed someone to talk to, as in Renee's case, there is no one around and having to contact other African American VIs in management from another center was not practical. Collette said that:

Support from colleagues could come in the form of just lending a listening ear while venting their frustrations, disappointments and helplessness about their experiences.

There is comfort in knowing that they are not alone or that they are not the only people going through this.

VRS companies provide counseling services to their VIs to help them cope with call contents or issues that may present themselves on the job. Such call contents could be as bad as having to relay from one caller to the other that he or she was raped or that a loved one died. This may have a dramatic effect on the VI, having to bear that burden, even though the event that occurred had nothing to do with them. The same can be said about the African American VIs being abused by the consumers they serve or experiencing racial microaggressive behavior; they experience similar effects. Because of possible occurrence of such events, VRS provides a hotline for VIs to access when needed. Even though this service is available, many VIs do not take advantage of it.

Wessling and Shaw (2014) found out that 93% of 889 VIs surveyed did not seek the professional psychologists provided by their respective companies. With this in mind, we can infer that of the professional psychologists provided by these VRS companies, probably a handful or less are from the minority cultural group if any. Adele said:

Yes, they do, they did, they do. I'm sure they do. Umm I think there is ... from what I've heard, there are centers that have experienced some kind of catastrophic event I'm sure counseling services were provided. Our center has never... I don't think we've ever experienced but I'm sure it's part of our package.

Renee also indicated:

Well they have the... Not specific.... Well they have the, when you have a problem, you can call the... there is a company that ... umm.... psychology... I don't know what it is called. They have that or you can talk to the manager but I don't feel that's an option because my manager is white. So I don't think my manager would understand. They can say "oooooh I'm sorry that happened" but that to me is not.

Collette described her experience:

I don't see any point in reporting anything because, what are they gonna do? To be honest with you, they don't really care. They don't care about any, you know the only event they would care about is if someone pulled out you know genitalia on the screen. Other than that, you know they don't really care how we are treated. You kind of talk to your supervisors, they are just like oh, sounds like a difficult call. Looks like you have 8 minutes left on your break, you better run to the restroom you know what I mean (laughs). Um so I think that um if they were more willing to allow time on the clock, you know, if they ever said hey, if you experience abuse of callers, take an extra break or whatever come talk to me but that is not the case or like or okay we have to act natural. You know don't call a team too often, don't um go over your breaks. You are 82% not 83%. you know probably need to get it up to 83.3%.

From the narratives above, it can be deduced that African American VIs have their hands tied when it comes to expressing their anger when confronted with a racist behavior. Due to the ambiguity of racial microaggression, it is especially difficult to discern whether to react or not. Whether the racial microaggressive act is coming from a colleague or from a deaf caller, options are limited when it comes to coping. As Holcombe (2014) stated in her thesis, VIs in general do not have decision latitude. Wessling (2014) divided coping methods into three parts: pre-call, during call, and post call. She found that the most common method of coping was used post-call. This supports my earlier statement of VIs having less decision latitude during calls.

### **Lack of diversity in VRS centers**

Adele, Collette, and Renee were all asked to describe the racial makeup of their centers. The reason for the question was to find out if the numbers were representative of the population

of interpreters in the nation. The question was also asked to find out if any African American VIs in particular had mentors who shared the same cultural background as they do thereby having access to support and other resources that only interpreters sharing the same cultural experience could give. Figure 6 portrays their answers to the question mentioned above. The numbers in Figure 6 are an approximate value and are not meant to represent exact figures. Either way, from the numbers below, it shows the ratio of African Americans VIs to the total number of VIs. This is not to say all VRS centers have the same composition, but the majority of VRS centers do not have the majority of their VIs belonging to the dominant culture.

Renee reported that she feels like an island at her center. She also mentioned that there were no other minorities at her center, just two African Americans and the rest Caucasians. She said, “I am an island. I know some centers have a lot of black people together which seems awesome but I don’t have that so my options are limited I believe. You know what I mean, if I need someone immediately.”

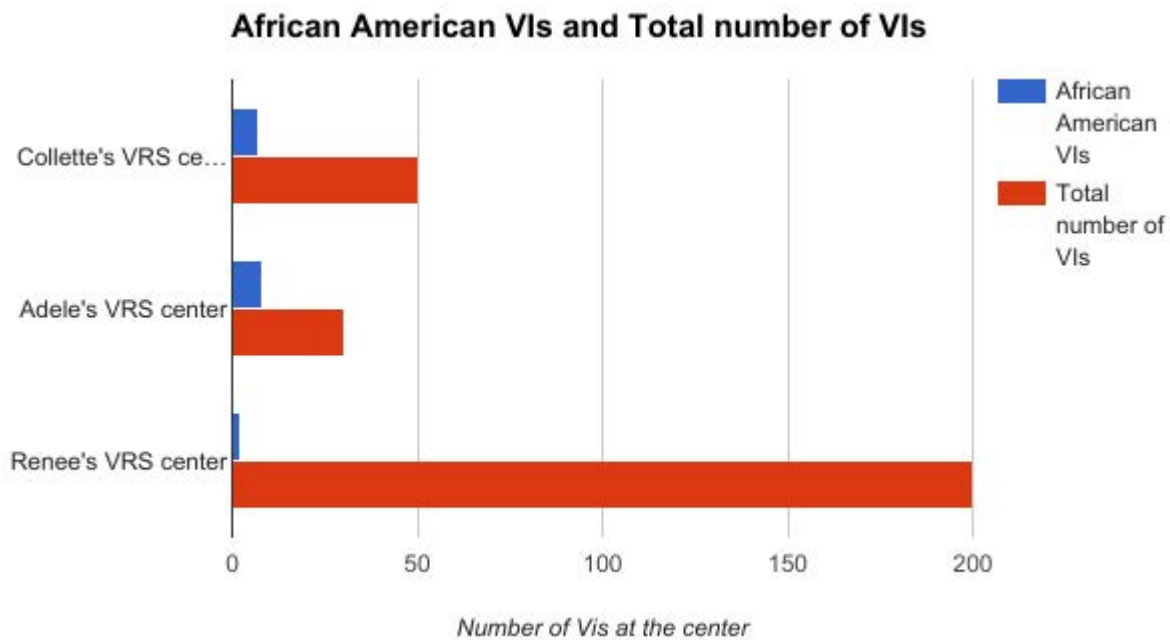


Figure 6. Diversity in Participants VRS Centers

In Adele's center, she reported that there are eight African American VIs. She stated that the city where the center is located has a small population of African Americans. To have eight African American VIs working in the same center was quite surprising to me. She indicated that the pool of African American VIs at her center have been working at the same center for many years and have relationships.

On the other hand, Collette's center is in a city where there is a modest population of African Americans. In her center, she said that there were between 5–10 African American VIs. Having that many African American VIs at her center afforded them the opportunity to form a support group. She said:

We kinda formed our own support network where you can kinda send someone a message "uh, just got another hang up" or (laughs) or someone in the center would make a remark and you are like "really?" You know, you would have to interpret racially charged comments you know and things like that.

From her comments above, we can conclude that having other VIs that are members of the same culture and understand the experiences that she went through did help, in some way, lessen the impact of the racial microaggressive behaviors. Unfortunately, Renee does not have this luxury and indeed feels isolated. Only a few VRS centers in the United States have this unique situation of having a handful of VIs belonging to the same minority group. This conclusion is based off the geographical distribution of African Americans across the United States.

Figure 7 below is an excerpt from the population and demographic data based on the analysis from the Census Bureau's March 2016 Current Population Survey. It shows the distribution of Whites and African Americans in each state. Judging by the graph, one can



conclude that no matter what state a VRS center is located, the probability of having a handful of African American VIs is small.

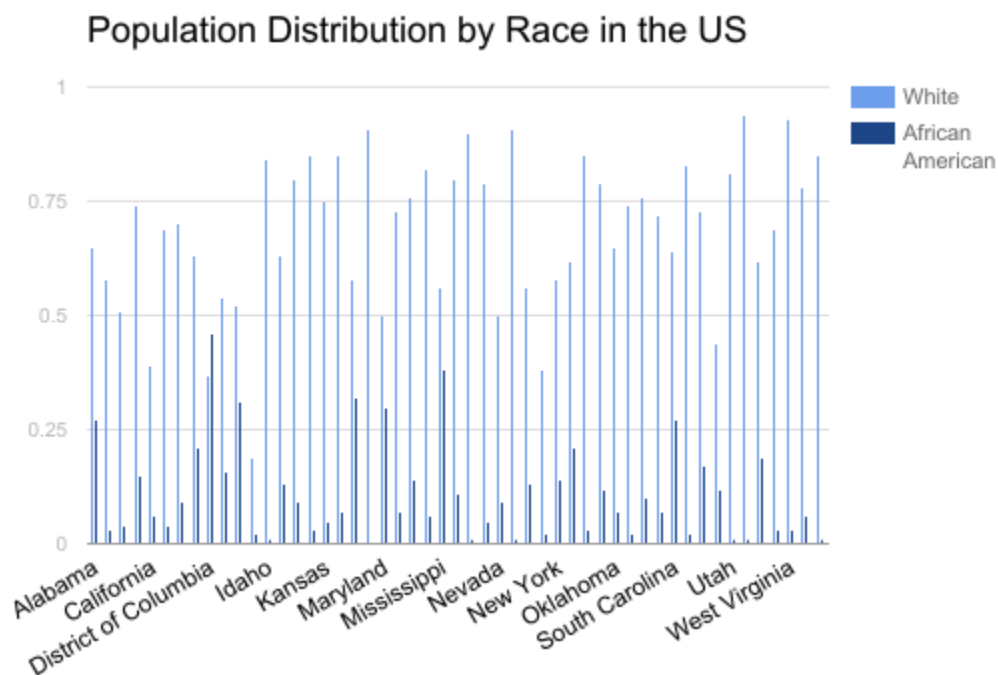


Figure 7. Population distribution by race in the United States

Collette, Adele, and Renee did mention that the VRS companies they work for organize a sort of forum where certain African American VIs are chosen from centers around the country to attend a summit to discuss issues pertaining to working in VRS. Renee attended this summit but Collette and Adele did not. Renee appreciated the effort put forward by the VRS company to try to cater to the needs of African American VIs. From what I could deduce from her comments, the opportunity to connect with fellow African American VIs was greatly appreciated but to reach out to these VIs was something she did not feel comfortable with. She said:

I think the Black interpreter summit that they put on every couple of years that I went to offers some connections. That's good. They do say we can reach out to somebody you know. There are a couple of Black directors there that I met that said we can contact

them if we need to. I have never done that though. I contact people I am comfortable with, people that I know more closely. But you know, they tell you that's an option.

Adele did not take advantage of attending the forum put up by the VRS company she works for. She said:

Actually, our VRS center hosted a summit geared towards African American interpreters so I think. I didn't go, haven't gone, I probably will be up to go the next go around. So, I think that has become more of a gathering and to express feelings also many of those interpreters have developed a list serve which I'm a part of. I have to admit that I am not as active as far as contributing to the comments. I'm just kinda at an age where now... where some of those issues don't concern me the way they did when I first started. I mean that those issues concerning African American/black interpreters face because I'm kind of leaving the field that I did for years try to fight those issues, try to fight you know, advocate for diversity, try to you know promote self-awareness for our community but at this point now, I just finishing up my last few months of interpreting.

Adele has indeed put in time and effort to improve the working environment for African American interpreters, but it seems that she has gotten to the point where she is ready to give up. This is disheartening. How many interpreters belonging to minority groups who have served as advocates feel this way? Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011) called this "racial battle fatigue" (p. 67). They said that the time and energy spent maneuvering unfavorable conditions and dealing with racial microaggression contributes primarily to the decline in positive attitudes as it relates to racial relations and social justice.

## **Mentorship**

When asked about mentors with compatible cultural backgrounds, Renee said one of the reasons why she has kept going in this field of interpreting is the rare occurrence of having a mentor with the same cultural background as hers. The mentor happened to be a Deaf African American interpreter. When asked if she had a mentor sharing the same cultural background as hers, Renee said:

I have one. He doesn't interpret anymore, he is now an administrator now at the Deaf school. Yes. I have one. Thankfully for him, you know I am thankful for him. Because at the beginning when I experienced all those micro and macro aggressions, he was there to talk me off the ledge and say, "stay in the profession" so I did, thankfully... Things related to culture of black culture even with black deaf people, he would help me... Deal with... You know. We talk about things... we could just freely about things without that apprehension not that you couldn't with somebody else. There was no apprehension, we could talk about anything. And when I felt... when I was clearly feeling racism from employer or deaf caller (DC) or anything like that... You know... we talked about ways to deal with it without coming off looking unprofessional. It was.... I think that was priceless.

When on the job and she is in need of assistance at that moment, she said,

You can talk to the manager but I don't feel that's an option because my manager is white. So, I don't think my manager would understand. They can say "oooooh I'm sorry that happened" but that to me is not... So, if I need an immediate something, to me that is not available but also there is no black VI there so how much can they do? I mean, you know what I am saying? That's a... I am an island. I know some centers have a lot of

black people together which seems awesome but I don't have that so my options are limited I believe. You know what I mean, if I need someone immediately.

When the same question was posed to Collette, she said:

No, they were white. A lot of times you didn't have black mentors. For me to have a black mentor when I worked at SLA was crazy. So, I was like...she specifically selected me because she was like "ok... I need... I'm going to work with a black interpreter and the person needs to have good skills." So...umm...she picked me for that reason. I don't know your background... you may very well be bi-racial but she said these white interpreters are going to try to cut you down at every opportunity they have and she was right.

Adele answered the same question by saying "no, all my mentors have been... None of them have been African American at all. No, no cultural at all... no, no cultural similarities."

From their responses above, for African American interpreters to have mentors who share the same cultural background is a luxury. Having this compatibility of cultures in a mentorship relationship is important when it has to do with issues of racism and how to cope with racism. It was surprising to me, though, to find out results from studies carried on youths from minority groups and their preference for mentorship. The majority of the youths opted for White mentors. Lee (1999), in her study on the effects of race on mentoring African American students, was equally surprised that African American students opted for White mentors. Their rationale was that if they needed cultural bonding, they could always go home to get it. However when it comes to their profession and gaining insight into the dominant culture in order to succeed in that world, the African American students chose White mentors. There seems to be a similar trend in the interpreting field, but when it comes to the longevity of one's profession with regards to

culture, it is beneficial to interpreters (both minority and majority) to have insights into how to navigate the cultural landscape associated with interpreting in a diverse population.

More work needs to be done to further diversify the field of interpreting in terms of culture. According to the statistics from RID as mentioned in the literature review, the percentage of minority groups in comparison to the majority group is still lacking. This means that many interpreters—especially new interpreters—lack mentorship opportunities with shared cultural backgrounds. Even with mentors from other cultures and especially from the majority culture, they need to acquire training on multiculturalism so as to be able to mentor a variety of interpreters. The mentor of an interpreter belonging to a minority group has to be privy to the challenges race can play in the career of their mentee. That way, the mentor can develop a pathway to ensuring the success of the mentee by connecting the mentee and helping them build a network of relationships to help foster their growth.

### **Cultural Education in Interpreter Education**

All three interviewees reported that they all attended a formal interpreter training program. They also reported that they were not exposed to any curriculum relating to multiculturalism. Adele reported that later on in her career, she had the opportunity to teach courses related to multiculturalism in a four-year college in the interpreting program. For there to be courses in multiculturalism taught, it means there has to be staff and faculty with lived experiences from those minority groups who can transfer their wealth of knowledge to the whole classroom (both majority and minority groups); everyone benefits from looking at the world from a different perspective. For the African American interpreting students, course content can be related to them in a meaningful way using what they are familiar with. Gay (2002) called this “culturally responsive teaching” (p. 106). She defined it as “using the cultural characteristics,

experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106).

Another benefit of having multicultural related courses taught in the interpreting program would be to teach about being culturally sensitive or culturally aware of the environment where these students would be working in the future. By exposing the students to the different cultures, hopefully less conflict will arise in the future in terms of racism and racial microaggressions, such as those experienced by many African American interpreters and narrated by the three interviewees in this study.

Finally, it is not only students belonging to the majority that need courses in multiculturalism; minorities need them, too. Course content could include issues faced by minority groups and how to recognize racial microaggressions (because not everyone recognizes it). The course content should also address how minority groups can address such issues as racism and racial microaggressions when confronted with it in the professional world and how to educate others on their inappropriate behaviors without sounding confrontational.

### **VRS Company Support of African American VIs: Inadequate resources for minority VIs**

For the question “Does your company have something in place to help VIs work through this types of issues, by ‘issues’ I mean racism/racial microaggressions,” Collette responded by saying:

When it comes to the ummm the support I ... they started a halfhearted effort to put together um some type of black interpreter retreat whatever is called. And they picked one black interpreter from every center to go and like talk about these issues and bring it back to the center. I don’t think it was productive at all. I mean... we can all agree via

instant message that black interpreters face racism at the center “what are you going to do about it?” is the question. So, I mean, for you to go and have a retreat.

When asked if she had attended the “retreat,” she answered:

I didn’t go, I knew it was a waste of my time, to be honest. I mean, because people come up with ideas because they want to make it seem like they are doing something but at the end of the day I mean, they are not really doing anything.

Collette also responded saying: “They don’t care about any ... you know the only event they would care about is if someone pulled out you know genitalia on the screen. Other than that, you know they don’t really care how we are treated.” Adele, on the other hand, responded:

One thing I have to say about the company I work for. They are very, very supportive of interpreters, fully empowered, fully.... Especially when there are issues like that. I don’t know whether I’m just jaded or I’m just at the point where you know I have experienced racism for so long that it doesn’t have the same impact that it has on the younger interpreters.

Renee responded:

Well they have the ... Not specific .... Well they have the, when you have a problem, you can call the.... There is a company that ... umm... psychology... I don’t know what it is called. But you know, they tell you that’s an option. It’s not a realistic option because there is only one black in my center.

Adele and Renee reported that their VRS companies are making an effort to cater to the needs of African Americans VIs but two out of three of the interviewees do not believe that their company is doing enough. Collette went as far as to say that what the company she worked for

did was a facade. She said that the company's bottom line was business and not on their interpreters. She added:

If you experience abuse of callers, take an extra break or whatever come talk to me but that is not the case or like or okay we have to act natural. You know don't call a team too often, don't um go over your breaks. You are 82% not 83%, you know, you probably need to get it up to 83.3.

Events such as those mentioned by Collette above are enough to discourage one from working in such a situation if perceived this way. This reduces the morale of workers in any organization if the workers feel that their interests are being ignored. When employees feel that company goals are prioritized at the expense of their well-being, employees disengage from their work or are out of tune with company expectations.

Attridge defined work engagement as "a term used to describe the extent to which employees are involved with, committed to, enthusiastic, and passionate about their work" (Attridge, 2009, as cited in Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 383). Once employees lose these traits, their future in that company may be cut short. Attridge studied how employee work engagement can be improved in the workplace to improve engagement in its employees. When African American VIs feel that the companies they work for have their best interest at heart, I believe the more likely the attrition rate of African American VIs will reduce. In the long run, the more diverse the pool of interpreters is, the more beneficial it will be for the consumers of VRS.

### **Cultivating Safe Working Conditions: Training**

A question was posed to all three interviewees, "What changes would you like to see happen in the VRS setting?" Adele responded saying:



I just think that more training needs to be given. You know, training in helping people to see that interpreters are human. And often times, people get upset because we don't understand but they don't realize we don't know you, we don't know who the characters are in your story. So, if I don't understand something, it's because I don't have any prep, nothing to tell what has happened. I kind of figured out as I go along. So, understand that rather than get upset because I don't understand a name sign, and when I say "who?." they kind of look at me "you don't know who this is?" And I'm like "no." And so, that's the thing, maybe... sometimes you think it's common sense but maybe it's more rare sense. People don't understand that... there are some savvy consumers who understand that so they give you... this is all the background, all that information but we still have a subset of ones who get upset that you don't understand, that's my biggest frustration.

Renee responded saying:

There isn't a lot that you can do... When they set up videophones for deaf people or when they do those little educational videos for them, I think some more stressing that, that is not the culture of the company so it's not going to be accepted or.... I don't know, more outreach to the consumers that the company does not stand for that. You know what I mean. Definitely more required not the optional uumm interpreter education ...whatever you want to call it... videos they put out for training...you know, some are optional, some are required. I think it needs to be... There is one on black/African American interpreters—really great but it is optional workshop. I think it needs to be required something.

Collette's response was:

So, the number one thing I think of is the break schedule is inadequate. But for black interpreters, I think there should be.... For interpreters in general, I think there should be some type of..... just like teaming... you can click/hit a button in a teaming situation... maybe there is button you hit when there is an abusive caller during the call not just waiting afterwards and then you log it as an abusive call. And kind of talking about what an abusive call looks like and I think that center managers should be trained on racial microaggressions and they should be trained on making the center itself an inclusive environment because a lot of it... It would be great for white interpreters to take cultural sensitive training and but I think we can take it too. But it's like preaching to the choir, you know what I mean. I think they have to take it and we take a different one on how to deal with it instead of internalizing some of it.

From the responses above, the overwhelming theme is training, training for both the Deaf consumers and the video interpreters, both minorities and whites. Going in line with this theme, when asked if they were taught any course related to multiculturalism, all interviewees responded "no." Adele, who seems like the only one among the three interviewees who was least negatively impacted by racism or racial microaggression in this study, did report that she was not taught multiculturalism during her ITP education. Years later after graduation, she taught multiculturalism in a four-year ITP program for several years. This probably equipped her to better handle the situation of racism/racial microaggressions at her VRS center.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

I am an African American VI working in a VRS setting. What is unique, also, is that I am an immigrant. Moving to the United States, I encountered “culture shock.” Culture shock is frequently used to describe how people react to novel or unaccustomed situations (Bochner, 2003). Even though I had heard of the concept of racism, nothing prepared me for the experiences I was going to go through being a minority. Working in VRS as an African American, I experienced racism and racial microaggressions. I had a hard time enjoying my work at the VRS company. I started wondering if other African American VIs experienced the same issues and if they did, how did they remain in the field.

In undertaking this study, I underestimated the amount of work, the depth of information and the emotional rollercoaster I would encounter in the process. There are many questions left to be answered and many facets yet to be discovered related to the topic. An African American video interpreter working in the video relay service setting does have a unique experience not shared by any other minority group especially when, as Collette stated, “it’s [race/color of skin] the first thing people see before anything else happens.”

From the responses of the interviewees, even though there were some similarities between their responses to questions asked, there were some differences as well. This demonstrates that while belonging to the same minority group, differences still occur due to various factors such as their lived experiences, location, age, socioeconomic factors, personalities, and self-identity, just to mention a few. Out of the three interviewees in this study, two have left the field of interpreting. The pool of African Americans interpreters has been reduced by two—one by burnout, and the other leaving the field entirely.

Interpreters in general need to utilize supervision (Holcombe, 2014) as one of the available tools at their disposal. The participants in the study were aware of what supervision is but none took advantage of it. One of the interviewees stated that supervision is common among newer interpreters. It would be expedient for the more seasoned interpreters to get involved in supervision either as a supervision leader, leading newer interpreters through their cases or issues they encounter, or as a case giver needing help with issues they face in the workplace.

Burnout is a major problem for the interpreting profession, contributing to a national shortage of sign language interpreters as mentioned earlier. More experienced interpreters are leaving the profession faster than it takes to train new interpreters (Dean & Pollard, 2001). We have to devise a way to reduce burnout in the field of interpreting, and this starts with the involvement of stakeholders in the profession. VRS companies have to revise their policies to accommodate the needs of employees by improving work conditions, which in turn increases employee loyalty. Attridge (2009) said, “employers who measure and use employee engagement data in managing their business operations reveal benefits to the company in areas of improved organizational culture, increased employee and customer loyalty, and higher sales and profits” (p. 394).

Also, VRS companies need to advocate for their VIs when dealing with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and their policies. When the FCC makes demands that seem detrimental to the health and well-being of VIs, more needs to be done to ensure that VIs are healthy. This trickles down to the consumers VRS companies serve, in that there will be more VIs available to work the phones which translates to less time wasted for VRS users waiting on an available VI to process their calls.

Formal interpreter training programs need to reach out to minority groups and neighborhoods. These programs also need to invest in hiring faculty from minority groups. In a needs assessment report carried out by Shaffer and Cokely (2016), when African American interpreters were asked what was the biggest hurdle encountered by people belonging to minority groups with regards to education, the number one culprit was finances. Scholarships should be offered to these groups as an incentive to enroll in interpreting programs.

By hiring teachers from minority groups, topics that seem to be a taboo can be brought to the surface, including social issues or controversial issues such as social injustice, racism, and hegemony. Outreach programs and campaigns need to be carried out to reach those groups who otherwise would have ventured into this line of work. Having faculty belonging to minority groups means an opportunity to incorporate curriculum relating to multiculturalism into their classes. This further educates interpreting students to sensitivity and self-awareness when they become professional interpreters and hopefully reduce the occurrence of racism and racial microaggressions and help people of color cope with such mistreatments when they do occur.

RID has a part to play in improving the cultural landscape of interpreting. As the governing body of sign language interpreters in the United States, RID has the opportunity to incorporate workshops focusing on diversity, multiculturalism, and racial microaggressions during their biennial conferences. As part of the requirements for maintaining certifications, this topic should have a place in the required Continuing Education Units (CEUs) interpreters should acquire. CEUs are used as a measurement in continuing education programs in order to assist professionals to maintain either their license or certification in their various professions.

Fellow interpreters in the field need to look out for each other, especially the under-represented groups. It would be beneficial to the field of interpreting if those who have excelled

in this field (seasoned interpreters) served as mentors to sustain the longevity of this profession by training new interpreters entering the profession. Mentors belonging to minority groups should get more involved in the field by mentoring others, both minority and majority groups. There was once the National Organization for Black Interpreters (NAOBI), but now only a few affiliated chapters are still active. I believe this national organization should be revived, because it is a necessity—especially for African American interpreters who are isolated. It is a great opportunity for African Americans to network with other interpreters and learn from one another.

The Deaf community, being a diverse group in itself, has nuggets of wisdom to pass on to interpreters especially the new interpreters entering the field. We, as interpreters, cater to this group and would love to work hand in hand through feedback on how to improve our work. Also, the members of the Deaf community should be more involved in the training of interpreters by being involved in the education of interpreters through giving workshop presentations, working in formal educational settings, and getting involved in the interpreting community.

For the Deaf community using VRS, it would be beneficial to take the time to know what it entails to work in the VRS setting. Interpreters are human beings capable of making mistakes and should be viewed as such and not as machines. Corrections or complaints should be made in a civil manner.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has various limitations, including the size of the sample, which may not represent the general population of African American VIs. The number of people who responded to the online survey was very small compared to the general targeted population. Choosing to interview three people for this study was an effort to take a peek into the world of

interpreting through the eyes of African American VIs. The size also had to do with managing the amount of data to be analyzed.

Another limitation is the fact that as the principal researcher, I am also a member of the group under study. I am aware that my bias may have played a part in how the data was analyzed. I bring with me my past experiences and my background to the study. Having this in mind, I had to be cognizant of the potential of my bias corrupting the data.

The sample interviewed for this study comprises a homogenous group; African Americans who are male or do not identify with any sex were excluded. This limits the study because not all African American interpreters were represented. Even though the profession is made up of mostly female or those who identify as female, it is important to research other genders and what their experience looks like. How females respond to racial microaggression, for example, differs from how males react to the same situation (Jang & Johnson, 2005). Also, when it comes to service providers, like VRS, genders react differently to role strain. Females seemed to be more negatively impacted by stress due to role strain compared to their male counterparts. With job satisfaction, for men, it is highly related to quitting their job according to the study carried out by Babin and Boles (1996).

Timing also played a role in limiting this study. Given the time constraint, reaching a larger population sample was not feasible at the time the online survey was disbursed. I believe a better picture could have been obtained if the study followed these VIs through an extended period of time. This would provide us with trends if any and changes happening in the field of interpreting especially with regards to race.

## **Further Research**

The study of the experiences of African Americans working in the VRS setting is one that cannot be fully covered in the time allotted. This study just barely scratched the surface. I would like to see more research done comparing African American VIs who are new to the VRS setting with those who have been working in VRS for some time. This would inform the profession on what factors, if any, favor or hinder the experiences of African Americans working in VRS. Also, research needs to be done on the type of personalities that thrive in VRS being a difficult setting to work in (Dean & Pollard, 2001). It would also be beneficial to study VIs who have exited the field to find out why and what can be done to mitigate the declining numbers of African Americans working in VRS.

## **Recommendations**

The data from the three participants in this study show that African American interpreters experience added stressors coupled with other stressors that normally accompany working in the VRS setting. The resounding theme from the interviewees for improving working conditions was training of both VRS users and VIs in general as well as African American VIs in particular. Exposure to racism/racial microaggressions has been documented to affect the health of African Americans. As diverse as the Deaf community is, so also should be the interpreting community. In order to keep the interpreting community diverse, African Americans working in the interpreting field should be retained in the field. This can be achieved by:

1. Recruiting potential interpreting students from minority groups.
2. Teaching courses on multiculturalism in ITPs, thereby exposing the majority group to other cultures and teaching them how to navigate between cultures in terms of interpreting.



3. Offering workshops focusing on cultural awareness, racism, and racial microaggressions.
4. For VRS companies, their VIs should take mandatory trainings on cultural awareness and racial microaggressions. For VIs belonging to minority groups, trainings should be offered on how to recognize racial microaggressive behavior, how to respond as well as how to cope with them. Management plays a huge role in setting the tone in the workplace. It is important for management as well to be trained in cultural awareness. They can have a huge impact on VIs from minority groups by how they address issues concerning those VIs.
5. With some of the VRS companies actually having set up a forum for African American VIs to meet to discuss issues, from the data analyzed, more needs to be done. From the comments made by the interviewees, African American VIs have to be encouraged to get involved in being part of the solution.
6. VRS companies should have to change their policies in regard to reporting abuse from VRS users as well as fellow colleagues.
7. With regards to rules set by the FCC, VRS companies should advocate for their VIs in general. Some of the rules and policies set up make the job difficult to do. Many interpreters are exiting the field. More needs to be done to reduce attrition by improving the working conditions for interpreters.

In closing, a lot remains to be done in our society in the way of education. More qualitative studies need to be carried out in order to broaden our knowledge of how racism and racial microaggressions affect the lives of interpreters of color as a whole and African Americans specifically. The more this topic is discussed in all areas of the interpreting field, the more

enlightened we all will be and more comfortable talking out the issues. It takes everyone being involved to make the change happen, albeit slow. These include interpreters of color, interpreters from the majority culture, VRS companies, FCC, interpreter education programs, and the Deaf community as a whole.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Questionnaire questions: Pre-interview Survey

#### Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
  - 18 - 20
  - 21- 30
  - 31 - 40
  - 41+
  
2. What gender do you identify with?
  - male
  - female
  - prefer not to answer
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - African American
  - American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - Asian, Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander
  - Chicano, Latino or Hispanic
  - White or Caucasian
  - Prefer not to answer
  - Other
  
4. Do you work in a VRS setting or have you worked in a VRS setting?
  - Yes
  - No
  
5. How long have you worked or did you work in the VRS setting?
  - 0 - 4 years
  - 5 - 10 years
  - 11 - 20 years
  
6. You currently hold:
  - CI/CT
  - NIC
  - BEI

- NAD
- ED K-12
- None of the above
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you believe you have unique experience as an African American video interpreter (VI)?
- Yes
  - No
  - I don't know

8. Have you encountered any form of racial microaggressions from VRS users?  
**Definition:** *Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.* (Sue et al., 2017). For example, "You speak good English," "When I look at you, I don't see color," "You are beautiful for a black girl," "You people.....?"
- Yes
  - No

9. If the answer is yes, in what ways did you experience racial microaggression?  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. What is the highest education obtained?
- High school diploma
  - Associates degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate degree

11. Did you attend an Interpreter Education Program (IEP)/Interpreter Training Program (ITP)/Interpreter Preparation Program (IPP)?
- Yes
  - No

12. How often have you experienced overt racism towards you while on the job?
- Extremely frequently
  - Very frequently
  - Moderately frequently
  - Slightly frequently
  - Not at all

13. What region do you reside in?

- West/Pacific including Hawaii and Alaska - CA, OR, NV, WA, ID, HI, AK
- Midwest - MT, ND, SD, WY, CO, NE, KS, UT
- Northeast - NH, VT, NY, NJ, PA, CT, RI, WV, VA, DE, MD, DC, MASS
- Southwest - TX, NM, LA, OK, AZ, NV
- Southeast - TN, GA, AL, MS, SC, NC, FL
- Great Lakes - MN, WI, IA, MO, IL, MI, IN, KY, OH

14. Are you willing to be contacted in the near future to participate in an interview concerning your experience?

- Yes
- No

15. If yes, please provide your email address below: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: RECRUIT AND CONSENT DOCUMENTS

### **Facebook post and email message to video relay service companies for recruiting participants for the survey**

#### **Online Survey Participation Consent Form**

Dear colleagues,

I am a master's degree student at Western Oregon University in the College of Education under the supervision of Dr. Elisa Maroney. I am conducting a research study seeking to explore the experiences African American video interpreters have working in the video relay service (VRS). I am requesting your participation in an online survey that can be accessed directly through this link: [https://docs.google.com/a/mail.wou.edu/forms/d/1UXzvJQ1gX09\\_Hm\\_NZilrSS0tiKRYx3VNZPGrdhZQ7Wg/](https://docs.google.com/a/mail.wou.edu/forms/d/1UXzvJQ1gX09_Hm_NZilrSS0tiKRYx3VNZPGrdhZQ7Wg/). It will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

#### **Who is eligible?**

In order to participate in this study, participants must satisfy the following criteria:

- a) Participants must be 18 years or older
- b) Participants must be African American
- c) Participants must work or have worked in the VRS setting.

#### **Benefits**

Understanding the experiences African American interpreters working in the VRS setting will help shed some light on some of the challenges they experience. The participants chosen for the study will benefit from knowing that their story is being told to a wider audience, which could lead to changes being made by stakeholders involved such as VRS companies and interpreter education programs.

#### **Risks**

This project may bring up emotional memories for the participants when they are being asked to tell their story. If that happens, the participant may close their browser and discontinue their participation.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of the survey instrument will be kept strictly confidential and will be kept secured in a password-protected computer, which can only be accessed by the principal investigator and her faculty advisor. If any examples are used for the thesis or other publications, no identifying information since no personal information will be obtained.

#### **Contacts**

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Taiwo Olopade, Principal Investigator at [tolopade15@wou.edu](mailto:tolopade15@wou.edu) or 971-998-8832 or Dr. Elisa Maroney, Thesis Committee Chair, at [maronee@wou.edu](mailto:maronee@wou.edu) or 503-838-8735. If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant,

you may contact the WOU Institutional Review Board at any time about the study at 503-838-9200.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and if at any time during the study you no longer wish to partake, you can withdraw from the study without recourse.

I do not foresee any physical harm of any kind during the course of this study.  
By clicking on the above link, consent is implied.  
Thank you for your participation.

**About the Researcher:**

Taiwo Olopade is a nationally certified African American Sign Language interpreter with over 7 years of experience working primarily in the VRS setting in Portland Oregon.

Taiwo Olopade, NIC

Principal Investigator  
tolopade15@wou.edu|  
971-998-8832

Western Oregon University  
College of Education  
Program of Masters of Arts in Interpreting Studies

## APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?
2. In which VRS company have you worked/do you work in?
3. On average, how many hours do you work in VRS on a weekly basis?
4. In VRS, do you experience hang ups? If so, what do you make of them? How does it make you feel when that happens?
5. How many African Americans work at your VRS center? Do you confide in them? Do you have a rapport with them?
6. What type of support network do you have at your center to go to in times of emotional hardship with callers? If yes, describe the type of support.
7. In the questionnaire, you mentioned you have experienced racial microaggressions from VRS users; in what forms have you experienced this?
8. How often do you experience racial micro aggression?
9. How did the experience make you feel?
10. Did you do anything about the caller? Did you seek moral support? If yes, was it in-house or where you referred to someone outside of the center?
11. Does your company have something in place to help VIs walk through this type of issues? If yes, how was the experience?
12. Have you ever contemplated quitting VRS because of this issue or other related issues?
13. If yes, why? And if no, why not?

14. What measures do you take in order to continue working in VRS despite experiencing racial microaggressions?
15. Did your training include multiculturalism? If yes, what and in what classes?
16. Have you experienced racial microaggressions from your White colleagues? If yes, please expand on your experience.
17. Do you have mentors who you share the same culture or identify with? If yes, with what culture do you identify? Please elaborate.
18. What else can you tell me about your experience working in VRS that makes it difficult to do your job?
19. Does the VRS company you work for provide counseling service to its VIs? If yes, please describe.
20. How does your company deal with callers who are mean to their VIs when it is reported by VIs?
21. Have you participated in supervision? If yes, how so?
22. Have you ever thought of quitting work in VRS? Why? Why not?
23. What changes would you like to see happen at your place of employment in regards to microaggressions in the workplace?
24. How did this interview make you feel?
25. What is the size of your workplace?
26. What is the racial composition of your workplace?
27. Where is your workplace located?



28. Do you have family support in close proximity to where you live? If yes, what sort of support do they give you to help you cope with work?

29. Who is your support in times of when work is unbearable?

Possible follow-up questions

1. Was there something else that you would like to share that you have not yet had an opportunity to share?
2. Tell me more about your response to \_\_\_\_\_
3. Please give me an example of your response to \_\_\_\_\_
4. What other information would you like to add?
5. Tell me more about your answer
6. Please give me an example that clarifies your answer

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM: INTERVIEW

### **Participant Information and Consent Form**

Dear colleagues,

I am a graduate student at Western Oregon University in the College of Education working towards my Master of Arts degree in Interpreting Studies under the supervision of Dr. Elisa Maroney. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences African American video interpreters have in the video relay service (VRS) setting.

#### **Invitation to participate**

If you work or have worked in VRS in the past, you are invited to partake in this research study to share your experience. Your input would inform various stakeholders as to ways to improve working conditions for African American video interpreters in particular and other minority groups as a whole. This study may also provide African American interpreters and other interpreters of color with ways to deal with issues that arise while working in the VRS setting.

#### **Eligible Participants**

In order to participate in this study, participants must satisfy the following criteria:

- a) Participants must be 18 years or older
- b) Participants must be African American
- c) Participants must be female
- d) Participants must work or have worked in the VRS setting with a minimum of five (5) years
- e) Participants must be nationally certified

#### **Benefits**

Understanding the experience African American interpreters working in the VRS setting will help shed some light on some of the challenges they experience. The participants chosen for the study will benefit from knowing that their story is being told to a wider audience, which could lead to changes being made by stakeholders involved such as VRS companies and interpreter education programs.

#### **Risks**

This project may bring up emotional memories for the participants when they are being asked to tell the story. If that happens, the participant will have the option to take a break and resume the interview when ready or discontinue the interview. If the participants wish to discontinue the interview entirely, they may decide if they would like the information gathered so far to be discarded from the study and deleted from the system.

If participant(s) experience stress of any kind, they can consult their counselor provided either through their personal medical insurance or through company provided counselors.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidential information such as name, location or any identifying marker will not be used in the final thesis. Knowing how small the community of African American interpreters is, data collected for this study will be kept strictly confidential and will be kept secured in a password protected computer which can only be accessed by me and my faculty advisor. No identifying markers including locations or names will be used but instead pseudonyms will be used.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and if at any time during the study you no longer wish to partake, you can withdraw from the study without recourse.

I do not foresee any physical harm of any kind during the course of this study. Thank you for your participation.

### **About the Researcher:**

Taiwo Olopade is a nationally certified African American Sign Language interpreter with over 7 years of experience working primarily in the VRS setting in Portland Oregon.

Taiwo Olopade, NIC  
Principal Investigator  
tolopade15@wou.edu|971-998-8832  
Western Oregon University  
College of Education Program of Masters of Arts in Interpreting Studies

### **Contact Information**

The Institutional Review Board at Western Oregon University has approved this research project. For questions about the review process, please contact the IRB at (503) 838-9200 or [irb@wou.edu](mailto:irb@wou.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Taiwo Olopade, Principal Investigator at [tolopade15@wou.edu](mailto:tolopade15@wou.edu) or 971-998-8832 or Dr. Elisa Maroney, Thesis Committee Chair, at [maronee@wou.edu](mailto:maronee@wou.edu) or 503-838-8735. If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the WOU Institutional Review Board at any time about the study at 503-838-9200.

### **Consent statement**

By replying to this email, you consent to participating in this study.

## APPENDIX E: REPORTED MICROAGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS (ONLINE SURVEY)

Deaf caller: "Where are you from?" Me: "America." Deaf caller: "No, your parents?" Me: "America." Deaf caller: "No, your ancestors." Me: "My grandparents and great grandparents are all from here." Deaf caller: "Oh, you look a little dark to be American. I guess you are tan like me." Or when I come on the screen "Black- no." Hangs up remote. Or "are you American?" Me: "yes." DC: "oh good as long as you are American I don't mind your race." Interpreting racist content, I could go on and on

I do not see color. I just love all people

"I want a normal interpreter", using terminology such as emphasis on the words "BLACK people" or "THAT BLACK guy", etc.

You African, right? Your husband is black too right, I know how you people are.

Verbal abuse

Many callers inform me of their Black relationships- son-in-law, daughter-in-law, etc. Many run and get pictures to show me. Not really microaggression though. I don't really mind. It's their way of bonding with me especially if we are on a long hold. I do find it interesting that they want me to know they have a 'connection' to Black folks.

"You don't look like the people on the street with the loud music you look like the woman that cleans my house." "I need an educated person to interpret this call." "Obama's Sister."

Several callers have informed me that it wasn't personal but they didn't like black people and disconnected the call.

Often – "You are beautiful for a black girl..."

Consumers, with regularity, disconnecting as soon as I appear on screen. Inane questions about my natural twisted hair. Being reprimanded in a demeaning way (although it may not have been racially motivated)

When I appear on the screen, the caller jump back a little in shock. Others just see me and hang up. Some will ask, do you know ASL.

being startled when I come up on screen. (happens periodically) Once I was even told 'I didn't expect'.... ummmm, well, .... never mind. I could mention many things. The 'I'm gonna sign super-fast because I don't think you're qualified to understand...then as the call progresses, the change in demeanor is very apparent, etc.

A white Deaf man called me Nigger (using the sign for that word)

You are a great interpreter, I love black people.

What are you?

I don't see color... Transfer, I don't want Black Voice...

I don't see color, "you people" comments in regards to BLM

"You did a great job, I am surprised" "I don't know you, please transfer to another interpreter"

"Please transfer to another male interpreter" (Hearing person) "I am not sure about the Interpreter, let's hang up"

I had another colleague say to me, "I don't know how you got NIC Master and I didn't."

Most common is "What are you?"

Hang ups mostly.

"You speak well." "You don't sound black." "I have a friend who looks just like you."

Oh, you are a good black interpreter

Called the n word, 'don't like black interpreters' 'wow me surprised you sign good'

The deaf consumer would comment to someone in the room with them, "it's a black person, what should I do?"

I answered no because what I experience wasn't directed towards me, but the person was looking for an apartment to rent and mentioned that an area was not to their liking because the area had a lot of blacks in it. I was offended although it wasn't about me.

Asking for immediate transfer to another VI before the call is connected

Called nigger several times; deaf person watching me suspiciously then suddenly telling hearing party "I'll call you right back, then hanging up; before greeting caller on VP, deaf person says "no I don't want you," then hangs up, etc.....

from callers being totally nasty; or telling me I look like Michelle Obama or mixing me up with a previous interpreter of color on VP ... 'you again?' or asking my ethnic background....

You are beautiful for a black girl; Assumes I know every other black person; Compares me to the last black interpreter who may or may have not messed up during their interaction; Did not want to use me as the interpreter because presume black voice.

One way that I have experienced racial microaggression, or maybe this is merely just an assumption, but it was when a caller deliberately and discreetly behaved in a unsettles manner after seeing an interpreter of color appear on the screen and remained uncomfortable until they see me sign and connected "you sign well for a black interpreter."