Rehabilitation, Alienation and The Young Deaf Adult

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AND THE YOUNG DEAF ADULT

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INTRODUCTION

Many rehabilitation agencies and their counselors seem to have become inured to how their regulations, their procedures and their personnel affect clients who seek their services. This has vital bearing on whether potential clients are served at all and how well they are served. Regardless of the client's disability, the agency's reaction to and behavior toward the client has bearing on the client's reaction to and behavior toward the rehabilitation agency.

With rehabilitation services so well publicized in schools for the deaf, the deaf client is no stranger to present-day rehabilitation agencies. This being the case, it would be assumed that the agency has made some provision to orient its personnel—both clerical and professional—towards the handicap of prelingual deafness and towards minimal communication with deaf clients. Altogether too often, however, this is not the case. There are, to be sure, many different types of deaf persons who seek out the rehabilitation agency under a variety of circumstances. Whatever the underlying reason for the client's coming to the rehabilitation agency, there are certain factors imposed by prelingual deafness that will predispose the client to certain attitudes, sets and types of behavior. When the agency's personnel is not aware of these factors, problems arise. Certainly, lack of common courtesy and negative attitudes toward handicapped persons in general on the part of the agency’s personnel would be enough to alienate any handicapped person. With the deaf client, however, communication difficulties often magnify and compound what might otherwise be relatively insignificant oversights.

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The fictitious narrative and discussion that follow attempt to show how this might happen. In addition, the social-psychological concepts of alienation and its consequences will be introduced to give perspective to the problem.

NARRATIVE

The bus sped past a row of neatly-parked vehicles. Each car carried a bright green license tag with its identifying number. Had a rider been lying on his back he could have seen through the upper windows of the bus the pock-marked faces of the concrete canyons lining the route of travel. Each pock-mark was of identical size and had blinds of the same color set at the same height. Even the dogwood trees crammed in holes in the sidewalk were of the same size and same yellowish pallor.

The bus proceeded. Near the front sat a young man with an eager gaze, but with a slightly bewildered look on his face. At first he had tried smiling as his eyes met those of the hurriedly boarding passengers. The smile was soon quenched, however, by a looking away or the mumbling of something he did not understand.

The bus continued its monotonous routine of starting and stopping until finally the driver nodded to the young man and he joined the parade of exiting riders.

Once off the bus he surveyed the scurrying people, the scudding cars, and the suddenly ominous buildings around him. He studied a card in his hand, compared the numbers with those on the building to his left, and began a tentative approach to its side door.

Pausing before the door, the boy squared his shoulders, took a determined step forward, extended his arm to push the door open. He recoiled as it swung open before he could reach it.

Disconcerted by the automatic door, the youth paused inside the foyer to regain his composure. He glanced at the card in his hand and looked around the large room. He saw no name corresponding to the one on his card. Across the room at a large desk sat a young lady who looked as if she could help him.

Approaching the girl, he spoke to her and was chagrined as he understood her to reply, "WHAT??" He tried again . . . again the same puzzled reaction. A third try produced
similar results. The young man shrugged, took a pad from his pocket and wrote, “Where Mr. Miller?”

When he looked up the girl was at the telephone—she stayed there for ten minutes or more. Finally she finished, turned back to him and read his note. She wrote, “I’m new here and don’t know Mr. Miller, sorry.” Again the pencil flashed: “But I’m supposed to meet him here!” “Sorry, but I can’t help you.” In desperation the youth showed her the card, she brightened, said something that resembled “for the flower,” and turned her attention to another person.

Tired of waiting, the youth fell in with a group of people just coming in the door. They proceeded to the elevator and the young man watched—fascinated as the light above the door descended. It stopped, not at One, but at L. The group surged forward, carrying the young man with it. The knobless door opened and closed without a touch.

Inside the light began again: 1-2-3-, stopping at 4. The people pushed off the elevator, carrying the young man with them. He found himself watching the door close and the light continue to climb.

Turning back, he saw the people disappearing through a door at the end of the hall. He hurried so he wouldn’t be left alone in the long, windowless passage. Once through the door he was shocked with what he saw. A girl in a wheelchair with her head twisted awkwardly to one side and her face oddly contorted sat to his left. Beside her sat a big grizzled Negro with only a stump for his right arm. Partially hidden by the door, a consumptive old man coughed continually into a handkerchief. A slight, pale woman crooned to a baby almost as large as herself. The others seemed to blend into the grey-walled room. The thought came: “Doctor’s office?” Then he saw the name Vocational Rehabilitation.

Glancing further, he noticed the sour-faced woman on the other side of a glass pane at the end of the room. Beyond her, he saw several girls seated at desks, staring intently at rapidly moving typewriters and whirling discs. He nervously approached the window labeled RECEPTIONIST...

Mona Vanet was mad. Mr. Tazewell, the office manager, had refused to let her off this afternoon. I haven’t taken any
more sick leave than the other girls. Why did he have to pick on me? She glanced through the glass at the clients. She reflected: That last one, the big one with the arm off, failed to say ‘Ma’am’ when he spoke to me. These people sure don’t know their place anymore.

The switchboard buzzed. “Yes . . . Vocational Rehabilitation, may I help you? Mr. Scott? I’m sorry, he’s not in, may I have him return your call? . . . He was supposed to call two weeks ago? No, he has not been on vacation! NO, I don’t know why he didn’t call . . . Would you like to talk to his secretary? Hello . . . Hello??” Humph!! Must have been some crank. These people come asking for service and expect us to treat them like kings.

Uh oh, here’s another one. Removing the plastic cover from the teller-like window, Mona barked, “Who do you want to see?” The young man spoke unintelligibly. Oh my gosh, one of them foreigners, thought Mona. “What?” The young man pointed to his lips and ears and thrust Mr. Miller’s card forward. “Oh, you’re deaf and dumb, huh? Sit down and Mr. Miller will be back in a few minutes.” The boy shrugged and Mona jerked her hand toward an empty chair. The youth understood and sat down.

Well, at least he can understand something, thought Mona. The last deaf one couldn’t even write his own name. Wonder if this one can read and write? Old Miller can’t fool with him if he can’t; besides he’s got no place to send him if he can’t.

The buzzer rang for a full twenty seconds as Mona struggled with the word in the puzzle. She slammed the pencil down, breaking its point, and plugged in the interoffice line. “Yeah? . . . No, Suzie, I haven’t seen Mr. Miller. By the way, he’s got a deaf and dumb boy up front here . . . How should I know his name, he can’t talk! . . . Me tell Miller? Tell him yourself, he’s your counselor, isn’t he?”

The boy sat down. The old magazines didn’t interest him. As he sat he wondered if he would remember what Mr. Miller looked like. He had only seen him once, at school, and then not for long. He remembered that the interpreter said something about coming to see Mr. Miller for help in finding a job. He had signed a paper, gotten Mr. Miller’s card, shaken his hand and left. The principal had later received a letter asking that the boy be sent to the office today.
Jeff Miller was 41. He should have been state senator from DuValle County by now. He would have, too, if that confounded new principal hadn’t hollered so loud about his taking so much time from his industrial teaching job to “politic.” Well, he had shown the guy who was who in the county, but those big city newspapers found out about it and he had lost his job. He wouldn’t have to put up with this vocational rehabilitation business much longer—his wife’s uncle was going to get him a seat on the State Agriculture Commission. Miller finished his third cup of coffee, sighed deeply and sauntered back toward the office.

* * *

Ninety minutes had passed since Boyd Wilson had taken the chair so graciously proffered by the receptionist. He had watched her intently for at least forty-five minutes and she had not smiled once. She reminded him of his dormitory supervisory back at school. Wishing that he hadn’t come and fearful that Mr. Miller had forgotten him, he went back to the receptionist’s window. The woman said something that looked like “Wa doo wa.” Guessing that she was asking what he wanted, he extended Mr. Miller’s card again.

“Uh oh! I forgot all about you. Mr. Miller came in but he’s gone now.” This rapid exposition was too much for Boyd and he pointed to his ears again and shook his head.

Thoughts ran rampant . . . Why can’t you understand like normal people? . . . I wish I could hear, then I would never have to come here . . . I’m glad he’s deaf and can’t tell the boss I forgot him . . . I wish she knew sign language . . . If they kept these people up at the deaf school, we wouldn’t have to bother with them.

Mona finally found a pencil and wrote, “Mr. Miller is gone, come back later.”

Boyd was both angered and relieved. Mr. Miller was coming back later and hadn’t forgotten him after all. Still, he wished he didn’t have to wait so long.

* * *

Across town, the Chairman of the Vocational Rehabilitation Commission was speaking to Mr. Tazewell: “Your district is the lowest in the state. If we are going to meet the goal I gave to Washington, then we must have at least fif-
teen more closures from each of your counselors. By the way, how is Miller doing? Any better? . . . Just passing time, huh? Well, I would like to let him go, too, but if we do, his wife's uncle will stop our new Senate appropriation before it gets out of the budget committee.”

Tazewell said nothing in reply. He was tired of the whole business. This rush to get “closures” happened every year and every year he hoped it would be different, but it wasn't. He would get the closures, just like the other district directors. There wasn't anything else to do if you wanted to keep your job.

* * *

Five o'clock. Mona took as long as she could to write up the day's log of applicants. Finally, as the last secretary signed out, she closed the book, pulled down the shade, turned off the lights, and headed for the door.

Boyd saw the people leaving, but he thought nothing about it until the shade was drawn and the lights went out in the reception room. Now he was mad! Hungry, too. He had not left the room to get his lunch for fear he might miss Mr. Miller.

Mona came through the door, headed straight for the exit to the hall, and would have overlooked Boyd completely if he had not called attention to himself by clearing his throat.

Mona saw the boy and, without thinking, motioned for him to follow her into the hall. There, where the light was better, she wrote: “I thought I told you to go home three hours ago?” . . . “You said Mr. Miller come back later.” . . . “No, I told you to come back later. Mr. Miller will be here Monday, come in and see him then.”

Boyd watched as the woman hurried to the elevator. He took the pad, turned it over and unconsciously signed to himself, “Mr. Miller is gone, come back later.” It was there in black and white. She had told him that Mr. Miller would be back.

Boyd glanced back at the darkened room and shuffled toward the elevator. The scraping of his footsteps echoed through the corridor but Boyd was oblivious to them.

Vocational Rehabilitation had effectively closed a case even before it was opened.
DISCUSSION

The foregoing narrative attempts to portray some of the alienating factors that can be present in the initial interview or the “walk-in” situation where the rehabilitation agency and the prospective client first encounter each other. This first contact is most important, both for the client and for the agency. If the client is alienated, he does not take advantage of the potentially available assistance, and loses the benefits of the assistance. If the agency fails to establish rapport in the initial stages, then it fails in its stated mission and, additionally, assumes a poor image in the eyes of the clients’ acquaintances, losing potential referrals.

According to Erick Fromm, any type of submission is alienation. An example is a man who does not experience himself, but becomes a dependent “thing” who is deprived of self-determination. Marx calls alienation that situation in which man is “estranged from himself, other men, and nature.” While submission generates alienation, there are other factors which can cause alienation.

Two other concepts are C. Wright Mill’s vocabularies of motive and the concept of anomie. Vocabularies of motives could be defined as vocabularies associated with the language that is common to the individual and his perception of his role in association with others around him. People see things differently. People describing the same situation would relate it differently. The language and concepts used would be related to the individual’s experiences.

The rehabilitation counselor must, insofar as is humanly possible, try to understand and perceive the vocabulary of motives peculiar to the client he is serving. Without this understanding the counselor merely stabs in the dark without knowing where he is going.

Anomie is that situation where the person finds himself disconnected from all that has given him clues to the role he plays in society. The sudden shift of the role of the Southern Negro when he finds himself suddenly planted in the ghetto of a Northern city, the severed social contacts of the poor window washer who wins half a million dollars in the sweepstakes, etc., are good examples of anomie. Thus anomie may be defined as loss of contact with norms, rules, and feedback, which let us know how we stand in regard to our fellow man.

One important thing must be understood—the basic goal of rehabilitation is the reduction of alienation in all of its clients. This de-alienation is to be accomplished by providing the client with the means of reducing his dependence on others and thus make him
a contributing member of society. However, in the provision of services and the interpretation of the goal through the human instruments or the agency, situations arise that increase rather than decrease feelings of alienation.

Alienation begins early for the deaf person. The psychological barrier thrown up by the guilt reaction of the parents to the child's deafness in the majority of cases remains throughout the lifetime of the parent. This is the first factor which begins the long process of alienation for the average deaf person.

The readily-seen problem of communication is always present—shown by lines 32-46, 91-99 of the narrative. A lack of language ability, lines 152-154, causes misunderstanding.

The isolation of the training in the residential school for the deaf separates the deaf person still further from a commonality of experiences and associations which would tend to give him a basis of easy intercourse with non-deaf people around him. The often unrealistic goals met by the students in day classes for the deaf often accomplish the same results in the opposite direction. Experimental deprivation inherent in present practices of training deprive a deaf person of the ability to function at his best potential—lines 16-18, 24-27, 47-56.

It would appear that there are at least two dangers which are equally harmful to the self-image of the deaf person and consequently contribute to his alienation from himself. The danger that his environment will suggest to him that he is different from or not as good as other people is one. On the other hand, the deaf person, cuddled in the womb-like atmosphere of his educational system, may not realize the verities of the world into which he is being forced and may be shocked into the state of anomie by the abortive "helpful" attempts of both individuals and agencies. He may be forever alienated from the identity of his true self.

The existence of rehabilitation agencies could, in one sense, indicate that society is attempting to appease its own conscience. Society recognizes a need, and acknowledges the fact that the need must be met. However, individual members of society are too busy, and others are hired to do the job. Society fails to care for the person who needs help.

It must be stated that the narrative is not intended to portray in any way a "typical" rehabilitation office. However, factors are presented that have occurred and do occur in agency offices throughout the country in one degree or another. There are enough of them to cause the proposal of some "dealienating" procedures and
an idea of a "self-help" organization for the deaf themselves.

The ideal counselor to the deaf would be one who can communicate with the deaf. This counselor could either be deaf or hearing. It is conceivable that a deaf person could more easily understand the vocabulary of motives peculiar to the prospective deaf client. On the other hand, a deaf counselor may be too close to the world in which the deaf client lives and the client may be afraid that his intimate personal problems will find their way back to his friends and peers. This can be overcome, however, by a constant professional treatment of confidential information by the deaf counselor.

The rehabilitation counselor working with the deaf should get to know deaf people outside the office or its professional environs. He should be active in their associational meetings, church groups, clubs, etc. This could be done without destroying the identity of the counselor if he were a hearing person and would fit in perfectly if he were a deaf person. By associating with the deaf people in this fashion, the counselor would be providing opportunity for contact with people who really could be helped but who refuse to accept the feeling of alienation generated by the act of coming to the agency with what they perceive as a "begging" attitude.

One of the most alienating factors in rehabilitation—especially in state agencies—seems to be the paper work that must be performed to satisfy the regulations. A good counselor could develop techniques of conversation to elicit names, dates, work history, and other necessary data. This would seem preferable to a clipped, dehumanized "grilling" that lays the individual bare. At the very least, the counselor should explain the reasons for the questions and give the client the feeling that the counselor perceives him as a person and not a package to be measured, labeled, and shipped.

A good counselor to the deaf will get to know the boys and girls in school before they enter their graduating year. He will set up liaison with schools for the deaf and day school programs and cooperate in assisting the student in making a vocational choice. He will be perceptive enough to know that he cannot dictate to the deaf client what he can and cannot do, but will be active and enthusiastic in providing experiences that will assist the young deaf person in gaining enough knowledge to make an intelligent decision on his own. The counselor will accept the fact that the client has a right to fail, and will strive to protect that right, even though regulations dictate the determination of a feasible vocational objective for each client before service can be rendered past the evaluation stage.
Rehabilitation agencies face one of their greatest challenges in their initial impact upon the people they attempt to serve. If reception rooms are drab and colorless, if the reception personnel are physically or psychologically separated from the reception area and are given other jobs to do which are not related to the prospective clients they are meeting, then the agency is neglecting a good opportunity to make a favorable first impression on the client. People who are forced to wait beyond a reasonable period of time may come to the conclusion that they are even less important than they thought they were. Important people don't have to wait, they are seen almost immediately. Any experience which negatively reinforces the person's ego further gouges an already eroded self-image.

It does not seem too much to ask that each receptionist should at least know how to fingerspell, and, in the larger offices, have some knowledge of the Language of Signs. Counseling aides, skilled in communication with the deaf, could meet the deaf person, obtain a good deal of necessary information, put him at his ease, explain the function of the agency, answer questions, and in some cases do a bit of preliminary counseling. This would reduce alienation by showing that the agency is trying to help the client maintain his identity and his dignity. These aides could be employed on a full-time basis or could be qualified volunteers obtained through representative organizations of the deaf.

The prevailing attitude in the agency must not be of the “client-counselor” relationship in which the counselor tells and the client listens, but more appropriately one of “man helping man.” This seems to be one way of “helping” without alienating the client.

If there were some way to introduce reciprocity in the relationship, a major problem would be solved. People who feel “obliged” are alienated from the “obliging” object. Most people dislike “owing” someone. When people are forced into a receiving role without the opportunity of returning the help, they tend to become alienated. Perhaps the enlistment of one client to help another, the requirement of repayment (however nominal), or some similar action could be employed to reduce the alienation of the deaf person from himself and the resultant emotional alienation from the person who gave. This placing of the person in a dependent role is one of the most alienating factors of rehabilitation.

If submission is a form of alienation, then the rehabilitation agency must employ every means at its disposal to put the human element and “equal relationship” approach back into its dealings with the people it serves. Regimentation and routinization may
seem to speed up service to people but it tends to make “things” of them and forces them to be dependent. This denying of the right of the person to determine his own direction, either by outright force or by structuring of the circumstance surrounding a person, is the ultimate in alienation.

An additional consideration, which seems to have merit, would be some sort of comprehensive service center set up for deaf people. It could be similar to the community service agencies in Wichita, Kansas City, Dallas, and Pittsburgh. A planned comprehensive agency that would incorporate all areas in which deaf people might seek assistance, education, counseling, legal matters, medical concerns, vocational placement, governmental liaison, interpreting, etc., seems to be feasible. It could be maintained by deaf persons or organizations with consultants in all areas concerned. Hopefully, alienation would be at a minimum because all persons would be members, would be called upon to assist others when the time came and would be free to participate as they felt inclination.

In closing, it should be said that rehabilitation agencies have made and are making many mistakes in their attempts to work with the deaf. Many of these errors are made because of a lack of understanding of the implications of alienation on the part of the agency and its personnel. However, through the milieu of return to remunerative employment and the related concerns, rehabilitation is attempting to give the people it serves the opportunity to achieve the role they perceive for themselves. Rehabilitation was, for a long time, the only profession concerned with these goals. To its credit, the trend has been more and more in the last few years toward the consideration of the “whole man” in the rehabilitation process.