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GENEALOGY INTERESTS IN DEAF AND HEARING ADULTS: EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPARISONS

David S. Martin & Robert Lee Williams

Genealogy and Personal Factors

Relatively few studies have addressed the connections between personality or family factors and interest in genealogy. Gosman (1995) stated that interest in genealogy may stem from the need to investigate inherited diseases, attain social status, bring the past “alive,” and develop a “sense of belonging” to some group. Rice (1992) indicated that amateur genealogists use family stories as a kind of “empowerment,” whereas Chance (1988) said that genealogy promotes mental health for older persons by fulfilling a number of personal needs such as the life-review process. Low (1992) pointed out that genealogists can derive a “cultural place attachment” through family history study. Thus, genealogy has been found to fulfill a variety of personal needs. No literature relates these needs to the difference between Deaf and hearing persons.

Genealogy among people who are Deaf

The authors raised the following questions in the process of comparing the motivation of Deaf vs. hearing people in the pursuit of genealogy:

1. Would Deaf persons be interested in genealogy primarily for the purpose of learning about the medical background (e.g., hearing status) of family members?
2. To what extent must genealogists who are Deaf need to overcome barriers to access to information?
3. Do Deaf genealogists benefit from group genealogical experiences?
4. To what extent would the satisfactions derived from genealogy be different for Deaf vs. hearing persons?

Method

A specially developed questionnaire was distributed to three cohorts during 1996 -- the Metropolitan Washington (DC) Deaf Genealogists' Association, a national Deaf person's computer List-Serve network known as “TFA” but which also includes hearing people who work in Deaf education, and the 1996 annual conference of the Federated Genealogical Societies in Rochester, New York. In all instances, participation in the survey was voluntary.

A total of 38 subjects returned the questionnaire. Of that total, 22 classified themselves as Deaf and 16 classified themselves as hearing. There were no significant differences in the gender of the respondents or average ages of either the Deaf or hearing samples.

Findings and Discussion

A. Interest in Genealogy. We found no significant difference between Deaf and hearing persons in their reasons for pursuit of family history. The majority of both Deaf and hearing respondents listed as their prime genealogical interests: preparing a history for the family, an enjoyable hobby, and qualifying to join a lineage society. There are several possible explanations for this unexpected finding. In the 19th century, extremely detailed genealogical records on Deaf children were kept as they were enrolled in schools for the deaf in order to trace hereditary deafness; these records were analyzed by Alexander Graham Bell (who was married to a Deaf woman) and are still available today in Washington, DC at the headquarters of The Volta Bureau, a subsidiary of the Alexander Graham Bell Association. However, in the late twentieth century, interest in the hereditary aspects of deafness from a pathological point of view has waned in favor of increased pride in Deaf culture and the resulting general societal openness to the rights of people with disabilities in the United States. Thus, it is possible that Deaf adults as a group have moved beyond interest in the specific medical aspects of deafness, and are more interested in family history for some of the same reasons as hearing persons.

On the other hand, approximately one third of the Deaf respondents referred to deafness either in their reason for becoming involved in genealogy or in one of their major satisfactions in working in the field. One Deaf woman wrote of wanting to be “able to tell family history to my mother who never heard before because she is the only Deaf child in my family,” or “...to find out whether deafness is hereditary or not...” Another Deaf man’s reason for pursuit of genealogy is to discover “why there was no history of deafness in [my] family ‘til now.” Because deafness is not commonly viewed as a pathological condition in the Deaf community, looking for “deaf roots” is not viewed as a “medical reason,” rather it is viewed as a cultural affiliation.

B. Length of Time Involved. Though 47% of the hearing respondents had been involved actively in genealogy for more than 15 years, only 18% of the Deaf respondents had been involved for as long a period. Yet there was no significant difference in the ages of the Deaf and hearing cohorts. This finding would coincide logically with the beginning of increased captioning on television in the early 1990s and thus the beginning of greater access to media programs related to family history.

Brief Report

C. Education in Relation to Hearing Status. Hearing persons in this sample had a higher average level of education than the comparable cohort of Deaf persons. This finding is not surprising in view of the fact that higher education is still not as widely accessible to Deaf as for hearing persons. Level of education, however, seems not to have affected the seriousness of purpose nor satisfactions derived by either subgroup, as indicated by results on other survey items.

D. Genealogical Training Experiences. Hearing individuals reported having attended an average of three training workshops, and more than 60% of the hearing respondents had attended at least one genealogical conference or training session. In stark contrast, Deaf individuals averaged less than one workshop (.6), and in fact only 25% had attended any kind of formal training session. The lack of available qualified sign language interpreters in many workshops and conferences is clearly one major explanation for this discrepancy.

Conclusions

Though the accessibility to training activities is clearly more restricted for Deaf than hearing persons, the highest-interest priorities in genealogy seem to be equally strong among both Deaf and hearing persons, in spite of the persistent differences in accessibility. The interest among Deaf genealogists must be sustained by a strong individual perseverance that is not as important for hearing persons, in view of the barriers posed by lack of interpreters in workshops, conferences, and many public libraries and archives. Therefore, one of the most important next steps in relation to equity must be the equal provision of support services for Deaf persons in genealogical events and research facilities so that all genealogical information and activities are fully available to Deaf clients at all times.

Deaf genealogists are in fact interested specifically in some of their genealogical connections to other Deaf families and ancestors. Several original families of Deaf persons have been identified in the past by historians in Colonial America located in four different colonies, and for some members of the Deaf community, there is a sense of pride to be able to be connected to one of those original families (T.W. Jones, Personal Communication, December, 1996). Properly taught, genealogy can help Deaf or hearing children to develop a healthy curiosity about differences in the world around them. Through still better understanding of these motivations, then services and education may then be better developed to serve this deep-seated human need to find our roots.

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