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THE DEAF GAY/LESBIAN CLIENT: SOME PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The role of the gay/lesbian person in the deaf culture and communication problems which contribute to or interfere with self acceptance as well as family or community acceptance are the focal points for this article. Changes that have been made in the deaf culture and in the culture at large in respect to sexual identity issues and the comparison of communities (deaf to gay/lesbian) are also outlined. Although not addressing every aspect of the issues surrounding the deaf, gay/lesbian client, this article provides suggestions for counselors and others who may be confronted with these issues.

The question of what constitutes a minority has long been discussed in sociological circles. The Civil Rights Movement defined minority and recognized the need for equal rights for minority groups. However, not all minority groups were given recognition as "minority culture." Two groups which were not recognized by the Civil Rights Movement, although very different in some respects and very similar in others, were people who are gay/lesbian and those who are deaf. This article looks at the similarities of these two minorities and ponders the dilemma of those who are deaf and gay.

The Minority of Gays/Lesbians

The lack of role models and feeling different than one's counterpart is similar to the life of a

person who identified themselves as gay or lesbian prior to the "coming out" movement of the past 20 years. Those who did declare their gay identities were often sent to mental health clinics, where they were classified as having a mental disorder, according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Since the Civil Rights Movement, however, the mental health profession has undergone significant changes in their understanding of gay/lesbian issues. The most recent psychiatric classification that specifically referred to gays/lesbians, ego dystonic homosexuality, was deleted from the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (third edition, revised) [DSM-III-R] in 1986 (Bayer cited in Cain, 1991). The result of this change can be noted by a more widespread acceptance and visibility of a "whole person" by the field of mental health as well as the general public.

The Minority of Deafness

According to general statistics, approximately one percent of the general population is deaf (Padden & Humphries, 1988). The National Information Center on Deafness states that the number of deaf persons ranges anywhere from 350,000 to 2 million, depending upon the classification system. Of those, 90% are deaf persons with hearing parents, most of whom are new to deafness (Commission of Educators of the Deaf, 1988; DeMatteo, Burke & Law, 1990; Stewart, 1989;).

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Clearly, the deaf child soon becomes aware that he (sic) is different in certain respects from his hearing counterparts and is constantly reminded of this difference, perhaps even more so if it is based, in addition, on other factors such as race, ethnicity, and social class (Sussman, in Green, 1986).

Most deaf clients grow up as a "minority" with few or no role models to help them establish their identity (Greenberg, 1985).

Acceptance Issues Around Deafness

As has been cited earlier, the majority of deaf children come from parents who are hearing. For the person who is born deaf to hearing parents, there is quite frequently a difficult adjustment time when the parents go through the issues of accepting their child's deafness. Because the acquisition of language is dependent upon adequate means of passing that language on to one's offspring, early communication often exacerbates an uncomfortable child-parent relationship. "Many parents of deaf and other disabled children are wounded," states Schlesinger, 1987, in reference to how parents respond to the information that their child has some form of a handicap. When the child's communication skills do not develop at a rate equal to those of hearing children, the parents find serious communication gaps developing between the deaf person and the family. The deaf child must navigate the journey of attachment, separation, and individuation without the benefit of language and without the words of their parents (DeMatteo, et al., 1990).

Acceptance Issues Around Sexuality

Acceptance plays an important part in the gay/lesbian community and the role of members of that minority in the majority community. There are hearing and deaf people who have not yet

come to terms with gay/lesbian community rights. Some are unable to talk about their negative attitudes towards gays/lesbians. Others may be unable to accept the family member who is gay or lesbian. Homosexuality continues to be stigmatizing for most gay men in most of their social interactions (Kirk & Madsen, cited in Cain, 1991). When it comes to bringing positive changes closer to home, when it comes to talking on a personal level about negative attitudes, when it comes to having a family member who is gay or lesbian, there are people who have not come as far in changing their attitudes (Langholtz, Critchfield, Berman and Burke, 1987).

Gay men who complete the identity development process, in which disclosure to other is an important part, are viewed as more psychologically adjusted and socially skilled than those who do not (Cain, 1991). However, for many families with a deaf member, the sexuality issue is not easily discussed openly. Communication problems encountered by the family because the child's deafness may seriously affect the child and the child's family when it comes to discussing and dealing with issues of sexuality. For the deaf person who wishes to communicate with parents about their sexuality, these communication barriers make the task seem impossible. Deaf gay/lesbian persons may have already experienced feeling isolated and rejected by their parents because of their deafness. It is often the case that difficulties in communicating with ones' family mitigate against finding a supportive and nurturing environment for exploring these feelings. When communication difficulties underlie the relatedness that the person has with his/her family, it is almost impossible for the deaf gay/lesbian person to talk about his/her sexual orientation. Communication may cloud the issues so much that parents and the hearing-impaired child may give up trying to deal with the sexuality issues for the child (Acree, 1987; Schlesinger, 1987; Scott & Dooley, 1985; Green, 1985). The rejection

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and isolation from those whom the person loves can often be the most painful experiences someone can go through. Having to go through those feelings again is very difficult and lonely, and the deaf person may have limited numbers of safe places where they can talk about and explore those feelings of being different.

Due to a variety of conflicting issues, the deaf person may find disclosure of their gayness more complicated and confusing due to lack of access to information. If the parents are hearing, very often they will go through a grief that is reminiscent of when they discovered their child was deaf. For deaf parents of a deaf gay/lesbian child, there may also be a sense of loss. The loss could be in terms of closeness in their relationship with their child or with their standing in the deaf community. There can be a sense of fear of ridicule by the fellow deaf community members. There is a worry that the jokes and comments they have made about gay/lesbian people in the past will be used against them. In many ways, the restrictions which society places on deaf children tends to color and flavor the issues and the effects of these issues around sexuality.

The Deaf Gay/Lesbian Person in the Deaf Community

Although the deaf community is a cultural minority, there exist prejudices within the community against other minority groups. For example, within a geographical region, there are pejorative signs to refer to gay men. It has been the experience of the authors, that even today, a deaf family who may have a deaf gay/lesbian member tend to keep it hushed, and that many people who themselves are not gay or lesbian will not attend workshops on gay/lesbian topics. Some gay/lesbian members of the deaf community do not identify with the core groups or with various organizations and societies that are geared for deaf gay/lesbian members. They prefer to remain

outside of the dual community for various reasons. There are some organizations around the country for deaf gay/lesbians, such as The Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf.

A phenomenon noted by the authors in their work with the gay community is that very often gay deaf men will form relationships with hearing lovers. Perhaps this trend is due to the availability of potential partners. The deaf community is not large in numbers; choices of sexual partners may be even smaller for the gay/lesbian deaf person. Several deaf persons have said that a hearing lover can help them navigate through the hearing world, often a difficult task for those deaf persons for whom communication remains a problem. A much more subtle reason may have to do with status within the deaf community. By successfully connecting with a lover, someone who is of the hearing world, they may experience a sense of compensation for times when they have not been able to make that connection. There is also the issue of power and control. The hearing lover is often initially not familiar with sign language. The deaf person wields control if the social life is in a primarily deaf community; the hearing partner can feel excluded from some of the communications.

During the last several years, while serving on various planning committees for conferences and seminars for members of the mental health and deafness community, the authors have experienced a fair amount of resistance about having gay/lesbian issues as part of the presentations. At the National Association of the Deaf Convention, people do not openly publicize gay/lesbian events except by word of mouth (Langholtz et al., 1987). Even at the most recent convention of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association in Chicago, Illinois, this past May, there were no presentations or small group discussions centered on gay/lesbian issues, despite the fact that many clinicians who work in the field of deafness and mental health regularly see gay and lesbian clients.

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A Closing Perspective

The deaf community and the gay/lesbian community are two types of minority cultures. Although the cultures are similar in some ways, issues of communication make relationships for deaf gay/lesbian persons very difficult. The deaf gay/lesbian person is a minority within a minority, often feeling isolated or unconnected to the minority culture of the deaf or the gay/lesbian

community. The deaf gay/lesbian person often has to deal with being invisible and having a negative connotation put on their lifestyle. These produce challenges for positive self esteem. There are many unexplored issues in regards to the deaf gay/lesbian client. For the deaf gay/lesbian person to feel his/her place in the world it is important that the dilemmas of communication, acceptance and isolation be spoken of openly and boldly.

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