# Qualitative Exploration of Case Conferencing and Occupational Stress with Video Relay Interpreters

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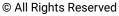Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/joi

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## ABSTRACT

American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters working in Video Relay Service (VRS) call centers experience more occupational stress than interpreters working in community settings, leading to burnout, attrition, and loss of qualified interpreters for the Deaf and hard of hearing community. Case conferencing that incorporates the use of Demand Control-Schema (DC-S; Dean & Pollard, 2001) is an emergent strategy that may be effective in decreasing VRS interpreters' stress and burnout but has yet to be thoroughly studied. The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative case study is to understand how participation in an adapted DC-S case conferencing group assisted VRS interpreters reducing occupational stress and attrition in VRS. Data from this study yielded four major themes: (1) reduction of occupational stress, (2) application of skills learned in groups, (3) integration into practice, and (4) retention in VRS. Although not a distinct theme, improvement in call center culture emerged as an additional finding. Our findings suggest that case conferencing is a helpful strategy to manage stressors that are unique to working in VRS and can promote interpreter retention.

## INTRODUCTION

American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreters who work in the field of Video Relay Service (VRS) experience an abnormally high rate of occupational stress in contrast to interpreters who work in community settings (Bower, 2015; Dean & Pollard, 2001; Dean, Pollard, & Samar, 2010; Napier, Skinner & Turner, 2017; Schwenke, 2015; Wessling & Shaw, 2014). The available literature, although still emergent, indicates that occupational stressors experienced by VRS Interpreters are different than those experienced by interpreters working in other settings, such as quick transitions between very different types of calls (e.g., transitioning from interpreting a pizza order to interpreting a 911 call), interpreting in highly positively and negatively emotionally charged situations (e.g., interpreting news of the birth of a child in one call and an employer calling to furlough an employee a few calls later),  and lack of "down time" to rest or mentally reset between calls (Bower, 2015; Dean et al., 2010; Napier et al., 2017; Wessling & Shaw, 2014). However,

interpreter education and training rarely cover topics such as strategies for managing occupational stress (Bower, 2015; Dean & Pollard, 2001; Harvey, 2003), much less site-specific stressors that occur in VRS. However, these occupational stressors can considerably impact an interpreter's ability to provide effective and ethical interpreting services, as noted by Dean and Pollard (2001):

> The characteristics and goings-on in the physical environment, the dynamics and interactions between the people who are present, and even the "inner noise" of the interpreter contribute to the accuracy, or lack thereof, of the resulting translation. The competent interpreter must understand and respond appropriately to the language *and* non-language aspects of each interpreting assignment (p. 1).

This chronic occupational stress may lead to reduced interpreter availability in VRS settings. Bower (2015) surveyed 355 VRS interpreters and found that 60% reported experiencing burnout, 22% reported taking a voluntary reduction in hours worked within VRS, and 0.4% reported leaving the field altogether due to occupational stress. When VRS interpreters reduce the number of hours they work or leave the field altogether, they decrease the number of experienced interpreters working in the VRS setting as well as increase the general shortage of interpreters (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), creating barriers to access and participation for deaf and hard of hearing consumers.

**DEMAND CONTROL-SCHEMA**

Demand Control-Schema (DC-S; Dean & Pollard, 2001) provides a theoretical framework that assists in conceptualizing the link between an interpreter's occupational stressors and their ability to make effective decisions. DC-S is based on Karasek's (1979) Demand Control Theory which operationalizes demands as the "requirement(s) of a job" and controls as the "degree to which the individual has the power to 'act upon' the demands" (p. 2). It is the interplay of demands and control resources, not solely demands, that predict occupational stress and subsequent job satisfaction. Karasek postulates that workers in occupations that have high occupational demands but who also have greater controls (often perceived as absent in the VRS work setting) experience higher job satisfaction.

DC-S divides individual interpreting encounters into four types of demands that elicit a response from the interpreter (Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2011). As contextualized for VRS, these demands include: (a) environmental demands (e.g., unfamiliarity with call terminology, being unable to see or hear consumers clearly; noise or temperature differences in a call center); (b) interpersonal demands (e.g., differing expectations of consumers, misunderstanding the role of the interpreter--administrative assistant, family member); (c) paralinguistic demands (e.g., accents, regionalisms, one-handed signing); and (d) intrapersonal demands (e.g., issues that arise within the person of the individual interpreter--recent stressful life events, personal life experience, ability to manage stress).

The DC-S model is helpful in understanding the VRS interpreter's increased occupational stress. When interpreters are unable to discern which demand is causing them the most distress (i.e., their main demand (Dean & Pollard, 2011) they then are unable to respond with an effective control to counter the troublesome demand. By engaging in case conferencing, VRS interpreters can learn to decrease their occupational stress by identifying more effective controls to meet the variety of demands they experience in their relay calls.

*CASE CONFERENCING*

Emerging paradigms in sign language interpreting conceptualize interpreters as practice professionals who engage in reflexivity to continually improve their practice (Curtis, 2017; Dean & Pollard, 2011; Hetherington, 2012). One method of reflexivity that has been reported in the interpreting literature is case conferencing (Curtis, 2017; Hetherington, 2012). Case conferencing is a reflective practice in which a group of professionals meet to increase their critical thinking skills by analyzing their work and exploring alternative options in their decision making (Curtis, 2017). Case conferencing may range from a debriefing session between as few as two interpreters (Zenizo, 2013) to a large, facilitated group session (Curtis, 2017). For the purposes of this study, we conceptualize case conferencing as confidential and professional discussions in a facilitated group setting with members who practice the norms of being non-judgmental and expressing empathy with each other. Using a non-judgmental stance and employing empathy are essential for group members to feel safe in exploring their own decision-making process. Through case conferencing, interpreters learn strategies for processing the myriad of occupational stressors that may impede their ability to provide effective interpreting services in VRS.

*AN ADAPTED FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING CASE CONFERENCING AND DC-S*

Case conferencing that incorporates the use of DC-S is an emergent strategy for decreasing the VRS interpreters' stress and burnout (Bower, 2015; Curtis, 2017; Dean & Pollard, 2001; Schwenke, 2015). Case conferencing can be used in conjunction with the DC-S model to assist interpreters to critically evaluate their "moment-to-moment decision making" (Dean & Pollard, 2011, p. 160) which is especially helpful in the fast-paced and highly demanding environment of VRS. In the case conferencing group, VRS interpreters reflect on the decision making process that occurred in a specific call in order to evaluate the quality of their work. Bernard and Goodyear (2019) describe how counselors use case conferencing to first engage retrospectively in reflection-on-action (ROA) that allows them to consider the effectiveness of their work with clients. Similarly, interpreters can use case conferencing to assess for themselves whether the controls they chose to use in response to a demand led to meeting the perceived goal of the interpreted interaction. If the interpreter decides that another control may have produced a better result, they then have the opportunity to use that new control in a future call. Bernard and Goodyear (2019) describe how the counselor's initial retrospective reflection-on-action (ROA) then becomes a reflection-in-action (RIA) in their future work with clients. Similarly, the VRS interpreter applies the insight they have gained through analyzing their work in case conferencing to provide more controls in their future work-related decisions, (e.g., alerting the caller that more lighting is needed instead of continuing to struggle to see the signing).

The adapted framework includes a facilitator who uses group norms to create a safe space, a movement exercise to depict the decisional latitude continuum, colors to differentiate the different elements of DC-S and writing out the case presentation for group members to view. In addition, the facilitator models a case of their own in the first session to assist in decreasing the potential power differential between the members and the facilitator. Group norms are essential for increasing members' feelings of safety so that they can explore their decision making process without fear of judgement. These norms will vary depending upon participant input but include a) following the tenets of the NAD-RID CPC (2005), b) agreeing to maintain confidentiality of both consumer and group member information, c) not engaging in advice giving until the member

presenting the case has had time to reflect on their own decision making process; d) being attentive, engaged, and using nonjudgmental and empathic statements.

The decisional latitude continuum gauges the controls used by interpreters based on the degree of active engagement by the interpreter (Dean & Pollard, 2011). Liberal controls are those in which the interpreter is more active in responding to a demand (e.g., if a caller does not have enough lighting, a liberal control would be to inform the caller that the interpreter needs more light to see them clearly). Conservative controls use a more passive response (e.g., the interpreter does not directly address the lighting issue and instead tries to compensate for the poor lighting by squinting their eyes or asking for repetition). Liberal controls lie at one end of the continuum and conservative controls at the other. In this adapted model, the facilitator uses an activity to assist participants with understanding the variety of controls available through the decisional latitude continuum. The activity begins by asking participants to stand on an imaginary line with one end representing conservative choices and the other end representing liberal choices. Next, the facilitator describes several VRS demands and requests interpreters to consider their choice of control and to stand on the line representing how liberal or conservative their choice is. This activity often leads to an engaged discussion and deeper understanding by the participants.

The third part of this adapted framework visually represents the group members' case presentations. As each participant presents their case, the facilitator writes down the details using colors to depict the different DC-S elements. The details are written in three columns with the demands being written in red in the first column, controls being written in blue in the second column, and consequences being written in green in the third column. By portraying the elements visually and with these colors, group members are more readily able to make the connections with identifying the main demand, the control(s) that were used and the consequences that occurred. The process of a standard case conferencing group using this model is detailed in Table 1.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY, POSITIONALITY, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Although  there is some literature to support the efficacy of practicing case conferencing using a DC-S framework with student and community interpreters (Dean & Pollard, 2005; Curtis, 2017), there is scant literature using case conferencing with interpreters working in VRS. This study is unique in that it focuses on the experience of VRS interpreters who participated in case conferencing groups facilitated by the lead author.

**Table 1.** *Case Conferencing 4-session Overview*

| | |
|---|---|
| Number of sessions | 4 sessions, with one-to-two weeks in between sessions. |
| Time of sessions | 2-2.5 hours per session. |
| Session 1 | Review of Adapted Demand Control Schema; decisional latitude continuum exercise; group norms; modeling of case by facilitator. |
| Sessions 2-4 | Group members present their individual cases. Each case is approximately 1-hour in length. |
| Role of group members | Listen attentively. Ask clarifying questions. Hold advice-giving or suggestions until after the person presenting has had time to reflect on their decisions. Use empathic and non-judgmental responses. |
| Curriculum Group Norms | Group Norms: e.g., confidentiality of consumer information and group members; hold advice giving, be attentive, be engaged, be empathic, use validating statements, put yourself in another's shoes, allow reflection by member presenting case. |
| Adapted DC-S | DC-S vocabulary: demands, controls, consequences; constellation of demands with a focus on the main demand; decisional latitude. |
| | Adapted: decisional latitude continuum uses an activity with participants standing on an imaginary line to indicate their choice of more liberal or conservative controls for common VRS demands. Facilitator writes the demands, controls, and consequences for group members to see as each case is presented. Facilitator uses color markers to assist in identifying the demands (red marker), controls (blue marker) and consequences (green marker). These elements are then linked graphically to show connections. |
| | Requirement that each participant is willing to present a case of their own. |
| Participation Incentive | Participants received .85 RID CEUs. Facilitator worked with the CATIE Center to sponsor CEUs. |

Research questions guiding this study are based on the lead author's positionality as (a) a sign-language interpreter/mentor with 29 years of experience at the time of the study and (b) a case conferencing facilitator during the time frame 2012-2017. Additionally, anecdotal conversations in the lead author's interpreting community revealed key concerns including: an expectation that VRS interpreters should easily be able to manage their own emotional reactions; frustration with colleagues who managed their stressors differently, and a lack of understanding in why certain experiences in VRS were more stressful to some interpreters than others. In the present study, we sought to build upon and explore these anecdotal experiences via empirical, qualitative data collection, and analysis. Accordingly, the present study is a retrospective, qualitative study investigating the experience of VRS interpreters who had previously participated in the case conferencing groups. The primary research questions were as follows:

1) Does participation in case conferencing groups assist VRS interpreters to reduce their occupational stress?
2) Does participation in case conferencing groups lead to increased retention in VRS?

## METHOD

### RECRUITMENT

Prior to study recruitment, approval was granted by a university Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited from a pool of interpreters who worked for a VRS company and had previously participated in a 4-session series of case conferencing groups facilitated by the lead author. Persons who participated in the case conferencing groups ($N = 45$) during the time frame 2013-2017 were emailed with a request to participate in the study. Of the 45 emails sent, 22 resulted in messages that could not be delivered. Of the 23 participants for who viable email addresses were available, 12 responded, with 9 (32%) agreeing to participate in the study. One participant was later lost to attrition, resulting in a final of sample of 8 participants.

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants were mostly White ($n = 7$) and female ($n = 7$) ranging in age from 18-60 years. Educational attainment included 2-year degrees ($n = 3$), bachelor's degrees ($n = 2$), and master's degrees ($n = 2$). All participants were nationally certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID, n.d.) with some participants ($n = 3$) also holding certification through the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). Participants described their work experience in VRS as part time ($n = 2$); full time ($n = 2$); mostly other than VRS ($n = 4$) and mostly VRS ($n = 2$). Other demographic information, including interpreting experience and participant's RID and NAD certifications, are included in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Participant Demographic Information*

| Demographic | n |
|---|---|
| **Age** | |
| 18-30 | 1 |
| 31-40 | 2 |
| 41-50 | 4 |
| 51-60 | 1 |
| **Race** | |
| White | 7 |
| Other | 1 |
| **Sex** | |
| Male | 0 |
| Female | 7 |
| Prefer not to answer | 1 |
| **Sexual Orientation** | |
| Heterosexual | 8 |
| **Disability Status** | |
| No Disability Reported | 0 |
| **Education** | |
| 2-year degree | 3 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 2 |
| Master's Degree | 2 |
| **Years of Experience in Interpreting** | |
| 6-10 years | 2 |
| 11-20 years | 3 |
| 21+ years | 3 |
| **Certification*** | |
| RID (CSC, CI, CT, NIC) | 5 |
| RID & NAD | 3 |
| **VRS Work Categorized (could check more than one)** | |
| Part-time VRS | 2 |
| Full-time VTS | 2 |
| Mostly Other than VRS | 4 |
| Mostly VRS | 2 |

*RID Certifications= CSC: Comprehensive Skills Certificate; CI: Certificate of Interpretations; CT: Certificate of Transliteration; NIC: National Interpreting Certificate. NAD Certifications: Levels III, IV & V.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection included three focus groups, consisting of $n = 3$, $n = 3$, and $n = 2$ participants, respectively. Although three participants were confirmed for each focus group, one participant cancelled, resulting in two participants for one group. Though four to eight participants in a focus group is considered ideal, different group sizes have been found to yield helpful results (Liamputtong, 2011). The focus groups were conducted in the space of 3 weeks during the spring of 2018 by a facilitator with expertise in moderating focus groups of sign language interpreters and students, noted expertise in the field of interpreting pedagogy, and experiential knowledge as a member of the lead author's previous case conferencing groups. Additionally, in line with the best practices suggested by Monahan and Fisher (2010), the lead author observed each of the focus groups, taking field notes to begin the process of meaning-making of the discussions.

The facilitator arranged for the groups to meet in a conference room at a local university that was known to all participants and provided a space that was accessible, private, and quiet (Burnard et al., 2008), and refreshments were provided. Each focus group organically ended within an hour.

Prior to beginning the focus group interview, participants signed the informed consent document initially provided in the recruitment email and completed the form for demographic questions. The facilitator began each group by describing the process of the focus group, group norms for engagement and the ability of each person to pass if they chose not to comment on a specific question.

### FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES

For each focus group, the facilitator introduced the concept of a "talking piece" that she has routinely used in her work. The talking piece has been used widely in traditional healing circles in Native American culture (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). The talking piece assists in creating an environment in which only the person holding the talking piece can share. Other group members are asked to refrain from speaking until they were holding the talking piece. The talking piece was passed from one group member to the next in a clockwise fashion, and there were at least two rounds per question. If a group member did not have a comment when it was their turn, then they could say "pass" and give the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece for these groups was the micro-recorder.

### GUIDED CONVERSATION

The facilitator used the "guided conversation" concept that allowed her to follow up on the participant's comments in various ways. At times in the conversation, she used follow-up questions to glean more information about a response. At other times, she used periodic summarizing to assist participants' in their discussion.

### QUESTIONS

Five primary interview questions formed the basis of each focus group embedded within the aforementioned guided conversation format:

1. Describe the occupational stress you have encountered in your work as a VRS interpreter.
2. Give examples of how you have used case conferencing to decrease your occupational stress in VRS.
3.  Describe how case conferencing might be used to increase interpreters' retention in VRS.
4. What techniques or strategies that you gained from case conferencing have you shared with your colleagues?
5. What other comments do you have regarding case conferencing?

## DATA ANALYSIS

### DATA PREPARATION

Focus group transcription was conducted by the lead author and supplemented by field notes taken during the focus groups and memos made while reviewing the transcripts, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). Content notes included specific statements that were particularly well-worded or seemed to strike a chord with other participants (e.g., "I'm supposed to interpret something I know nothing about, about something I can't see, to a person I've never met."). Reflective thoughts included ideas such as noting that using the micro-recording device as the talking piece ensured a clear recording of each participant's thoughts (e.g., "It's not the interpreting, it's everything else.").  Descriptive notes included participant body language, comfort level with using the talking piece, and what occurred when participants wanted to add to a previous comment. While transcribing and reviewing the transcripts, the lead author wrote memos by highlighting, underlining, and taking notes to self in the margins of the paper copies of the transcripts. These memos were then helpful in identifying codes and subsequent categories and themes.

### CODING AND THEME IDENTIFICATION

Per the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018), the first step in the coding process involved the open coding of each line in each transcript by the lead author, followed by the constant comparison method of iteratively reading and combining codes. NVivo, a commonly used qualitative data analysis software program, was used to assist in the process of aggregating codes and searching for different patterns and categories among them.

Theme identification occurred via a deductive-inductive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Deductively, the lead author combed the data searching for key words and phrases (e.g., demands, controls, consequences, VRS, stress) using selective coding techniques. At the same time, the lead author built categories inductively, as open coding techniques were used. Throughout the analysis, the lead author moved in and out of the data, disaggregating and then reaggregating codes, attempting to discover the themes that best fit the data.

Initially, via deductive reasoning, the lead author attempted to develop categories that corresponded with the DC-S terminology of demands, controls and consequences, particularly for the role of occupational stress. However, more applicable categories that better fit the data emerged from continued analysis (e.g., how the skills that were learned within the case conferencing groups had generalized to interpreting practice and to mentoring practice). As the final step in identifying key themes, the lead author consulted with an expert who has experience with Deaf/hard of hearing-related research as well as being an RID certified interpreter, to review the data and preliminary themes identified. Four final themes emerged: a) reduction of occupational stress; b)

application of skills learned in groups; c) integration into practice; and d) retention in VRS, as well as an additional, overarching finding related to improvement in call center culture. Examples of themes and codes are listed in Table 3.

## RESULTS

### THEME 1: REDUCTION IN OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Participants stated that their previous participation in an adapted DC-S case conferencing group was effective in reducing their occupational stress in VRS. They described their decreased stress was due to several factors: (a) use of common terminology; (b) validation and nonjudgmental space to analyze the work; and (c) provision of additional tools.

#### *COMMON TERMINOLOGY*

Learning to use a common terminology by incorporating vocabulary from Dean and Pollard's (2011) DC-S model, allowed for an easier discussion of the stressors they experienced when interpreting. Participants explored how the case-conferencing group assisted them in understanding and applying the DC-S model as they critically analyzed the challenges (demands), identified the options to resolve the challenges (controls) and weighed the outcomes of using different options:

> It finally provided an opportunity for professionals to come together and learn how to speak about these calls, in this case in a professional manner. Um. And it gave language for that. It provided us the opportunity to take the language we had learned in session and take it with us, speaking in a professional manner with confidentiality as our priority. So, I felt that it really was a great opportunity for professionals to come together and continue to move our profession upwards. And it was a great environment to be able to do that. And yet, still very safe and we felt we could work through tough stuff…
>
> (Participant #7 31-40 years of age; 16-20 years of interpreting experience; Mostly in VRS)
>
> Yeah, and what we learned, the next day we have a way of talking about it. Or if someone is struggling, so now you can say. 'What other controls could you have used?' or 'What was the demand that was getting to you?'
>
> (Participant #8 41-50 years of age; 21+ years interpreting, Full time in VRS)

Many participants identified the main stressor in VRS as "It's not the interpreting, it's everything else." That "everything else" was the constant decision-making that interpreters face numerous times in each call. Before these interpreters participated in the case conferencing groups, they did not have an effective way of improving their practice because they did not have the terminology to identify and discuss their challenges in VRS.

**Table 3.** *Thematic Process*

| Example Codes | Category | Theme | Exemplar Quote |
|---|---|---|---|
| negative emotions, time pressures, gossip, options | Stress | 1. Reduction in occupational stress | "So, a demand comes up and (click) I love that now in the middle of the call, I can say 'I have options right now' as opposed to when I was younger in the case conferencing. It was like, 'I'll figure this out later' (laughing). So, lots of controls I can exercise in the moment even though its VRS." |
| lack of terminology, demands, controls, so many decisions | Demand Control Schema | 2. Application of Skills | "Yeah, and I liked your comments about what we learned that right the next day we have a way of talking about it. Or if someone is struggling, so now you can say. 'What other controls could you have used?' or 'What was the demand that was getting to you?'" |
| being able to process, general interpreting, planning ahead, mentoring | Casual conversations and mentoring | 3. Integration into Practice | "It [case conferencing] made me be more receptive to others needs because I think I've done so many years alone in an educational seat where I don't have teams. Sink or swim. Figure it out. …So, for me it was very awakening to me to see hey some people need that [debriefing]." |
| work satisfaction, feeling supported, better relationships with coworkers, complacency | Complacency and Community | 4. Retention in VRS | "(VRS) it's the 'same same' (uses the ASL sign) just keep doing the same thing with no regard for improvement or professional development or professional modification changes. So, complacency, I think is the one thing that I think will help with retention…" |
| professionalism, increased empathy and insight, increased comfort | | Additional Finding: Center Culture Improved | "And so that gave me great insight, into where they're coming from as an interpreter. And why they're making some of the choices they're making or to me not making. But why they're feeling limited by the options they have." |

*VALIDATION AND NON-JUDGMENTAL APPROACH*

Participants discussed how being in a case conferencing group with their peers provided validation for their individual challenges. The validation in turn, decreased their stress. Participants described that engaging with other interpreters as they discussed challenges that were similar to their experiences, assisted in normalizing the struggles they encountered in their work in VRS. The case conferencing group format was beneficial as it allowed members to critically evaluate a variety of strategies that improved their practice, validated their experience, and gained new strategies to approach their interpreting challenges. One participant described the endemic challenge of VRS as: "I'm supposed to interpret something I know nothing about, about something I can't see, to a person I've never met". This statement exemplifies the pivotal challenge in VRS. Unlike community interpreting, in which the interpreter generally knows whom they are interpreting for, the topic and the context of the situation, the VRS interpreter often works in a vacuum and may fear how others would judge their decision making.

> I'm just riddled with self-doubt. Constantly. What's great is that case conferencing has really validated; just like allowed me to validate the choices that I make. And be like oh there's not like only one way. There's that whole pendulum and you can go more liberal with your choices and it doesn't mean you're a bad interpreter and you're doing it wrong or you can go more conservative and that doesn't mean that it's bad or that it's wrong.

> (Participant #4 31-40 years of age; 6-10 years of interpreting experience; Full time in VRS)

> Like the 'unity of the body' of interpreters. During that time (of case conferencing), like you said to debrief and encourage each other and affirm each other. I don't feel that there are judgments. That was a wrong decision or that was a right decision. But um. I've been through that. That kind of thing. There's encouragement there. That's (what) we need. Kind of a building up of the body.

> (Participant #8 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Full Time in VRS)

*ADDITIONAL TOOLS*

The focus group discussions highlighted the importance of case conferencing as a resource for acquiring strategies to decrease occupational stress, improve outcomes with consumers, and add tools to their interpreting toolbox. Participants stated they gained a variety of strategies they could use to decrease their occupational stress. These tools ranged from new strategies to engage more effectively with customers to new ways of reframing their perspective on a call. In addition, case conferencing itself was seen as a tool that could be used to work through the stress they experienced.

> In any job if you're overworked, not feeling appreciated, man. You're outta there. You're gonna go back to whatever it was you were doing before. What we do is very intense, for the most part. And if I don't have a way to let some of that go or release that I'm not going to be able to stay very long.

> (Participant #3 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Mostly work in other settings)

I think that was a big thing that destresses me now. Is to be able to say to someone who has been there longer than I have. Hey, can I talk to you about a call that I just had? And feel comfortable in that without being nervous that at any moment the FCC (Federal Communication Commission) police are going to come and drag me away (laughing).

(Participant #2 18-30 years of age; 6-10 years of interpreting experience; Part time in VRS)

### THEME 2: APPLICATION OF SKILLS

The goal of continuing education is for professionals to not only learn new information but to apply the new knowledge and skills in their practice. Participants discussed the difficulty they had previously experienced in attempting to apply the tenets of DC-S to their work. Each participant acknowledged that they had some familiarity with DC-S before participating in case conferencing, most had taken part in one of Dean's introductory workshops, and all expressed a desire to use DC-S. However, a common theme reflected in the focus groups was that without the structure of a case conferencing group, they were unable to apply what they had learned. Some participants discussed their lack of understanding of DC-S terminology, "I didn't even know what demands and controls were before that, before I took case conferencing." The participants discussed two formats they used to practice what they had learned in case conferencing--applying DC-S and daily practice.

### *APPLYING DC-S*

The case conferencing groups were focused on applying ethical decision-making to VRS interpreters' actual interpreting experiences. The group format allowed participants to engage with the tenets of DC-S, and to experience success at identifying the main demand and creating new controls. Some participants described how their participation in case conferencing assisted them to rethink their practice and adjust how they approached ethical decision making in their work.

I feel like that so many of the workshops and conferences that I attend have a lot of really cool information in theory (laughs). And you know you get all this cool vocabulary, but you know 3 weeks later I don't remember what that was; so how is it really improving my work as an interpreter? So, this [case conferencing] I can bring forward. I actually did this. I actually [presented] a situation I went through. If it ever happens again, how can I, make it better? Or change it? Or how would somebody else have handled it? And that I could carry that into my very next shift the next day and that's something I could keep with me and keep doing on a smaller scale with people after I debrief, and it taught me something that I could actually use.

(Participant #2 18-30 years of age; 6-10 years of experience; Part time in VRS)

…so, I've learned to look at the demands and controls because I was more factual. I was a black and a white, a yes or a no, a good or a bad. And I learned it's not about the good and the bad but about the options. You know. Like you were saying. And oh, you said you wouldn't have handled it that way. But they did and why. So, I've learned to look at it through a different lens you know instead of so black and white.

(Participant #3 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Works mostly in other settings)

### Daily practice

In addition, participants commented about how practical the application of case conferencing was to their daily work. They emphasized how they have incorporated what they had gained from the case conferencing groups into their daily practice.

> I-use-it-every-single-day. All-the-time. So, now after having practiced case conference for years. VRS and outside, in terms of a practice. It's become like a routine for how I handle demands.
>
> (Participant #5 41-50 years of age; 16-20 years of experience; Part time in VRS)
>
> Cause, wow, it really helped me to see the deaf person's perspective was probably totally different than me.
>
> (Participant #8 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Full time in VRS)

#### THEME 3: INTEGRATION INTO PRACTICE

Integrated practice was a common thread discussed throughout each of the focus groups. Case conferencing was not a professional development activity that they attended and then never used again. Participants identified two specific ways they integrated what they had gained from their groups into their practice in casual conversations with colleagues and in their mentoring practice.

#### *CASUAL CONVERSATIONS*

Participants described how they used what they had learned in daily conversations with their coworkers.

> …someone came to me and they were having a really difficult time with a certain type of caller and you know, and they'd been making very liberal choices with them and I talked with them. And I was like, well maybe you're going to have to swing to more like conservative choices. To get the boundaries you need with that person. All that smart talk came from case conferencing.
>
> (Participant #4 31-40 years of age; 6-10 years of interpreting experience; Full time in VRS)
>
> (my peers) …they'll jump right to the frustration and sometimes I'll back them up and say, ok…Like it was so helpful for me to identify circumstances leading up to, 'Tell me a little more about your day?' So, I'll ask, 'Were you tired at the time? Was it the beginning of your shift? The end of your shift?' Um, 'How was the lighting?' So environmental (demands), starting there. So, it was kind of narrowing down. I loved that! I had never really thought that much about it before."
>
> (Participant #7 31-40 years of age; 16-20 years of interpreting experience; Works mostly other than VRS)

*MENTORING PRACTICE*

Several participants provide formal mentoring services in their work outside of VRS. Two participants describe how they use what they learned from case conferencing and apply it to their mentoring work with community and educational interpreters.

> Being better versed in Demand Control and in Role Space helped me think that I am speaking the language of newer graduates. Um. This is what they're trained in nowadays. So, when I speak that to them at an internship site or when they're mentoring with me. That. I've learned that new language. Or honed it maybe. I knew it before but honed it.
>
> (Participant #1 51-60 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Works mostly other than VRS)
>
> And so, I was able to turn that [case conferencing] into school mentoring as well, um which ultimately now three-fourths of our interpreters are working in video relay. So, I think you know it's spread [outside of VRS].
>
> (Participant #3 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experience; Works mostly other than VRS)

**THEME 4: RETENTION IN VRS**

Retention in VRS was described by the focus group members as the inverse of a lack of incentive to improve one's practice. They discussed how interpreting in call centers can be more stressful than community interpreting due to the lack of variability in the work and the increased amount of time they worked with other interpreters. They coined two words to describe their experience: complacency and community.

*COMPLACENCY*

The participants discussed the dissonance they felt in wanting to improve the quality of their VRS interpreting practice while being cognizant of the administrative priority on response time and reimbursable minutes. The focus group participants felt that engaging in case conferencing could provide some accountability in improving their interpreting skills in VRS.

> I think if a company would prioritize a regular case conferencing opportunity, the employees would also feel very valued, that would be one of the many links that would be needed between administration and the employees that these things are really important to us and I think that can go really far. Especially like you said if it could be a regular event. I would go to case conferencing and it would be at the forefront for the next couple of weeks. I mean it would be like right there and then over time you get a little complacent and I think it raises the morale overall.
>
> (Participant #7 31-40 years of age; 16-20 years of interpreting experience; Works mostly other than VRS)
>
> (VRS) it's the 'same same' (uses the ASL sign) just keep doing the same thing with no regard for improvement or professional development or professional modification changes.

So, complacency, I think is the one thing that I think will help with retention as I don't think that most of us who work in interpreting ever want to become complacent. Because then, we lose our 'effectiveness.'

(Participant #3 41-50 years of age; 21+ years of interpreting experienced Works mostly in VRS)

*COMMUNITY*

Retention in VRS was also described in terms of the experience of community that was achieved within a call center. Participants reported that due to having less stress at work, they were more effective at managing the challenges they experienced in their VRS work which led to increased hours of engagement in VRS work. Community was the term that some participants used to describe how participation in case conferencing groups increased positive connections with co-workers. One participant, who identified as a "millennial" described how vital connection was to their generation.

Going back to what I said earlier about the sense of community. Um. I think, my observations with my generation, in particular, are that we're looking for a sense of community. And fostering a sense of community and in the workplace in a field that is not traditionally known for a strong supportive community. Interpreters have a very black name as far as supporting one another go. But to have a little oasis…

(Participant #2 18-30 years of age; 6-10 years of interpreting experience, Part time in VRS)

*ADDITIONAL FINDING: IMPROVEMENT IN CALL CENTER CULTURE*

Although not meeting the criteria for a fifth theme, as there was not enough data across participants to directly support it, another noteworthy finding emerged from the data. The development of new norms at one center where participants worked was indicated as a byproduct of participating in case conferencing groups. Prior to their involvement in these groups, the participants had not felt safe to dialogue with other interpreters about their challenges. They were concerned that their co-workers would negatively judge their decision making choices. The call center culture was described as improving due to the emphasis on validation and the nonjudgmental approach that was encouraged in the case conferencing groups. The safe nonjudgmental space extended to others in the call center and changed the dynamics of their professional relationships.

So, just mind-blowing how it made the work environment safer. Um, more professional, positive…

(Participant #5 41-50 years of age; 16-20 years of experience; Part time in VRS)

[The facilitator encouraged us] ..."when you're in the center now, start thinking about your calls." She made it applicable like during that time when we had case conferencing sessions going on. So, it kind of brought all that Demand Control, ethical decision making into a semi-controlled environment, meaning that we're all the same kind of people working together and seeing the improvement.

(Participant #5 41-50 years of age; 16-20 years of experience; Part time in VRS)

The stressors that participants identified were similar to the findings published in previous self-reported surveys of VRS interpreters (Brower, 2015; Napier et al., 2017; Wessling & Shaw, 2014). Occupational stressors were identified as issues with the video and audio technology; rapid pace of calls; extreme variety of topics; lack of recovery time; and lack of support from management. An additional stressor, which had not been reported previously in the literature, was the challenge of managing other co-workers' different styles in stress management.

## DISCUSSION

Case conferencing is an emerging, vital tool for interpreters not only to increase their capacity for making effective choices but also as a way to manage the stress that they experience. Results from the present study show that participation in case conferencing groups was perceived as effective reduction of occupational stress; assisted in the application of skills learned in groups; was integrated into practice; and assisted in retention for interpreters working in Video Relay Service (VRS) settings.

Occupational stress and strategies for stress management are often neglected in interpreter training (Bower, 2015). In other human service professions, such as counseling, students and trainees are routinely trained to identify and manage their emotions so that their internal stress does not interfere with their work (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2016). Given the stressors associated with sign language interpreting, especially in a VRS setting, interpreter training should include training in self-care strategies and tools for continuously identifying and managing occupational stressors. Often, new interpreters are simply told that need to be ready for sharp criticism and would benefit from developing a "thick skin" (Wickless, 2013), rather than being afforded strategic tools and opportunities to practice stress management. This "tough love" approach to stress management may contribute to problems with interpreter retention, especially in VRS settings.

Interpreters' stress can also be related to the relational aggression they may experience from colleagues (Ott, 2012), leading to perceived isolation and lack of peer support. Newer interpreters in particular may be searching for mentors who will help usher them into their new field, only to encounter aggressive and passive aggressive behavior such as insults, snubbing, and sarcasm (Ott, 2012) that punishes support-seeking behavior. Thus, it is important to note that participants in this study described case conferencing groups not only as a strategy for enhancing decision making skills but also a means for increasing mutual trust with their coworkers. Participants stated that they were more interested in remaining in VRS because of this increased sense of support and community.

One of the surprising results of this study was the reported improvement in center culture as a result of the case conferencing groups. During the four-year period in which the lead author provided case conferencing groups, more than half of one VRS call center's interpreters participated in case conferencing workshops. Participants described the change in the center's culture as one of professional respect and improved empathy for their colleagues. They described that they had become a "better peer mentor" because they were able to empathize more effectively with their colleagues who had different personalities and processed the emotional content of the work differently. As an unexpected byproduct, case conferencing groups not only provided interpreters with tools to decrease their occupational stress but also created the sense of community and connection for which many interpreters are searching.

## LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, selection criteria, and participant diversity. The sample size ($n = 8$) is smaller than what is generally best practice for case study analysis, which typically includes purposive sample sizes of 4-8 people per focus group (Liamputtong, 2011). The selection criteria for participants may have contributed to this smaller sample size, as only participants who had previously taken part in the lead author's case conferencing groups were eligible to participate, and the high rate of non-functional email addresses further reduced the sampling pool. Additionally, this sample identified as all White, all heterosexual, almost all female, and had no pre-certified interpreters represented, limiting transferability and consideration of unique or amplified stressors for interpreters from marginalized groups. Additionally, recruiting participants from a single VRS company also reduces the transferability of results. Lastly, the case conferencing style used by the lead author, although in line with recommended best practices, may not reflect all case conferencing methods used in interpreting settings, further limiting the potential transferability of the findings. However, it should also be noted that all participants described their experience as substantiating these themes, regardless of age. This suggests a potential widespread social validity of case conferencing among VRS interpreters.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Occupational stress and retention for sign language interpreters working in VRS is a topic that needs further investigation. Subsequent studies could involve quantitative or mixed-methods designs with larger, more diverse samples and multiple case conference facilitators to confirm, refute, or expand upon the findings of our study. For example, use of a quasi-experimental design could potentially provide more generalizable evidence that case conferencing does indeed reduce the occupational stress of VRS interpreters by assessing perceived occupational stress and burnout both before and after experiencing a series of case conferencing sessions.

Increased research is also needed to define both the intrapsychic stressors of individual interpreters as well as the systemic stressors that, when combined, may decrease the retention of interpreters in the field. Researchers from the field of interpreting need to work in tandem with those from the counseling fields to identify what strategies might be most helpful to the VRS interpreter practitioner.

## CONCLUSION

Occupational stress has been found to be more extreme for sign language interpreters working in the field of Video Relay Services (VRS) than for interpreters working in the community (Bower, 2015; Dean & Pollard, 2011; Shaw & Wessling, 2014), leading to high rates of burnout and attrition. Thus, it is notable that participants in this research project overwhelmingly reported their experience in case conferencing had assisted them in more effectively managing their stress working in VRS and increased their retention. In addition to having immediate application in their daily work, case conferencing was also perceived as decreasing negative behaviors in the call center and positively increasing feelings of community among interpreters. This combination of benefits led to participants' reports of reducing burnout and attrition which increases access to quality VRS interpreting services for the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

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