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POINT OF VIEW

DEAF PROFESSIONAL FORUM: THE PARTICIPANTS' VIEWPOINTS,

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Editor's Comment

This section provides a forum for exchange of reasoned ideas on all sides of issues in the area of deafness. The opinions expressed in this article, and others that appear in *Point of View*, are those of the authors and should not be considered the position of ADARA or the editors of JADARA. The editors welcome responses to the opinions expressed in this section.

- * "I feel so angry when I see hearing professionals who have been in the field for umpteen years talking to each other without signing. Where is the respect for me as a professional and the opportunities to learn and grow from others?"
- * "We need the interpreter so much, it oppresses us."

The above opinions were expressed at the recent Deaf Professional Forum (DPF) which took place at the 1993 American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association (ADARA) Conference in San Francisco. The gathering of diverse deaf participants ranged from those who have established their names in their fields to the interns learning the ropes. This forum quickly became a place where we were able to ventilate about our working experiences without the constraining presence of the hearing professional. From our discussions, the primary theme focused on, "How are we, the deaf professional, affected by our colleagues both deaf and hearing?"

History Leading to Deaf Professional Forum

The inspiration for this forum grew out of our experiences at a mental health conference. There, a number of deaf professional colleagues noted that the conference appeared to be geared towards serving the hearing professionals with second

Do the following statements sound familiar?

- * "When I go to a 'deaf' professional gathering, where are my deaf colleagues?"
- * "When I try to give my professional opinion on a case, I was basically ignored. I felt my contribution was unwanted and not respected."
- * "Sometimes I feel so tired and burned out, trying to educate the hearing professional about the needs of my clients as well as mine. It is hard to find other deaf peers and gain support."
- * "After seeing the gains that deaf people have made in the past 20 years or so, I wish I had not been born too soon."
- * "In spite of my speech and signing skills, I wish I were more accepted by other deaf people who are not hard of hearing or deafened. They call me 'hearing' (sign on my forehead) and I feel isolated."

POINT OF VIEW

thought to the needs and expertise of deaf professionals (i.e., usage of interpreters, lighting, and seating and the clinical issues discussed).

These realizations were confirmed by several deaf participants when discussing observations during lunchtime. We immediately saw that we shared strong feelings—anger, disappointment, frustration, betrayal among others. Validated and buoyed in support, we decided to bring our collective experience to the ADARA conference, thereby creating a place where we could explore and support each other in dealing with the issues as they become increasingly important among the growing number of deaf professionals.

General Observation

Regardless of the stature achieved in their careers, diversity among us did not become a dividing issue, although there is a history of division in the deaf community. Everyone was united in the fact that we all shared the same experiences both as a deaf or hard-of-hearing professional and as a deaf or hard-of-hearing person. Everyone was of equal importance in who or what they were. "So I'm not alone in what I perceive. We respond to similar encounters with the same thoughts and feelings. It is not my imagination after all!" was a recurring theme. It was truly a magical time in which boundaries real or imagined were transcended and real healing and support could be achieved.

A seasoned participant initially stated that the DPF would be worth nothing if there were no plans of action or goals for the future. However, it was generally acknowledged that the first task of the forum was to provide a much needed and overdue opportunity for deaf professionals to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences as they relate to being a deaf professional in a predominately hearing field. From there, we would be able to move towards a more structured

approach in building and maintaining a base where support to deaf professionals would remain available.

Professional Conferences and Associations

An important topic centered on the need for professional growth opportunities. At any professional conference, a participant is expected to leave the conference, taking with them new tools and working knowledge that enhances their ability to perform as a professional. However, it appeared that for a majority of deaf/hard-of-hearing people, conferences 'for the deaf' have left much to be desired, leaving deaf professionals feeling unsatisfied and skills underdeveloped.

"Where are my deaf peers?" Finding solace during the DPF, a participant, reflecting many others' feelings, stated that she was 'happy' to be here. Being in contact with other deaf colleagues at professional gatherings was her criteria of a 'successful' conference. Questions as to whether these functions should be deaf-run in order to be deaf oriented were raised as a result of our discussion.

The deaf person's life experience, education and training often makes for a powerful and effective professional. The deaf professional has strived to offer valuable input into fields such as interpreting and clinical therapy. Unfortunately, qualified supervisors have not always been available to help deaf interns combine their cultural knowledge with clinical skills. However, even when a professional has this wonderful combination of clinical skills and cultural experience which could benefit the community, it has not been perceived as valuable or desired. Here's an example shared at the forum:

A president of an ADARA Chapter and a first-time ADARA participant sadly shared her story about a workshop she had attended. A case was presented about a deaf girl who manifested her

POINT OF VIEW

problems through physical symptoms. The participant attempted to dialogue with the hearing presenter about the diagnosis of the case, suggesting that Deaf Culture was a possible issue in the root cause. Unfortunately, the hearing presenter was not able to hear what she had to share and instead suggested that more tests be performed, stating the deaf client must learn to live in the hearing world. "I was given an exasperated look by the presenter and subsequently ignored. My feelings were hurt" was how this deaf participant described her 'professional' experience at this workshop.

People groaned over the frustration of seeing the deaf client/student poorly served due to the seniority of a professional who has become complacent with his or her signing skills and knowledge of deafness. The issue of a "deaf agency" sending only hearing staff as presenters to a professional conference raised the question, "Are opportunities to learn and develop as a professional to be limited for deaf people because of the hearing professional who does not recognize their contribution?"

A deaf social worker shared an example about the in-patient facility where she worked. They had developed a program for deaf clients where she had been laid off. She said that she had worked diligently to hire other deaf social workers with the program. Unfortunately, politics led to the decision to close the deaf program. The facility then announced that they would use sign language interpreters for the non-signing professional instead of employing the deaf social worker.

The social worker expressed her anger about this situation, exclaiming that hearing professionals often learn from deaf professionals and then take their jobs after they 'understand' what is minimally required in serving deaf clients. She said, "It is not profitable, so the hospital is closing. But I am not leaving my resources with them. Don't teach hearing people. *Teach deaf people.* The doctors learn from us, then let us go, using what they have

learned. The deaf population is small. We don't have as many opportunities as hearing people do.

Communication/Assertiveness Issues

In comparing common experiences in the failures of communication, we concluded that the common thread underlying the issues center around the need for us to assert ourselves whenever and wherever we are. Some felt that we have been "trained" to be passive in learning how to cope with the hearing world due to repeated negative experiences, not unlike the African-American's experience with the white population.

Another deaf participant shared a dimension of the conference that proved to be a sore spot for many others. She saw three hearing professionals that she knew. They had worked for many years in the deaf field and were generally held in high esteem. They were engaged in conversation with each other, yet not signing to each other at the conference. There was anger in viewing this behavior as it was questioned how deaf professionals can grow and develop as professionals if communication access is not addressed and especially at a conference that is supposedly geared towards deaf people.

Many felt that the workshops at ADARA and at other organizations were organized and designed with the hearing professionals in mind. Because of our discussions at the DPF, there was consensus that we need to be more active in improving the next conference in Kansas City by speaking up and assisting in helping the ADARA conference meet the deaf professionals' needs. Many roles of involvement were discussed and ideas shared are covered under "Specific Recommendations."

A participant observed that if a deaf person becomes assertive, that s/he may be viewed as angry or even militant according to the hearing point of view. An encouraging response from deaf

POINT OF VIEW

peers was to assert one's needs as opposed to being aggressive and not worry about what 'labels' we may be given by hearing or deaf people.

We were able, as a group, to assert our needs later in the conference in trying out the ideas we had been discussing and to receive immediate feedback. It proved to be an exhilarating experience for us all. It began when a deaf ADARA Board member reported that at the beginning of the ADARA board meeting, a sensitive hearing board member asked the deaf board member if he preferred him to do 'simultaneous communication' (meaning to sign and talk at the same time). The deaf Board member, knowing that such communication mode appeared ineffective, suggested that an interpreter be used to sign for the hearing board member instead. We all protested such a solution and laughed when the suggestion was to ask the hearing person to sign and the interpreter to reverse instead. A seemingly simple idea, yet profound, impressed the fact on us that we do prefer and *can* ask to be able to communicate directly with others.

In another situation, anger was expressed when a paying deaf participant attended a professional conference where the deaf professional preferred the interpreter use English though she was a native ASL signer. When two other participants requested ASL instead, the deaf professional deferred to them, sacrificing her need for learning new clinical terms and vocabulary in her field. When it was found out that the two participants were hearing and merely wanted to watch the interpreter sign ASL for their own viewing enjoyment she was outraged that they had faked deafness and felt cheated out of her conference fee and valuable time wasted at the conference.

As one participant said, "This has bugged me for many years. Unlike many other deaf students, the residential school felt like a jail to me. Because I have good speech skills, people say I am not

deaf. They tell me I am 'sign hearing on the head.' I feel angry and upset about not being accepted. Just because I can use my speech doesn't mean my opinion doesn't count, too. And as for interpreters, like many other deaf people, I don't trust them to reverse properly. I prefer my own voice and feel I should not be penalized because I can speak!"

Along those lines, some talked about the "backstabbing" that occurs and the wounds that it creates. Human emotions such as insecurity, jealousy and need for power from both the hearing and deaf community continues to impede deaf professionals' struggle to develop their potential. However, not all frustration was attributed to interactions with the hearing professional, but also with our deaf colleagues!

In spite of the focus on the injustices perceived from others, we were clearly reminded of the importance to change ourselves first. Some people asked, "How many people are in positions of authority where they can make changes?" Looking around the room, we could see that very few deaf people currently hold important administrative positions to create new gains for ourselves and others. Bolstering each other's morale, we reminded ourselves that regardless of our positions, support from other deaf professionals can help us keep fighting when we feel like giving up.

In discussing the need to assert ourselves and speak for our rights, some participants expressed that we should not complain but get involved. There is a need for more deaf officers, said one participant; 'a deafship,' a power group needs to be created and supported. At the conclusion of this heated debate, it was agreed that all deaf people need to be involved at some level. The question was in *what* role, as some are leaders and some are followers. It is important that the rich diversity and potential of people that exists within our group (Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, gay/lesbian) also needs to be recognized and encouraged.

POINT OF VIEW

In addition to talking about changes we can make in asserting our communication needs, we discussed our positive and negative experiences with interpreters. Issues centered around using the interpreter during conferences. "If I have to look at the interpreter all the time, I lose enthusiasm," "Using an interpreter, I must glance back and forth from the hearing presenter to the interpreter!" "I am not satisfied with interpreter when I am trying to talk because I often lose my train of thought," "I am a native ASL signer, but I prefer English at professional conferences. The interpreter says I should use ASL. I am insulted when my request is not respected."

The predicament of the interpreter not complying with the professional communication needs requested by the deaf consumer were many. As one clinical psychologist shared, he insists on his right to English transliteration, word for word. For example, ASL for 'sick' is sticking your tongue out while signing it with two hands on the forehead and stomach. Spelling the same spoken word becomes 'psychopathology.' As the interpreter is the primary vehicle for learning opportunities at conferences, the request to fingerspell professional/clinical vocabulary is a frequent one, resulting in a more accurate and professional experience.

Discussion ensued on how we can encourage more people to sign at our workplace who tend to lapse into speaking, making it difficult for those who cannot understand what is being said at meetings they attend. At one well-known deaf institution, a partial solution has been to use interpreters for both deaf and hearing people. It may embarrass the hearing signer that the deaf person is unable to understand their signing due to fluency problems or lack of full usage. Viewing the interpreter also may give deaf people an evaluative feedback on the hearing person's skills.

The problem has not only been with the hearing but with the deaf who, for example, may force their philosophy of ASL and Deaf Culture on

others who do not share their views. Again, we stressed to each other the importance of asserting our own needs, whether they be communication, identity, or cultural. Diverse communication for the individual deaf person needs to be respected. And it was agreed that anyone who wants to work with the deaf client should be fluent in sign language or else seek training. As one participant quipped, "Always sign. It improves your signing."

Do We Hate Hearing People?

Among much heated discussion on the "wrongs" committed by hearing people to the deaf, some have stated that it isn't just Hearing versus Deaf situation. There also have been transgressions from the deaf to the deaf. As one sums it, the attitudes of "us versus them" leads to conflict with any human being. Human conflict is just normal politics and has been amplified by the deaf versus hearing issues.

"I do not hate hearing people. It is an on-individual basis (that I determine my relationship with people)," said one participant, anxious to impress on us not to generalize a group of people as being all the same. Another person remarked with wonder that, "Many hearing professionals sign so well, I don't know if they are deaf or hearing, especially the young people!" It became apparent that the struggle to find a balance in our relationships with the world around us poses a challenge as we seek to assert our rights and get along with those around us.

An example of this challenge manifests itself in this story which unfortunately resulted in a breakdown in communication. As a deaf teacher from a residential school, a participant mentioned that many deaf teachers distrusted the hearing teachers because they talk or whisper what they say. So, in reaction, the deaf people hide their signs by turning their backs to the hearing, creating conflict but not communicating or asserting one's needs. His experience in working in an all-hearing working environment was that as

POINT OF VIEW

a lone deaf worker, he has gained more cooperation with the hearing colleagues because the politics of hearing versus deaf does not have the opportunity to develop.

Stories of the hearing people's ignorance and fear of the deaf has placed many deaf professionals in the delicate position of diplomacy. Fair or not, often times, it is up to the deaf professionals to attempt to bridge the gaps between the hearing professionals and her or himself to put the hearing person at ease. Sometimes using humor to smooth things over has been a tool to help soothe the hearing person's initial discomfort. An example of such a situation occurring was when the hearing person, meeting the deaf professional for the first time, assumes that the interpreter is the contact person. "And, subsequently, when the interpreter is not with me, I can see the hearing person trying to avoid dealing directly with me. I put on a big smile and try to tell them that we can write while waiting for the interpreter," one deaf professional relates.

Another participant brought up the expectation that deaf people need to continue to educate the hearing community about deafness. Yet, he believed that the same holds true for deaf people about deafness. For him, "Deaf Culture" has become an excuse for many things. He strongly stated that Deaf Culture has become like a dirty word to him. "Deaf people say they have pride and their rights are rooted in 'Deaf Culture.' However, when deaf people are with hearing people, they change their behavior to fit the norm of the general society. Who says deaf people cannot learn to pick up their feet when they walk? Where is my right to be different than the stereotype cast for the deaf person within the 'Deaf Culture?,' he asserted. Another person contended, "I am a person first who happens to be deaf!" Diversity which appeared to be well-accepted at the DPF still poses itself as a barrier in allowing deaf people to be respected for the individuals they are.

Conclusion

Much enthusiasm and high spirits resulted at the end of the two sessions of the DPF. Many of us wanted to continue the process that had begun and to see it go even further than a biannual meeting.

One proposal was to create a formal section of ADARA so that there would be a mechanism in place to deal with our issues. A letter to the ADARA President along with the specific recommendations to improve the ADARA conference has already been sent. Many also wanted to see a deaf voice in the form of a regular newsletter to inform and support all deaf professionals. Taking the information into a public forum creates an opportunity to educate both deaf and hearing professionals of the issues common to the deaf professional. It was also requested that an article be written summarizing the first DPF. The newsletter could be a place for all of us to share experiences, to learn from each other, to support changes we are attempting to make, and to be in touch with each other.

One esteemed participant from a well-known deaf institution commented he believed the DPF was an historic event in the history of deaf people, beginning with DPN (Deaf President Now) which occurred at Gallaudet, unifying the deaf community nationwide for the first time. Sometimes he felt like the lone charger in his efforts to rally the unification of deaf people and stated DPF was the right step toward this direction.

One of the most gratifying experiences was the diversity need not be a dividing issue, but a source of strength to all of us. "Too bad we need this sort of thing to rally and support each other" was a comment from one participant. Perhaps that is true. It is also too bad the African-American people need to continue the struggle for equality, too. But let us rejoice that we have begun something that has clearly benefitted the

POINT OF VIEW

participants and holds great promise for our future.
Come! Let's get to work together!

Specific Recommendations for Improving the ADARA Conference

Ideas for the ADARA Board...

- * Improve the election process for ADARA officers by increasing publicity of candidates so voters can learn more about the people who are running for office.
- * The title, ADARA, was questioned as neither appropriate nor reflective of today's professional population. The word, rehabilitation, was particularly noted. It was discussed that the focus be changed from a pathological point of view to perhaps a cultural outlook. It was also brought up that this is not primarily a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor conference but a conference encompassing a wider range of professionals serving in the field of deafness. It was shared that the title of the organization should reflect this change.
- * It was requested that the National Board of ADARA establish a formal section of Deaf Professionals. A need was seen for a permanent mechanism. ADARA was discussed as probably the only professional mechanism outside of education for deaf professionals. This new organization/section should have a voice in running conferences, advising Mental Health and other groups.
- * A newsletter was proposed as a vehicle to inform Hearing professionals of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the deaf professional as well as to lend support to other deaf professionals.

Ideas for the ADARA Conference Planning
Committee...

- * The ADARA is to be a "Deaf-run, Deaf oriented" conference, meaning that the workshops are to be geared to providing support and information primarily to the deaf professional instead of educating hearing professionals about deafness, a view shared by many deaf participants.
- * Allow the Deaf participants the right to choose the manner in which information will be interpreted/transliterated. Or, better yet, require all participants/presenters to sign for themselves.
- * All participants should sign at all times—both deaf and hearing. Perhaps t-shirts or buttons can be passed out at the conference saying, "Thank you for signing." Make it a written policy that all future ADARA conferences be silent in terms of voice and noisy by hands.
- * Put "Thank you for signing" in the program book. List in the program book if the speakers are deaf, deafened, hard of hearing, or hearing, and the mode of communication they will use to present their information (i.e., ASL, Oral, PSE, etc.).
- * Interpreters should be provided only for those people who do not sign well. It was acknowledged that forcing a person to sign when they cannot is not fair to both deaf and hearing parties.
- * Attract Deaf presenters by allowing their proposals to be videotaped in sign language for the workshop selection process.
- * Offer a workshop on how to prepare a proposal for the conference's consideration in selecting a speaker. Many deaf people expressed interest in presenting at future conferences. However, it is a struggle to make them write a proposal, thus shy away from attempting to be a presenter at conferences.
- * A videotape of all presenters should be made to evaluate for signing ability. If the presenter is well known, and signs fluently, then a

POINT OF VIEW

videotape may not be deemed necessary. Perhaps a certification process could be developed of a person's signing ability and a list maintained of qualified or fluent signers, both hearing and deaf, if they should apply again as potential presenters.

- * To cut cost of interpreting bills (\$20,000 worth but billed at \$15,000 at the San Francisco conference), it was suggested that presenters be fluent in sign language. Interpreters are to be used only as back-up resources when it is clear that poor or no communication is taking place.
- * All presenters be required to give materials before they are put on the overhead, as it is too difficult to take notes. Presenters should also be sensitive to communication access by explaining that overhead materials will be used, then turn off the lights to view the overhead materials, and then turn on the lights to continue the presentation. If overhead must be an integral part of the presentation, other lighting needs to be made available to see the presenter/interpreter.
- * Deaf presenters should provide a copy of their script to the interpreters to avoid inappropriate selection of vocabulary, e.g., "sick" instead of "psychopathology."
- * Allow more deaf people to serve on committees for ADARA conferences.
- * An idea was raised if the ADARA Pre-conference should be for deaf professionals only.
- * Allow deaf participants the front tables at any workshop or event, not the hearing participants, especially if interpreters are to be used. The entertainment provided also should be geared primarily to the deaf audience, not hearing audience, such as music.
- * Presenters need to be aware of how the podium can block the view of the audience.
- * A need for more deaf representation and leaders in minorities such as Hispanic, Black, Gay & Lesbian, and Women needs to be developed and encouraged.
- * Presenters, as a courtesy, should check with their audiences if everything is okay, such as the interpreter (if used), TV, overhead, etc.
- * The Deaf Professional Forum should be offered as a regular part of the ADARA conference. To avoid conflicts for those who wish to attend, no workshops should be scheduled during the time DPF is offered.
- * Discussion regarding use of real time captioning ensued. Some raised the issue of non-signing deaf, deafened, and hard-of-hearing professionals needing this service. Others believed it was a waste of time and money. It was clear that this service needed further exploration as to its usefulness to the participants.