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PSYCHOLOGY OF DEAFNESS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERPRETER

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I would like to discuss the psychology of deafness and its implications for the interpreter for the deaf. I do not intend to dwell on figures but here are a few relevant statistics from the book, *The Deaf Population of the United States* by Schein and Delk (1974) which reports the results of the National Census of Deaf Persons (NCDP). Discussing physical and mental conditions among the survey sample, Schein & Delk noted that one out of three persons had a disability in addition to deafness and of that group less than 3% had neuropsychiatric difficulties. Also, it appeared that there were no differences in the percentage of women and men who had neuropsychiatric difficulties. However, it was reported that nonwhite deaf males suffer a greater percentage of neuropsychiatric conditions than their white deaf male counterparts.

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Some final figures from the NCDP deal with the category of behavioral emotional problems in children. The NCDP noted that four out of every ten students had a condition besides deafness which interfered with their academic progress — one fourth of these, or approximately one out of ten were the result of emotional or behavioral problems.

The preceding indicates that a percentage of deaf individuals with neuro-psychiatric disorders or behavioral emotional problems may confront those involved with a deaf population. It seems especially appropriate for interpreters to be aware of these figures because the interpreters frequently have contact with the deaf in stress situations, i.e. situations in which the deaf are dealing with the hearing population relative to the problems of living.

Rainer, et al, (1969) have defined deafness as, “a stress-producing hearing loss, from birth or early childhood, rendering a person incapable of effecting meaningful and substantial auditory contact with the environment” (p. XIV).

It is now possible to review briefly several different psychological views of deafness, which, without elaborating upon each, will allow me to make some general suggestions that might help interpreters dealing with the deaf either for their first time or their millionth time.

The first psychological view is that of Helmer Myklebust (1960) who discussed sensory psychology and how sensory deprivation might affect the deaf psychologically. He noted that of the five senses — audition, vision, taction, olfaction, and gustation; the first two, audition and vision, become the lead senses and act in a complementary fashion to aid the processing of sensory information in normal intact individuals. That is, one sense, audition, acts as an alerter to the sensory event for the vision sense, then audition resumes scanning the environment while vision attends to the stimuli source of the sensory event. In effect the senses pair to help the organism process the sensory acts happening about it. Most of us are aware that deafness causes a limitation in a variety of intellectual areas; chiefly, we hear about communication deficits, but what Myklebust says to us is that each sensory channel supplies part of the total sensory picture. Therefore input from each channel is necessary to understand a sensory event. If this assumption is true, then not only is the deaf person limited sensorily but his experience of any sensory event is substantively different from ours. For the interpreter, this means that conveyance of a message requires more than just words. It is necessary that the sensory context in which the message was generated be made clear so that real communication is achieved. Furthermore, any response to a sensory event comes from a qualitatively different experience within the deaf individual. An analogy here can be found in the deaf individual's wondering what the voice of Frank Sinatra sounds like. So, the interpreter has to be sensitive to the intent of the message and its underlying sensory experiential context. It should be clear that much of what is said requires previous knowledge of and experience with total sensation.

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Myklebust suggests also that the deaf individual to maintain physical reality contact and psychic equilibrium or balance shifts primary emphasis to the visual sense mode and secondarily to the other sense modalities. This compensating action leaves the interpreter with the need to explain any auditory event, for example, in visual terms. How adequate the interpreter is is a measure of the communication achieved.

Another psychological way of looking at deafness is to think in terms of the dominant culture which surrounds the deaf individual and the pressure that culture exerts to normalize the population (Meyerson, 1963). In our society, for the greater share of our recorded history, being "different" has subjected the deviant individual to punishment, banishment, or the state of simply being ignored. Parents of today cry "Why can't my child talk", meaning, "If my child talks he will be normal." Schools implicitly accept this notion that normalcy means speaking. Perhaps, both parents and schools should redefine normalcy in terms of establishing effective communication.

The culturally established and generally accepted norms mentioned above have several effects upon the deaf individual. In general, these norms force hearing individuals who are enculturated to adhere to them blindly; thus any sensible behavior as seen by the deaf individual is simply not perceived as sensible on the part of the unimpaired persons. The implications of this state of being to the interpreter should be clear. It makes their job doubly important because without being "messianic" they are constantly charged with explaining deafness in a way which reduces the effect of the culturally imposed values and normalizes the deaf population. There is hope that contact with the deaf through interpreters may affect these negative attitudes in the hearing community.

An additional effect is that the deaf individual may accept the cultural judgment of ineptitude. If he does then he will behave as many deaf individuals have, willing to accept life decisions being made for them. A sensitive and educated interpreter can to some degree mitigate this culturally proscribed passivity by developing deaf awareness to their rights and by not accepting the implicit derogation of her client. In this connection, my comments here describe precisely what the "deaf power" advocates are fighting for and against.

On the one hand you have great numbers of conscientious deaf individuals unaware of this social devaluation but behaving in a way which conforms to the society's devaluation of them. Remember this is an implicit thing — it is the way of life for the hearing. And remember too, the hearing really feel they are doing the right thing by decision making relative to the deaf.

On the other hand you have an aware cadre of deaf individuals who are trying both to sensitize the deaf community to the truth and what group solidarity will achieve for them while establishing basic communication with the hearing and affirming the operating rules for modifying the power structure to include the deaf. The inclusion in the power structure has the

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effect of bringing change to society's attitude whenever the power group becomes an advocate. The role of the interpreter and particularly groups like RID and the state RID's must be clear here since they represent an advocacy group.

Another psychological viewpoint is that of Schlesinger (1972 who discusses the development of the deaf individual in terms of eight stages of man. Each stage is a crisis or critical period; the degree of resolution of each determines psychological adjustment. Several of the critical periods involve the deaf individual and his interactions with his family, teachers, community and self. It should be apparent that the presence of sensitive skilled interpreters can provide the communication link necessary to facilitate resolution of those crises involving interpersonal interaction.

What has been said here applies to the interpreter as well because he is subject to societal judgments and cultural pressures and self doubt. If he succumbs to the notion that the "deaf can't", his behavior will affect the welfare of the deaf materially.

The interpreter needs to feel confident in his ability. He need not always apologize for a job he feels poorly done. To apologize too profusely has two effects; one, it may establish an expectation of poor quality communication and two, it makes the interpreter so sensitive to his errors that he becomes communicatively ineffective. Accepting errors to a degree and not dwelling upon them is necessary to become successful as an interpreter.

For myself, having had a deaf family supposedly gave me an insight into deafness but as I grow older I doubt that more. What I now feel it gave me was an alliance and a group to identify with but having that identity does not necessarily grant me the objectivity to deal adequately with the problems which can occur. My current view of deafness has shown me that the deafness I encounter as a professional is in substantive ways different from my view of deafness as the son in a deaf family. Many of us with similar backgrounds tend to derogate those who haven't had the "experience" of deafness as we have. It is just possible that our in-group identification may be hurting our objectivity.

In summary, an interpreter can draw much to help him from general psychological thought if he will open his mind and remember that his position demands objectivity, awareness, and responsibility.

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