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A New Agenda for Deafness Rehabilitation: Embracing Multicultural Diversity

Glenn B. Anderson
University of Arkansas

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POINT OF VIEW

**A NEW AGENDA FOR DEAFNESS
REHABILITATION: EMBRACING
MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY, Glenn B.
Anderson, University of Arkansas,
Little Rock, AR**

Editor's Comment

This section provides a forum for exchange of reasoned ideas on all sides of issues in the area of deafness. The opinions expressed in this article, and others that appear in *Point of View*, are those of the authors and should not be considered the position of ADARA or the editors of JADARA. The editors welcome responses to the opinions expressed in this section.

The theme for the 1993 ADARA Conference, "Cultural Pluralism: Empowerment Through Mutual Understanding," reminds me of the first ADARA conference I participated in 21 years ago in Washington, DC (1972). At that time, ADARA was known by its original name, PRWAD (Professional Rehabilitation Workers With the Adult Deaf). I had the privilege of being part of a general session titled, "Problems of Black Deaf People," with four other presenters, Ernest Hairston, Linwood Smith, James Magness, and Frank Bowe. Although the meeting in Washington, DC was the 4th biennial conference, our general session was in many ways historical, because it was the first time a presentation on multicultural diversity issues had been included in a PRWAD conference program. Furthermore, it was also the first time that a group of multicultural

deaf persons had been invited to be part of a PRWAD conference program.

Why was such a topic relevant to the PRWAD membership at that time? The best way to answer that question is to briefly comment on what the "climate" was like at that time. It was clearly a "post-civil rights era." It was a time when the buzz words were socially and culturally disadvantaged and the federal/state rehabilitation program had a legislative mandate to "rehabilitate the socially and culturally disadvantaged." It was a time when there was a great deal of interest in serving people who, due to low income status, lived in "inner cities," had significant health problems, and were "non-white."

It was also an era when our deafness rehabilitation profession, as a whole, was not very diverse. There were very few professionals who were either deaf, female, or of multicultural backgrounds. You could count the number of multicultural professionals on your fingers. And finally, it was also an era when it was uncommon to hear professionals at a PRWAD conference talk about the idea that deaf people had a legitimate, natural language and a unique culture.

Once the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed and new priorities emerged, attention began to shift away from serving "socially and culturally disadvantaged populations" to serving

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those who were described as severely disabled. Interest in serving people who were severely disabled also became a prominent area of interest for ADARA. In fact, the theme of the 1974 conference was, "Serving Severely Handicapped Deaf Persons."

In spite of the new federal priorities on serving individuals who were severely disabled, it seemed reasonable and realistic to expect that the milestone achieved through that first general session presentation in 1972 would spark the emergence of many more sessions on multicultural issues at future ADARA conferences. To my disappointment, however, that did not occur. For example, in my review of the proceedings of all ADARA conferences since 1972, multicultural diversity issues did not appear as either a workshop topic or as part of a conference theme until the 12th biennial conference in New York City in 1989.

With the recent passage of the 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act, it now seems that the pendulum has swung back. Once again, serving culturally diverse individuals is a priority for the federal/state rehabilitation program. Why is there renewed interest in serving culturally diverse groups? Four factors appear to have persuaded Congress to support this priority (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 1993, pp. 20-21). These factors were:

1. The changing demographics occurring in our society which predict that by the year 2000, one out of every three Americans will be either African-American, Latino, or Asian/Pacific Islander.
2. Data on the rates of disability which have documented that people of racial or ethnic backgrounds tend to have disabling conditions at a much higher rate than white Americans.

3. The results of outcome studies documenting that compared to white Americans, people of racial or ethnic backgrounds experience inequitable treatment in all aspects of rehabilitation and related human service programs.
4. The chronic shortage of individuals of racial or ethnic backgrounds being recruited into pre-service and in-service training programs. The implications are that sufficient manpower is not being prepared to meet the changing demographic make-up of people seeking services from rehabilitation programs.

Within our profession, we also seem to be experiencing renewed interest in people of racial or ethnic backgrounds. Topics on multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication, and racial/ethnic diversity have begun to appear with greater frequency in our professional literature. In addition, two national conferences focusing on people who are multicultural and deaf were sponsored during Spring and Fall, 1992. The Spring conference, held in Atlanta, GA, focused on people who were African-American and Deaf (Anderson & Watson, in press). The Fall conference in San Antonio was devoted to people who were Hispanic/Latino and Deaf. A third conference focusing on deaf people who are Asian/Pacific Islanders is being planned for March, 1994 in San Francisco.

Why the sudden increased national interest in these populations by professionals in our field? I suspect that our profession is also responding to the same four factors that persuaded Congress to increase its support for culturally diverse groups when it voted on the 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act. In addition to the changing demographic make-up of our students and clients, we are also aware that, in general, we have not been doing a very good job serving deaf people of

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diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds (Anderson & Grace, 1991; Cohen, Fischgrund, & Redding, 1990).

This increased interest by professionals in our field could also be attributed to some other significant changes that are occurring in our society. The most notable change seems to be the declining importance of assimilation as a vehicle for success in our society. Traditionally, society's approach to the attainment of the American dream has been through assimilation. The metaphor for becoming assimilated has been labeled the "melting pot" theory.

To be successful in the workplace, for example, people who were "different" or culturally diverse were expected to "fit-in" and conform to the culture and values of the dominant group. People who chose to fit-in were, in effect, giving up their cultural identity to be accepted and successful on the job. A good example of this were people who immigrated to America from Europe during the early 1900's. Many of them chose to Americanize their names, perfect their English, and enter the mainstream as quickly as possible.

But, now times and attitudes have begun to change. People who are culturally diverse are less willing to be assimilated, even for eight hours a day on the job. People are beginning to celebrate and take pride in their cultural differences. People are willing to be part of a team on their jobs, but many no longer desire to jump into the melting pot. I have even heard friends of mine say when they go to work, "I don't want to park my culture at the front door any more."

Similar developments are occurring among deaf people. The idea of developing interventions and/or programs to either "fix" or to help assimilate deaf people as fully as possible into mainstream hearing society are very powerful influences in our profession. They impact a great deal on the attitudes and behavior of both the general public and professionals who work with

deaf people. The growing public fascination with cochlear implant surgery and the trend toward "mainstreaming" or educating deaf children in regular public schools are two examples of this influence.

On the other hand, deaf people have emerged with new vocabularies and concepts to describe their views regarding assimilation in mainstream hearing society. Their views of assimilation differ from those of hearing people. In recent years, deaf people have begun to strongly advocate for self-determination in all aspects of their lives. Terms such as "Of, By, and For" deaf people have become quite prevalent in our profession. Mainstream hearing values and standards of behavior are no longer being accepted as the only or the main models for success in our society by deaf people. The values and standards of behavior of deaf people are considered at least equally important. The "Deaf President Now" movement at Gallaudet University and the emergence of bilingual/bicultural and deaf studies programs in our schools and colleges are two examples of the influence of self-determination in the deaf community.

What are the implications of these changes in attitudes and views about assimilation in American society in general? An example described in the book, *Beyond Race and Gender* (Thomas, 1991, p. 9), provides a good analogy.

"Imagine that you were told that by the end of the year the only gasoline available for your car will be a mixture that is 15% gasoline and 85% something else. You have a choice. You can ignore that projection and continue to drive as usual. But if you do, and the projection is correct, your car will eventually stop running and there will probably be permanent damage to the car engine." In other words, if you do not change your driving habits, you will be driving on only 15% rather than 100% of the

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fuel needed by your car to run smoothly and efficiently.

The moral of this analogy is that if we do not learn to burn all of the fuel—in other words to harness and take advantage of the power that all the diverse groups in our society have to offer—we will jeopardize the strengths of our organizations and institutions—government, business, educational, and civic. Even though our society is one of the most diverse in the world, many of our organizations, including those in our field, are still trying to drive their cars using only a small percentage of their fuel—or diverse human resources.

This analogy reminds me of a paper Dr. Oscar Cohen, Executive Director of the Lexington School for the Deaf, recently shared with me. The title of his paper was, "Multicultural Education and the Deaf Community: A Conversation About Survival" (Cohen, 1993). There were several themes presented in his paper that appear to be relevant for the theme of our 1993 conference.

One theme was that deaf people have achieved considerable empowerment as a minority group asserting its rights within a dominant culture. The second theme was that if the deaf community is to become stronger in the future, then deaf people will need to share a vested interest in improving equity and opportunities for deaf people of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. A third theme was that it is now more important than ever for Deaf people and professionals who work with them to acknowledge and celebrate the diverse cultures that make up our deaf community. A final theme was that a shared vision of cultural pluralism within our deaf community needs to be developed.

A notable implication of Dr. Cohen's paper is that within our deaf community we are using only a small percentage of the fuel—or diverse human resources available to us. Therefore, if we hope to become more empowered and gain greater access

to education, employment, technology, and social resources, then we must find ways to harness or take advantage of the strengths that exist among the diverse groups of people who make up our deaf communities.

Now that the pendulum has swung back and service to culturally diverse individuals has become a major priority for rehabilitation programs, what does this mean for our organization, our consumers, and our profession? Will this renewed interest become just another fad that will be popular for a while and then fade away when new interests and priorities arise? Should not ADARA assume a leadership role in responding to these challenges by developing a vision of cultural diversity that becomes more than just a passing fad within our profession? If ADARA desires to commit itself to developing such a vision, what steps can it take to ensure that it effectively taps all, not just some of the fuel that exists among the membership as well as the profession as a whole?

Research on managing diversity has identified 10 guidelines that can help make a difference or provide organizations a "leading edge" (Thomas, 1990). Nine of these 10 guidelines which may apply to ADARA are briefly described below.

1. **Clarify your motivations.** A lot of leaders are often not sure why their organization should get involved with multicultural diversity issues. Some do so to comply with certain legal requirements (e.g., Affirmative action and EEO). Some do so for social and moral reasons. The most important reason for becoming involved with multicultural diversity issues, however, should be to enhance organizational effectiveness and productivity.
2. **Clarify your vision.** What is your private or personal vision for the organization? Is it a vision of equality and a desire to tap the human resource

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- potential of every member of the organization?
3. **Expand your focus.** An organization's definition of diversity should include not only race, gender, and ethnicity, but also other important differences such as age, sexual orientation, and religion, among others. The goal should be to create a diverse, heterogeneous culture for the organization.
 4. **Audit your organizational culture.** An organization should periodically examine its unspoken or unwritten assumptions and values. For some organizations, this requires recruiting outside consultants to conduct the audits.
 5. **Modify your assumptions.** The results of the audits should lead to appropriate modifications in an organization's unspoken or unwritten assumptions and values to benefit everyone.
 6. **Modify your systems.** By modifying unspoken or unwritten assumptions and values, an organization will also be encouraged to modify its systems or ways it provides services and benefits to its members or constituencies.
 7. **Modify your models.** As a result of modifications that occur in assumptions and values in addition to its systems, an organization may also modify the models of leadership it advocates.
 8. **Help people pioneer.** Modifications in the organizational culture and systems should help involve a greater diversity of people in the organization's activities and broaden opportunities for innovation, new ideas, and excellence.
 9. **Apply the social consideration test.** This test consists of one question: Does this program, policy, or principle give special

consideration to one group? If the answer is yes, the organization is not on the road toward managing diversity.

There are two final comments I want to present about cultural diversity. Last month, my wife and I went to hear a jazz concert. A Japanese performer, who was the husband of one of the keyboard players in the band, came on stage to perform two sets. After he played the first set, he made some comments. He explained that they had come together for the first time a few months earlier. The band of 10 musicians were from all corners of the U.S. and also from several continents. Two of the musicians were Japanese, two were from South Africa, one was Hispanic, two were white, and three were African-Americans.

The Japanese musician said that when the band first got together to rehearse, "it was like being in the middle of Los Angeles," because it was such a chaotic first encounter for the band. One of the musicians from South Africa had never heard of the type of music the Japanese musician wanted the band to play. But the song sounded so good the South African musician liked it. It was a song that was dedicated to Native Americans. The group also played American Jazz, Pop, and songs from South Africa and Japan. Their performance was a wonderful example of the power and beauty of a synthesis of diverse musical talents and interests.

The music was so good my wife and I could have sat in our seats all night and enjoyed it. After the Japanese musician finished the song that was dedicated to Native Americans, he said something that really made an impact on the whole audience, "Why can't we all live together in harmony and peace?"

I want to close with a quote that provides a good metaphor for describing cultural diversity in our society; it is a quote by Jesse Jackson (Reyes, 1992).

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"America is not like a blanket—one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt—many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven together by a common thread" (p. 23).

Many of you will form your own interpretations of the meaning of this quote. I would however, like to share one interpretation of

the meaning and significance of this quote. Cultural diversity is the source of our uniqueness as an organization and as a profession. By valuing and respecting cultural diversity, we recognize that it can be infused into all aspects of our organization and our profession. The common thread that holds our diverse people together is our shared interest in the building, success, and growth of our organization and our profession.

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