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## POLARIZATION OF DEAF PEOPLE

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### INTRODUCTION

A great deal of current professional literature deals with the educational and/or psychological aspects of deafness but very little relates to the sociological variables. On the other hand, there have been prominent individuals such as Robert Lauristen and McCay Vernon, who have proffered empirical commentaries on the deaf sub-culture commonly referred to as the *deaf community*. Such synopses have, in the past, focused on the life-style of a deaf person in regard to employment and social activities in general with limited statistics to support their comments. These reports have indicated that the deaf community is an entity in itself with social organizations composed of and operated by the deaf on a local, state, national, and, sometimes, on an international level.

Within this structure are individuals who can be classified according to the role they choose to maintain. For example, there are deaf individuals who elect to associate only with persons who can hear, and others who refuse to associate with "hearing" people. Such polarization has been noted by Lee Meyerson (1963) and McCay Vernon (1971). Yet, such observations are incomplete. Knowledge of the continuum of human behavior in other areas would suggest that there are various degrees of polarization. It is contended by the present author that the middle group exhibits the most acceptable traits. To verify this contention, one would turn to existing researches. However, available data indicate that there is an abysmal knowledge gap that needs to be filled.

Since little data relate to this polarization phenomenon among deaf individuals, it then becomes necessary to delineate a set of questions which,

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if answered, could provide a composite profile of the variables that might influence polarization. These questions are:

- Exactly who are “the deaf”?
- How do deaf individuals view others with similar hearing dysfunctions?
- What factors determine the social effects of deafness?
- How do such factors interact with each other and to what degree?
- What implications and/or ramifications does the hearing loss have for a deaf person in his attempt to be a functioning member of society?
- What role does the deaf community play in the social structure of a deaf person?
- What is an acceptable definition or description of the deaf community as opposed to that of a deaf person?
- What factors appear to provide a sense of commonality among the wide variety of personalities found in the deaf community?

### THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Erving Goffman's book, *Stigma* (1963), offers reflections on an individual's perception of his impairment. Goffman states that the “members of a particular stigma category will have a tendency to come together into small groups whose members all derive from this category” (Goffman, 1963, p. 23). In other words, a deaf individual's “real” social group is composed of persons who are likely to suffer similar deprivations because they possess a common handicap. This, then, is the deaf community.

Since the term *community* implies a geographical entity, one may envision deaf people living in some kind of a physical or cultural ghetto imposed by the nature of the handicap. However, as noted by Al VanNevel, in the traditional sense, the deaf do not comprise a ghetto (VanNevel, 1973, p. 6). The deaf community is comprised of persons having various degrees of auditory dysfunctioning who live in different towns and who converge at some location (usually a rented hall) for social identity and personal-social enrichment. Therefore, the term “deaf community” does not denote geographical boundaries, but rather suggests a type of loose-knit, informal organization. The tendency of the deaf individuals to seek social interactions with others having similar limitations has given rise to complex organizations, some more stratified and centralized than others (Mindel and Vernon, 1971, pp. 97-98). It is apparent from the number and type of such organizations that deaf persons, lacking the salutary feedback of daily social intercourse with others, have sought and created special means to compensate for the isolation caused by the communicative disorder (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). As a result, deaf people move in and out of a larger culture according to their momentary needs but always maintain a variety of their own resources which enable them to live reasonably well-balanced and profitable lives.

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Goffman (1963, p. 9) noted that a deaf person might attempt to correct what he perceives to be the objective basis of his handicap by conforming as much as possible to the actions of a "hearing" person. Such a person may break with reality and attempt the impossible such as making a telephone call that often leaves both the caller and receiver frustrated with nothing accomplished. Goffman also contends that a stigmatized person may compensate for his condition by devoting great effort to mastering an activity that would normally be closed, e.g., a person endeavoring to play professional football. Though there are notable exceptions, such efforts are usually futile because of the communication barrier. Under these circumstances, deafness can be viewed as a permeating and pervasive condition which affects all phases of an individual's social and psychological growth.

A review of the potential implications and ramifications of deafness helps to crystallize how an individual may perceive his role(s) and attempt to integrate into a society he feels will accommodate his personal and social needs. By viewing these reactions from a sociological perspective, five distinct groups of deaf individuals emerge. Each type has not been documented but does appear to follow some pattern of adjustment. These groups reflect the patterns of individual endeavors to come to grips with the problems caused by the hearing impairment and to devise solutions that will satisfactorily compensate for the hearing loss.

The pattern concept is not relatively new. Meyerson (1963), has proposed three patterns of adjustment that support the premise of this paper. Meyerson, through these patterns of adjustment, demonstrates how a person adopts a social identity that allows him to function with a minimum of dissatisfaction and frustrations. However, Meyerson's concept does not accommodate individual deviation from a pattern. The hypothesis of polarization centers around the fact that people tend to emulate available models. Thus, the choice a deaf person makes will be based on the data available at the time the decision was made.

Since people are flexible, the choice is not necessarily final; there have been incidences in which a person chooses one social lifestyle and, later, changes to another. This flexibility is illustrated by a panel discussion in which seven deaf individuals compared experiences and reactions on the meaning of deafness. One participant stated that he adhered to the oral philosophy until he became involved with other hearing impaired people (Lloyd, 1972, pp. 6-7). Frequently, there is a great deal of mobility when resistance to a different style is lowered. Such decreased resistance is often brought about by association and/or observation of other deaf individuals. Sometimes, areas are overlapped in order to meet needs.

In view of the deficiencies of Meyerson's group descriptions, a five level hierarchy is proposed. Included among the five levels will be a description of deaf people and their position within the deaf community. Since this

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hypothesis is formulated by empirical knowledge, it is hoped that, by describing the characteristics commonly found in each category, the postulation will be crystallized and made amenable to research.

**TYPE I** – This level is composed of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who, for the most part, totally reject their hearing impaired peers and, in doing so, imply a negative reaction to their hearing loss. Individuals in this group whose communicative mode is entirely oral associate only with those who can hear. In some cases, other oral deaf people may be permitted into their social structure. Emphasis is placed on the “normal” aspect of their activities. Intelligence and educational level does not seem to be a salient factor in this category. Some oral deaf possess doctoral degrees while others are blue-collar workers. However, persons in this group appear to suffer from loneliness since it is difficult, if not impossible, to be actively involved in group activities (Jackson, 1973, p. 208). The majority of individuals appear to be adventitiously deaf. In short, according to Meyerson’s adjustment patterns, one would classify this category as exhibiting characteristics of the second pattern.

**TYPE II** – This category includes some of the characteristic lineament (sic) of Meyerson’s second and third patterns. This classification includes deaf people who strongly prefer the company of those who can hear. At the same time, exclusion of other people possessing auditory problems is not noted. While the oral method is the preferred mode of communication, the language of signs is, when necessary and usually with an air of condescension, used in interaction with other deaf people. As in Type I, the majority of individuals appear to be adventitiously hearing impaired. The eruditional level is noticeably higher and more evenly distributed, with many individuals engaged in professional occupations. This group tends to contribute to the leadership of the oral deaf.

**TYPE III** – Persons in this classification are often viewed as the most well-adjusted: National and state leaders are drawn predominantly from these people. In societal terms, most of the characteristics of Meyerson’s third pattern apply to this group. Individuals in this category often display a charismatic flair probably due to the fact most individuals are post-lingually deafened. The deaf “clans” (families having an inordinate number of siblings and relatives born deaf) contribute extensively to this classification which supports the contention that early communication is a salient variable in the adult social adjustment of deaf person. Though most individuals in this group are adept in oral communication, all prefer to rely on the language of signs. Educationally, this group evidences the highest number of well-educated individuals with the majority assuming professional careers. A large percentage of deaf persons possessing advanced degrees (masters and doctorates) appear to fit the description of this category. Companionship is not selected on the basis of any bias but rather on its own merits. These people manifest a willingness *and* ability to relate with others in spite of their

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hearing disability demonstrated by the fact that skill in signing is not a prerequisite for social interaction on the part of the "hearing" person.

**TYPE IV** – Individuals in this group rely extensively on manual communication, but are relatively capable in the art of speaking and speech-reading. Association with persons possessing auditory impairment is more comfortable for these people. At the same time, if a "hearing" person can sign, even minimally, their overtures of friendship are not rejected. The occupational categories seem to be more evenly distributed with skilled trades more pronounced. Leaders of the local and state organizations of the deaf are often derived from this classification with a few becoming nationally known. Many individuals in this group have been diagnosed as congenitally deaf, with a few losing their hearing before the age of one year.

**TYPE V** – The majority of deaf persons in this group would be classified under Meyerson's first pattern. The vocational achievement tends to reflect a distinct lack of specialized trades. The jobs are predominantly custodial or assembly-line in nature. Unfortunately, though many have completed a four-year secondary program, educational achievement rarely progresses beyond the fifth grade level. The type of hearing loss would be seen as prelingual deafness. Deaf clubs provide all of the socialization and entertainment these people desire; association with the members of the normal group is avoided when possible. When business must be with someone who can hear, communication is through the "pen and paper" method. Ameslan is the preferred system of sign language when interacting with each other. Persons in this group are often very frustrated and, as a consequence, many harbor resentment towards the more fortunate deaf peers while, at the same time, conceding the need for their help.

### CONCLUSION

Both John Singer (McCullers, 1940) and Abel Ryder (Greenberg, 1970) succinctly demonstrate how the communication barrier creates the isolation and alienation experienced by many deaf people. As with other people, how one accepts his limitation, in part, determines the role he will assume in society as well as the society to which he will belong. Abel Ryder accepted the challenge and became a leader in the local deaf community. On the other hand, poor John Singer was alone when his Greek friend died. In addition, John rejected the friendly overtures of other deaf people, leading to a loneliness to which suicide was preferred.

Persons having a hearing loss generally do not stand about groping for guidance where it does not exist. Instead, they cope with the problems inherent in the physical dysfunction and engendered by the public's lack of understanding. The *modus operandi* of coping and attacking the problem is a social question calling for attention. As a first step, a great deal of research in this area should be conducted on role assumption by the deaf. Research of a demographic nature should concentrate on the variables previously

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listed. The design of the research should combine several methods which would enable the researcher pertinent data. The case study incorporating biographical history should serve as the primary method.

The sign language skill of the researchers and interviewers is of utmost importance in obtaining accurate data. It is essential that these people be fluent in the language patterns of the various types of deaf individuals which might be encountered. The validity of responses and the reliability of research will be assured.

It is anticipated that results will support the contention that there are several roles available to the deaf person. As an added benefit, the results should give educators and ancillary service personnel working with the deaf sufficient data in order to provide guidance in the decision-making process.

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