Point of View

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DEAF CULTURE: IN SEARCH OF THE DIFFERENCE, by William L. Erickson, Director of Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired for the Oklahoma State Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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.

The 1988 summer issue of THE DEAF AMERICAN carried an article written by Dr. Harlan Lane (1988) entitled, "Is there a Psychology of the Deaf?" In that article, Dr. Lane quite accurately points out the error of professionals over-generalizing and labeling deaf people based on stereotypes. Lane encouraged more observations and research regarding deafness, employing the same rigor one would use in any scientific study. One can neither argue with that suggestion nor with his conclusion that "there is no psychology of the deaf." Lane concludes that the presence of interesting things to be learned about deafness does not lead to the existence of a special psychology. The insistence on a special psychology of the deaf, in the absence of sound corroborative research, may actually be counterproductive. Tenuous assumptions strung together to form an illogical premise are often the reasons for good intentions bearing negative

results. The premise of an existence of a psychology of the deaf is just one example.

The concept of a psychology of the deaf gave rise to the unsubstantiated conclusion that current psychology is inapplicable to deaf people. Some murky nuance was thought to exist which placed deaf people outside the body of knowledge which had accumulated during the last two-hundred years. That nuance was never found, and the deaf psychology era seems to have closed. In reality, we know that deaf people are not beyond being understood using the same principles employed with anyone else. Deaf people are subject to the same learning paradigms as other humans. It is the impact of deafness on individual development that must be studied, just as any other developmental issue must be studied, to understand the individual. A major flaw in the writings reviewed by Lane is that the impact of deafness was not understood. The professional evaluated the individual using the same criteria used for hearing people and then generalized on erroneous conclusions. Once that error was uncovered and the variables introduced by deafness understood, they could be used as factors in evaluating the individual. In psychology, we must be sure that we are using the proper yardstick to measure what we intend to measure. This is the basis of validity. Unfortunately, one can only be disappointed that the lesson learned from the rise and fall of deaf psychology is not being applied to other areas involving deafness. While today it is encouraging to see a pendulum swing away from negative attitudes about deafness, it is tragic that some of the more radical movement is no less misguided and without basis in fact. Perhaps in an effort to make amends for past wrongs, the professional community is currently accepting, even contributing to, false

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assumptions which, ironically, bring further harm to the deaf community.

Hopefully, the labeling and stereotyping Lane cited are products of a less enlightened time. Certainly we reject the notions that deaf people, as a whole, are "asocial, clannish, egocentric, impulsive," or the rest of the list used in Lane's discussion. We should, however, also be cautious of committing errors in the opposite direction simply because they are not politically palatable. Now, new and dangerous assumptions regarding deaf people and deafness masquerade as enlightened thinking which purports to help and support the deaf population at large. Probably the best example of such counterproductive "enlightenment" is found in the omnipresence of a creature called "deaf culture."

Accurately defining deaf culture is as elusive as finding the source of the term. "Deaf culture" pops up in writing often enough to be taken for granted by most readers. But, nowhere is there an outline or profile of what constitutes deaf culture, besides the presence of sign language. Those authors who espouse the concept of a distinct culture for the deaf do so on the flimsiest of evidence, often citing and cross-citing each other. None display more than an intuitive contention of its existence, much less a description of how we might recognize it. Clear evidence, or even a convincing description, to support the existence of a deaf culture is almost totally lacking. However, that is not to say that differences between deaf and hearing people do not exist.

That deaf people are unique is an inarguable fact. The all-pervasive nature of deafness creates a developmentally unique individual. What is difficult is the application or creation of an acceptable label for that difference. Suitable terms are not readily available which will convey a sense of true uniqueness while retaining a positive connotation. Many similar attempts to label other minority groups have fallen short and resulted in

the politically correct, sometimes silly, language we are asked to suffer with today. How to describe the developmental uniqueness shared by many deaf people using economical terminology becomes the challenge. We struggle to find a single-word description for the shared experiential background of the majority of today's deaf adults. The result of that shared experience is a likely basis for the label "culture." However, shared experience of deaf people, even with the uniqueness of a language, provides much less divergence with the mainstream of American culture than the proponents of an all-pervasive "deaf culture" would have us believe. How can deaf culture be so radically divergent when the deaf individual shares almost all cultural commonalities with hearing people? We must examine these supposed differences and compare them to the mainstream culture.

Of the examples given to support the notion of a deaf culture, language stands out as the leader. True, other countries have unique languages and are unquestionably regarded as separate cultures, but they have much more than language to separate them from their neighbors. Religious beliefs, traditional dress, ethnic foods, attitudes about children and the elderly, broad value systems, political beliefs and behavioral norms provide additional cultural differences from country to country. In contrast, examples of deaf culture often strain for credibility. Love of sports, residential school education, perception of deafness, association with other deaf people, bluntness, visual sense of humor, the existence of deaf clubs and national organizations are often given as examples of deaf culture. One opinion was that since Native Africans and Native Americans can have a culture, then deaf people are entitled to one, too. Most of these examples illustrate little, if any, uniqueness from hearing people. In fact, were it possible to interview and categorize a cross-section of the deaf population,

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we may very well find within-group variance equal to that of the hearing population. Indeed, there is far more shared between deaf and hearing people than there is separating them, but that separation is profound. Even so, the deaf experience does not possess a totipotency (the ability to generate or regenerate a whole organism from a part) in the creation of a finished individual, uninfluenced by the rest of the environment. The individual is much, much more than the result of experiences shared among any single group. If there are more similarities than differences, what, then, might be the driving force behind the deaf cultural movement and its inherent dissociation with hearing people?

One rationale for advancing deaf culture is to promote individual self esteem through a type of collective pride. This, in itself, is not an unreasonable goal. Certainly, no one would suggest that deaf children or adults should be ashamed of themselves, feel inferior, hide or apologize for their deafness. But, the theory that possessing a unique culture fosters a healthy self esteem begs to be tested. There has been no analysis of attitude change among deaf people to determine the extent of impact, good or bad, resulting from the deaf culture movement. The deaf culture—self esteem connection is only assumed. Instead of a healthy advancement in self esteem for the deaf individual, one may find what DeVoss (1978) called "role narcissism" which he defined as "an intense identification of one's total self with one's professional or social role, leading to the exclusion of other social meanings." Inherent in such over-identification is a segregationist attitude which can only harm the deaf individual.

The emergence of a deaf cultural elite has brought with it a rejection of all that is not deaf, or not deaf enough. This rejection spills over onto parents, communications techniques, community organizations and other areas having the potential to be of service to the deaf population. The result is that deaf people are sometimes encouraged to reflexively reject the very support they need because the program is not for deaf only, or the provider is not deaf. Contrary to the intent of the cultural movement, deaf people lose much more than they gain.

The perception that the deaf self is a finished, unchangeable product of deaf culture, immune to influence from non-deaf sources, severely curtails motivation toward self improvement. Programs which deaf people demonstrably need, such as continuing or remedial education, are viewed as "hearing only" and shunned. Sometimes the notion that substandard educational performance is part of deaf culture prevents participation. Worse still is the unquestioning acceptance and perpetuation of completely unfounded conclusions about deafness and deaf culture by a segment of the professional population supposedly educated in issues related to deafness.

A glaring example is the dogma that hearing people cannot understand deaf people because of the cultural differences; therefore, hearing people cannot perform as therapists, teachers, leaders or models for the deaf. (Is this much different than the deaf psychology movement?) An obvious contradiction in this assumption is that it is often made by hearing people who, at one time, had no understanding of deafness themselves. Fascinating is their refusal to believe that other professionals are capable of learning about deafness or, heaven forbid, that someone might actually question the conventional wisdom concerning deafness. A mind-set has developed wherein even the most innocuous questions regarding deafness are reacted to as malicious blasphemy. Safe forums to promote understanding through open discussion of contradictory ideas are alarmingly rare in a field given to a perceived need for self defense and isolation from outside scrutiny.

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Continued perseveration on past misdiagnosis, misplacement, mistreatment and lack of understanding of deaf people denies an existence of solutions for such mistakes. Obviously, the solution is inherent in the education of the professional. But, education brings us back to the issue of what is reliable information, which can only be provided through unbiased, scientific research that allows questioning, promotes discussion and disregards the emotional shrillness which is becoming commonplace today. Our problem, simply stated, is that we do not know enough about deafness nor are we employing rigorous scientific study to learn about deafness. In place of knowledge we find folklore based on the deaf culture myth, which is being so vigorously defended by its victims that it creates a surreal swamp capable of swallowing those who would enter.

As professionals, we are trained to examine cause/effect relationships. We are admonished to control variables to arrive at some degree of certainty in our conclusions. Yet, when working with issues involving deafness, most of that teaching is cast aside to embrace emotional generalities. What sometimes passes for research is merely a very biased, ungeneralizable questionnaire addressing nothing more than preference. Successes in teacher and student performance are passed off as successful teaching programs, while the failures are swept under the rug. Support of sign language systems bears more resemblance to religious faith than rationality. The impact of a disability on development is labeled as culture and shrouded in mystery. Our quest for understanding through analysis is seen as an affront to the very people we are trying to understand.

To question the validity of deaf culture and its impact on the individual is no sin. What is wrong is to blindly accept that which flies in the face of common sense and injures the very population we seek to serve.

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