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### Cover Page Footnote

\*Paper delivered at the International Audiology Congress, Sept. 1968 London, England.

## SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF DEAF SCHOOL LEAVERS IN THE UNITED STATES\*

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MERVIN D. GARRETSON

Social adjustment may be considered within a medley of contexts. With the professional sociologist we may view deafness against the backdrop of deviance and stigma as reflections of behavior which is perceived to be abnormal, such perception certainly varying from one community or society to the next according to each particular definition of normality. We might elect to approach the subject in terms of social maturity as it relates to the attainment of individual independence, which some would equate with social competency. Or we may wish to discuss the topic within the framework of marginality, or perhaps some other sociological effluvia.

Although there may be merit in certain types of ongoing sociological research, especially in longitudinal studies conducted by qualified individuals in the area of hearing impairment, I sometimes wonder if certain segments of our profession do not tend to spend an undue amount of their time and energies on conceptual esoteria and analysis which bear very little application or relevance to the realities of human living. A certain danger would appear inherent in the extent to which sociological studies are conducted in a laboratory atmosphere as if one were studying non-organic objects of interest only to research scientists. Frequently aseptic in nature, handling deaf subjects, so to speak, with forceps or tongs,

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such studies should be evaluated with extreme caution. The vital quality of "peopleness" is absent.

I find myself very much in accord with an emerging group in the United States and possibly elsewhere, which has expressed definite reservations about the validity and applicability of test-tube and paper research in the area of human phenomena. This has been particularly brought out in recent years with our problems in racial relations, bilingual minority groups, and in the poverty programs in my country. We are learning that it is hardly realistic to hope to achieve much of an understanding of the various nuances and intangibles which are so integral a part of the human element—without living, working, and communicating with these people. I believe this to be particularly significant in the area of deafness, a disability which generally presumes a communication handicap. Similar sentiments are quite clearly expressed in a paragraph from an *Atlantic Monthly* article written not too long ago:

After the report was written, I realized that many of my blacks and whites had gone to problematical gray, the burden of increased knowledge. I realized also that part of that knowledge was of a kind outside the numbers and specifics that fill government reports and sociological journal articles; it is composed of pieces of information that do not array themselves in nice neat patterns; they do not form pretty theses or admit nice tabular or verbal conclusions—but somehow I cannot help feeling that they are in many ways more important, more germane, than the figures or the charts. Art and science go around constructing and projecting coherences; the street does not think in coherences, it is just there.

In this sense, the social adjustment of deaf people may be viewed as a street—it is just there, and a genuine understanding of all of its ramifications would require actual personal involvement with those who are deaf.

In the light of the above, and because of limitations of time and space, this paper will simply consider social action by individual or group deaf school leavers within the milieu

of a predominantly hearing population. By the same limitation, it is not possible to carry on an extended discussion into differences of adjustment between the hard of hearing and the profoundly deaf. Finally, while we believe with Lee Meyer-son in the existence of three distinct patterns of social adjustment, we must raise the usual caveat against stereotyped and generalized inference. Intrinsic to each deaf school leaver is an unique personality with all the attendant idiosyncrasies one would recognize in any normally hearing school leaver; each represents a separate human being, an individual in- violate, and from this standpoint one approaches with cau- tion the question of compartmentalization.

The term "School Leavers" has been defined for this paper as referring to young deaf adults who have left school either for college or for the world of work. Educational sys- tems for the deaf in the United States are perhaps unique in that no uniform approach toward teaching deaf children exists along lines of communication methodology. One will discover a diversity of philosophies, all of them, to be sure, anchored to similar pedagogic principles and all utilizing a media-oriented teaching framework. Each American school strives for an effective program in speech, lipreading, and auditory training; the differences arise in the total communi- cation approach of each individual school:

1) The simultaneous method, where all of the various communication systems are used together—speech, lipread- ing, fingerspelling, and signs. This multi-method is generally prevalent in the intermediate and upper grade levels of most of the large state residential schools in the United States, in a number of day programs within the last several years, and at such institutions for higher learning as Gallaudet College, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Riverside City College, and Delgado College;

2) The sometimes termed neo-oralist or Rochester meth- od, which appears to be gaining acceptance at the primary and pre-school levels in some sectors of the country, both in resi- dential and day school programs—the use of fingerspelling along with speech both in and out of the classroom, and;

3) The completely oral approach where no manual communication of any type is permitted either in the classroom or in the dormitory. This system is in effect at several private residential schools and in numerous day classes and day schools. Such programs usually continue as far as Grade 8, after which level students are expected to integrate into regular public schools for the hearing.

It is possible these differing philosophies have resulted in some degree of variation in social adjustment among deaf school leavers in the United States. However, several years ago the National Association of the Deaf established a Junior NAD whose membership is composed of deaf students of "High School" age, or those 14 years and older. At this time, under the able coordination of its national director, this dynamic youth organization links chapters in some 45 state residential schools for the deaf with a total membership in excess of 3,000 young people. Just recently this junior organization held its first National Convention and plans are underway for workshops in community awareness and leadership development. One result of these activities might be the emergence of a broad general base for a similar adjustment springboard for these eventual school leavers. Mention might be made that the median age of school leavers in the United States falls between 18 and 19 years, with as many as 2,000 of them continuing with higher or advanced technical education for another two to five years.

As indicated earlier, personal experience as a deaf person would tend to substantiate the three broad adjustment patterns identified by Lee Meyerson, both in the United States and in other countries as well. Depending upon the type of school situation, on family and environmental factors, personal need for independence and self-expression, and on other intangible human vagaries, deaf school leavers may find themselves in any one of the following categories:

#### *Adjustment Pattern One*

Probably 40 percent of our deaf school leavers have merged into this first pattern, which involves something of a with-

drawal from hearing society to the relatively small, restricted but safe places provided by organizations of the deaf and societies for the hard of hearing. Such environmental cul-de-sacs may be considered safe because in such a sub-society the deaf person finds ego-identification and self-concept flourishing unchallenged by problems of communication. Individual interests and the need for self-expression and leadership develop along normal lines within the confines of this closed milieu. Such deaf people escape the uncomfortable sensation of being "left out" due to their inability to participate adequately within the group as so frequently occurs when the deaf individual finds himself mentally floundering in a gathering of hearing people who ordinarily carry on a conversation at a rate which is all but impossible to follow, even for the more accomplished lipreader.

These young deaf adults have in a sense rejected and have been rejected by the world of the hearing; however, they do have a semblance of overlap or community into the life-space of the non-deaf. This minimal valence comes into play at the various places of employment where an element of interaction with hearing co-workers is a requisite part of the job. At times the economic contact may extend to the social, as at employer-employee parties and picnics, with certain further carryover among some individuals.

Many of the deaf people in this adjustment pattern may have excellent speech and lipreading skills; with many others such ability may be only fair, but definitely it is not a lack of oral training that leads them there. This arises from a fundamental need to participate and to belong somewhere.

As would be expected, these islands in society are not without their negative elements, such as restricted contacts and a narrowing of choice among individuals who may be seeking companions with similar social, recreational, or intellectual pursuits. For example, a young deaf adult with a preference for poetry and literature may find it next to impossible to meet someone in his circle with identical interests. However, one might observe that were he to seek such com-

panionship in the larger world of hearing, the communication difficulty would simply compound the problem. Also, in such a pattern frequently it takes time for fresh ideas and changing idiomatic usage to become assimilated from hearing society.

### *Adjustment Pattern Two*

In the second social adjustment pattern would be found the five to ten percent of those deaf school leavers at the other end of the spectrum—young adults who have been brought up to reject the world of the deaf and to spend their lives aspiring to be an acceptable part of the world of the normally hearing. Raised in an atmosphere of “mouth-to-hand” and integration-consciousness, they yearn to do exactly the same things as those with normal hearing and in exactly the same way. These individuals go to heroic and sometimes fantastic lengths to camouflage their deafness and view their proudest moments as those occasions when people are unaware of their hearing impairment.

However, the deaf people in Pattern Two are constantly running into all kinds of barriers—the social institution can be most powerful and just about impregnable even for normally hearing people. It is not unusual for such deaf individuals, then, to discover themselves in a sort of no man’s land between the way of life they desire but which rejects them, and the microcosm they themselves have rejected. Psychological and personality problems are not uncommon.

Discussions with numerous deaf individuals in this category have elicited the information that all too frequently their only recourse in social gatherings is day-dreaming or “wool-gathering.” Sometimes they attempt to rationalize the situation by reading a book or magazine, or otherwise occupy themselves since they cannot follow the conversational goings-on unless it happens to be a *tete-a-tete* or an occasional threesome. Many of these individuals have married a partner with normal hearing and are seeking happiness in their partner’s social group.

In short, the relatively better adjusted persons in this group would be those who have learned to accept the fact that inevitably theirs will be a secondary role in their environment; who face the realization that it will be necessary to sacrifice a large degree of participation in the discussions and other group involvements from time to time, and who have developed effective defense mechanisms to aid in minimizing such inconveniences so that they may continue to be acceptably happy in their chosen pattern.

### *Adjustment Pattern Three*

Another large group of deaf school leavers, possibly more than half of the total, may be represented in the third adjustment pattern—those young people who believe they have learned to accept the realities of deafness in a hearing society. Such individuals recognize with varying degrees of clarity that indeed they form a marginal and deviant group, but would just as soon have everyone know of their disability than go through life playing “The Great Pretender.” As a whole, members of this group tend to be reasonably well educated, may be quite fluent at signs and at the same time possess usable speech and lipreading skills. Generally they have discovered a large common area in both the deaf and hearing milieu.

Such young deaf adults may be interested primarily in establishing their own self identity. They aim to get their hearing fellowmen to accept them simply as deaf people, and in this manner to prove that their deafness is just a characteristic beyond which may be discovered other qualities which can be shared and which are similar to those of the normally hearing.

The individual in Pattern Three actively seeks out areas where hearing is not a significant factor, or finds time to instruct his friends in the rudiments of manual communication to speed up the conversational give-and-take. Theirs is a sort of no-holds barred, multi-lingual world where they and their associates, deaf and hearing alike, make use of speech, lip-

reading, signs, and fingerspelling, just so they are in communicative rapport with each other. With the aid of hearing and hard of hearing companions who are reasonably expert at signs, these deaf people are constantly making new contacts through manual interpreting. Once the initial ice has been broken, they may be able to develop new friendships through lipreading and basic signs.

Bypassing their deafness through these same manual interpreters, this group of deaf adults makes use of dual telephone arrangements, attends lectures and plays, "listens" to radio and TV programs, participates in professional group discussions and meetings, shares in seminar activities, and in other like situations strives to effect a reduction of their marginality. They also find time for all deaf functions.

Regardless of the particular adjustment pattern, invariably the deaf school leaver will seek the city, especially such metropolitan centers as New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, where they can be assured of a diversity of activities and friends, both deaf and hearing, with whom they can communicate. If possible they will avoid a rural setting which frequently implies a life of relative superficiality and loneliness, but should the employment factor make this necessary, they will then probably drive hundreds of miles for a weekend meeting with friends or to attend a club affair. Their summer vacations will be arranged so as to take in one of the state or national conventions of the deaf.

As each young deaf person leaves school, he faces a number of social problems. The telephone situation has been greatly improved in recent years with the advent of the Electrowriter, the teletype attachment, and other gadgets which in time should minimize to some degree their dependence upon others to make their telephone calls for them. As they set up housekeeping, they will substitute the chimes in their doorbells for blinking lights, will make special arrangements for child rearing, and as their children grow, will seek to participate in the PTA activities of the public schools. They will

learn to select spectator sports and other activities where hearing is not an overriding factor.

In summary, it should be obvious to discerning people who have had some degree of contact with post-school deaf people that when viewed as a group, they tend to exhibit pretty much the same characteristics as a normal sampling of young hearing adults, the difference arising with the important factor of communication. The frequent reference by some professionals to the concept of "integration in the hearing world" has little meaning to the average deaf person and is no matter of great concern to him. As a matter of fact, he believes that he occupies the same hearing world as everyone else, views the same passing scenery with the same eyes, breathes the same air, eats the same food, swims in the same waters, and makes love pretty much the same way. His use of signs and his difficulties in communicating with others may set him apart, but he realizes that life must be sought for its personal meaningfulness to him as an individual, and THAT certainly represents the ultimate measure of social adjustment.