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## **ADARA BIENNIAL CONFERENCES: OUR HOME FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Gabriel I. Lomas, Ph.D.**

*JADARA Editor*

It was probably almost 20 years ago when I attended my first professional conference. As a young professional, I recall a feeling of awe as I listened to many of the presenters. I am fortunate to have attended a number of local, state, national, and international conferences in our field. Being in the right place at the right time, I was able to meet legends in the field of psychology such as Albert Ellis, William Glasser, and Robert Wubbolding, among others. These major conferences tend to be held in major cities with massive convention centers and thousands in attendance. Access to high-profile presenters is often limited as masses of attendees swarm these presenters for a moment of their attention. I recall the first time I was in the same room with Albert Ellis; I almost froze with fear and intimidation as I was unsure what I should say to him.

In the deaf community and the psychology field, we have our own legends. Because our field is so young, many of the early researchers and founders of our association are still among those at our conferences. Also, since our field is a niche area, our conferences typically attract smaller cohorts of attendees. This allows for a more intimate experience as attendees, and presenters are able to connect to participants with ease. Breakout sessions at the ADARA conferences tend to take on an interactive dialogue format, as a meeting among friends. The intimidation factor is greatly reduced in such a setting. This brings me to my first of what I hope will be a number of reasons to attend ADARA conferences: Our conferences offer us access to practitioners and researchers who are at the top of our discipline. ADARA conferences offer attendees unique opportunities to learn from and learn with the most recognized professionals in our field.

I recall attending an annual meeting of the American Counseling Association about three years ago. I was impressed with both the experts who were amassed and the sheer number of people in attendance. Although I was grateful to be an attendee, I felt there was a void in my training, since

there were no sessions that were specific to practicing with deaf clients. I am currently preparing a manuscript for publication in which school counselors working with deaf students were interviewed. Participants in the qualitative portion of the study indicated a number of themes in their work, including a lack of appropriate professional development opportunities.

Truly, there is a paucity of training opportunities that focus on working with deaf clients. However, each workshop at ADARA conferences offers those in attendance insight into applications with deaf clients. While other conferences may have had much to offer, they also left a lot to be desired. At ADARA conferences, I always feel like each workshop is applicable to my work and my clients. Few other conferences can offer what the ADARA conference offers. Hickson (2006) indicated that it is our obligation as professionals to remain active in our respective fields of study. Hickson also stated that conferences offer us a chance to learn from our peers, present our own research, access cutting-edge information, and develop a network of personal and professional friends. This brings me to my second reason to attend our association's biennial conference: The ADARA conference is one of only a few that provides professional development targeted to psychology and deafness. The ADARA conference closes the gap that exists with regard to training that is tailored to our needs.

Today's conferences are being offered in a number of innovative platforms. Internet-based conferences appear to be the wave of the future. Certainly, they have some obvious potential benefits such as cost savings on travel and flexibility with timing. However, they also pose a number of limitations, especially to our niche field. While web-based conferences allow attendees access to conference contents, they offer limited networking opportunities. Furthermore, they offer few opportunities to sit and listen to a group of experts in our field debate a contentious issue.

I am on a number of e-mail distribution lists. Often, professionals pose questions or comments laden with controversy. These e-mails frequently lead to online discussions and debates among those who wish to participate. While these discussions can be fruitful, they unquestionably leave much to be desired. Discussion forums that are web-based frequently lack many of the vital components of human communication. For example, it's extremely difficult to read affect or emotion in a web-based forum unless the individuals clearly identify their feelings. Sitting in as an observer at live discussion

forums offers participants many benefits. This brings me to a third reason to attend our biennial meetings: ADARA conferences offer attendees both formal and informal forums to observe scholars as they discuss and debate issues at the heart of our profession. Hickson (2006) stated that listening to others discuss and debate issues in a scholarly manner helps us to build enthusiasm and makes us want to be better at our respective disciplines.

Today, there are a number of specialized interest groups within the field of deafness and psychology. Some might argue that these groups are an essential component to meeting the needs of professionals in deafness. On the other hand, others might see smaller groups as a splintering or weakening of the energy in our discipline. Whatever your perspective, assembling as a large group provides a number of benefits. Our association began with just a few individuals sitting around a table and discussing the need for a professional association that addressed our needs. (If you have never read our history, see the link on our website at [www.adara.org](http://www.adara.org).) Without the unifying energy of a convention, our association, along with other specialized groups within our discipline, may not have formed. These smaller groups are referred to in the literature as an *epistemic community* (Arnold & Lee, 1974). The word *epistemic* comes from the Greek language and means *knowledge*. Networking at ADARA conferences allows us all to gather in venues large and small, sharing our knowledge with each other.

In closing, I feel compelled to offer congratulations to Doug Dittfurth, Randi Turner, and their conference committee for a job well done. The 2009 conference in San Antonio was a wonderful venue that offered attendees all of the benefits detailed above. The esteemed group of presenters shared the latest research and practice in our discipline. Contained in this issue you will find seven full-length papers contributed by presenters at our 2009 conference. Additionally, abstracts from all other presenters offer readers a taste of what was available to those in attendance. If you missed the 2009 conference, don't fret. ADARA is co-sponsoring the Breakout conference in Atlanta during the summer of 2010 and our biennial conference will be held in San Diego in April 2011. Please check the ADARA website for more information. I hope to see you at our next conference.

## References

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