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Gifted Hard of Hearing Persons

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Abstract

The intent of this study is to find out what happens in the lives of intellectually gifted hard of hearing persons relative to their careers, psychological adjustments, educations, and general life circumstances. The individuals studied all had IQs of 130 or above and suffered the onset of hearing loss in childhood or early adulthood. As such, they represent a unique group, different in many respects from those whose hearing loss occurred in later years (Vernon & Andrews, 1990).

Case History

Jerry was born able to hear human voices, although he had difficulty understanding the words being said. His own speech, while intelligible, contained articulation errors; when he talked, he sounded "different," and this had great significance in how he was perceived, particularly by his peers.

In school, Jerry missed a lot of what was transpiring both in and out of class. He often felt isolated and "different" in negative ways. He saw himself as less than whole, internalizing the judgements and values of the normally hearing children who teased and demeaned him. When kids called him "stupid," Jerry felt that he must, indeed, be stupid in spite of the fact that, with an IQ of 138, he was not only more intellectually gifted than 98-percent of the children who harassed him but also brighter than most, if not all, of his teachers.

Hating school, Jerry became a loner who never developed social skills or learned how to make friends. By his own evaluation, his closest companion was his dog, Dudley.

Because school had been such a horrible experience, Jerry declined to go to college. Instead, he educated himself with hours of solitary reading, doing photography, listening to classical music. Although Jerry developed excellent writing skills and did historical research, he never had the self-confidence or knowledge of publishing to submit his work for publication. His recreation also consisted of solitary pursuits such as watching sports and walking with his dog.

As an adult, Jerry never overcame his feelings of low self-esteem. Lacking social skills and normal human relationships, he was incapable of asserting himself in a positive way. His employers, failing to appreciate Jerry's abilities, tended to take advantage of him. To them, it seemed natural to assign this eccentric loner who "talked funny" to undesirable, boring, dead-end jobs. Other than an occasional immature temper outburst at work, Jerry never was able to assert himself or demand recognition for his capabilities. As a result, instead of the fulfilling career one might expect of a person

with his intellect, he has been stuck in dead-end, menial jobs such as filing, copying computer discs and messenger work.

Socially, Jerry's life has been equally barren. Years of loneliness finally drove him to an episode of serious depression, a suicide attempt, and psychiatric hospitalization.

Recently, through the help of a rehabilitation counselor, Jerry has begun to fight for his rights. Armed with psychological validation of his abilities, he is now successfully moving through Civil Service grievance procedures in hopes of gaining a position more in keeping with his abilities. However, at age 54 he faces an uphill battle both in his career and personal life.

Jerry's story is similar to that of thousands of other persons whose early onset progressive hearing losses prevent the realization of the tremendous potential they possess. Jerry's IQ of 138 places him in the upper one-percent of the population relative to intelligence. Given adequate support and guidance, his intellectual abilities could have led to a successful professional career as a scientist, physician, professor, attorney, engineer or accountant.

What is Known About Gifted Hard of Hearing People?

An extensive library and computer search failed to reveal any published research focused directly on gifted hard of hearing people. Although work has been done on gifted deaf youth by Sullivan (1990) and others (Baker, 1986; Harrison, 1987; and Whiting, 1980), their research involved primarily children and adolescents, not adults. In addition, their subjects were deaf, not hard of hearing.

The present study presents a linear view of individuals having IQs of 130 or above and whose hearing loss occurred in childhood or early adulthood.

Sample

Gifted persons, defined as those with IQs above 130, represent a small percent (2.2) of the total population (Sullivan, 1990). Those with early onset hearing loss form but a minute segment of this intellectually elite group.

Our sample included every gifted, early onset hard of hearing individual among the more than 3,500 deaf and hard of hearing clients psychologically evaluated by McCay Vernon, the first author. These evaluations occurred over a thirty-year period in which he was a psychological consultant for state departments of vocational rehabilitation, school programs, and other agencies.

Hard of hearing persons were defined as individuals who had audiologically established significant hearing losses but who, for most or all of their lives, were able in a quiet, one-to-one setting to hear and understand speech well enough to carry on conversation (Schein & Delk, 1974). Giftedness consisted of an IQ of 130 or higher on a performance or verbal IQ test, usually a form of the Weschler Scales. (Some persons were given only the performance scales because they had early onset hearing losses.) One man was also blind and could take only the Verbal WAIS-R. Using these criteria in the 3,500 cases we identified, 18 were gifted hard of hearing individuals.

In 1990, we did a follow-up on the ten individuals from this group on whom we could gather additional data.

Results

Demographic Data

The 18 hard of hearing individuals studied ranged in age from 6 to 52 years at the time they were psychologically evaluated. Nine were males and nine were females.

The leading cause of hearing loss was genetic

(eight cases). Five had an etiology of illness and/or medication-induced hearing loss. One was brain damaged at birth and four individuals had hearing loss whose cause was unknown. In 15 persons, onset of hearing loss was prelingual. In three it occurred in early childhood, but after language had been acquired. Fifteen of the individuals had progressive losses. This is an issue of great importance psychologically and will be discussed later at greater length.

Education

Thirteen of the individuals were mainstreamed in regular public schools, six with no support services. One had attended both a mainstreamed program and a special school for hearing impaired students which used oral methods. Four individuals had been, or were, in residential schools for the hearing impaired at the time they were evaluated.

These gifted hard of hearing persons enjoyed educational success compared to the general population. However, relative to gifted normally hearing individuals, they did poorly (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Terman, 1925). More specifically, all who were age 18 or older at the time of evaluation had graduated from high school. Three were still in grades 1 through 12; four had attended college but not graduated (one was a junior at the time of evaluation); nine had earned bachelor degrees; four of these had gone on to obtain masters degrees. The remaining two cases ended their education after completing high school. Of those 13 who attended college, six went to Gallaudet or the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID); seven went to regular colleges or universities for hearing students.

Careers

Of the nine individuals who graduated from college, one was in graduate school, four were either teachers or social workers serving deaf populations; one was a general service provider in an agency for deaf people; two others had lower level management positions, one worked for the Postal Service, and one was in business. One gifted college graduate was on welfare at age 44 after having tried to work as a free-lance writer and an aide to a psychologist. Of the two high school graduates, one (Jerry in the case study) at age 52 was still doing low level clerical work as a GS-IV in the federal Civil Service. The other, age 29, was working as a waiter but was considering going on to college.

Of the four who had attended college but not graduated, one had worked briefly as a typist, but was now on welfare; one was driving a cab, but thinking about returning to college and becoming a social worker; two others were still working toward their degrees.

Psychological Adjustment

There were 13 individuals over 17 years of age at the time of the psychological evaluations, i.e., who were old enough for most serious psychological problems to have manifested if they were likely to appear. The overall picture yielded was one of great difficulty in coping. Six of the 13 persons needed psychotherapy, had been suicidal, and complained of depression and isolation. Four of these had been psychiatrically hospitalized. Five had maintained a satisfactory adjustment, albeit one characterized by underemployment, isolation and low self-concept. There was one recovering alcoholic and one individual whose level of psychological adjustment was not clearly established.

There was insufficient data on those under 17 years of age at the time of evaluation to adequately report on their mental health.

Communication

Except for articulation errors, all 18 individuals in this study had intelligible speech. Most had enough receptive communication skill (residual hearing and lipreading capability) to function

adequately in conversation provided they could face the speaker in a quiet, one-to-one setting. None were able to understand speech satisfactorily in group settings and/or when significant background noises were present.

Nine (50 percent) knew no sign language, four knew some, and five were fluent users of American Sign Language.

Discussion

As with deafness, the cause of hearing loss among the hard of hearing persons in this study was about 50-percent genetic (Vernon & Andrews, 1990). Of particular importance is the fact that, regardless of etiology, the losses were progressive in two-thirds of the cases.

Psychologically, this is of great significance. If the loss is sufficiently extensive early in life so as to place the hard of hearing person in a special class or school for others similarly disabled, he/she has an opportunity to learn sign language and to become involved with deaf people. Thus, they are in a position to decide for themselves the degree to which they want to become part of the deaf community, the hearing community, or both.

If the hearing loss is not severe until the individual is past college age, it becomes extremely difficult for the person to participate in the deaf community and/or to learn sign language (Stone, 1988). To achieve such fluency requires more than sign language classes – it takes extensive interaction with deaf signers. Most of the deaf community is not receptive to those who cannot sign fluently. Those whose hearing losses do not progress to severity until after college age rarely have the contact with deaf people which is required to master signing. Thus, they tend to interact with hearing-speaking people or with no one (Rutman, 1989).

In general, we found that those gifted hard of hearing persons who developed sign language skills and moved between the deaf and hearing communities had the best psychological adjustments. They led less isolated lives, acquired better understanding and acceptance of their disability, and enjoyed more professional and extracurricular options.

Progressive hearing losses in this sample proved more difficult to cope with than those which were stable. Their progressive nature leaves the individual in a continual state of having to adjust to new problems. It makes future planning difficult and stresses marital and other human relations (Vernon & Andrews, 1990).

Educationally, the overwhelming majority (13 vs 5) attended regular public schools and were fully mainstreamed through high school. Six of these students had no support services. Of those who went on to college, almost half (6) attended either Gallaudet University or the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). This is in keeping with the general trend toward more special education and less mainstreaming for hard of hearing and deaf students as they move into higher grades (Luckner, Rude, & Thomas, 1989).

The careers of these gifted hard of hearing individuals reflect tragic underemployment. Although most attended college, none have made major contributions to society or to themselves. Five are in social services/teaching positions with deaf and/or hard-of-hearing children or adults, others are in modest supervisory positions in business or civil service and two are on welfare. Those without college degrees are in menial dead-ended occupations.

The most disturbing finding is with regard to psychological adjustment. The model pattern tends to be one of isolation, depression, and a low self-image. Those who function best psychologically are the persons who learn sign language, function professionally and/or socially in the deaf community, but continue an active social involvement with a limited number of hearing persons.

The data presented and our own contact with, and study of, these 18 gifted individuals, lead to some important additional implications. First, society stifled the potential of these highly gifted persons. They had the intellect to be research scientists, artists, scholars, etc., capable of making major contributions to humankind (Therman, 1925). In the opinion of the authors, none have held truly significant positions or have done work of any great consequence. Why? A society which wastes its most valuable asset, i.e., the brains of its brightest citizens, is making a horrible error.

In going over the case histories, the reasons for this waste are obvious. They start when the hearing loss, often diagnosed years after it appears, is first discovered (Vernon, Griffin, & Yoken, 1981). Parents, family, and/or employers do not know what to do, nor does the hearing-impaired person. In children the language issues are rarely understood. School systems, even when aware of the hearing loss, typically do not make the adjustments and provide the support systems necessary. If the gifted hard-of-hearing student achieves on a level with average normally hearing students, all is considered well. In some cases the gifted hearing-impaired youth is thought to be retarded or slow "because of the funny talk" (Vernon and Billingslea, 1973). Most of the individuals in our sample were loners in school. They developed idiosyncratic ways, did not learn social skills, and withdrew. Often they felt rejected and inadequate. They needed self-help kinds of programs similar to that which *SHHH* is introducing to the Washington, DC area schools. Such programs would have made them more comfortable with their hearing loss. They would be knowledgeable about their strengths and weaknesses and how to adjust these patterns successfully into the world of work.

In sum, gifted hard-of-hearing people are a priceless human resource now being wasted, even destroyed, due to a lack of understanding and appropriate support services.

Conclusions

There exists no previous research on intellectually gifted hard-of-hearing persons. This study is small (18 cases) and addresses only that segment of hard-of-hearing gifted individuals whose auditory deficits were detected prelingually or early in childhood. Therefore, generalizing from the findings is unjustified in a statistical sense; it should be done with great caution clinically. This pilot work needs to be followed up by larger, more controlled, in-depth research.

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