COUNSELLING WITH THE PSYCHO-SOCIALLY ISOLATED DEAF

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Abstract

The official acceptance of sign language is probably the most important event in the history of the deaf. Communication is vital in order to establish close relationships. Not all of the hearing impaired participate in the deaf community despite a common language and a common culture; i.e. they are psycho-socially isolated due to external factors and more internal (personal) ones. Isolation must be met with measures at different levels; information to and influence on society at large as to the deaf and their needs, support to families with deaf children and various forms of support to the deaf themselves. Preventive measures aimed at the parents of deaf are required to ensure optimal developmental conditions. Counselling for the deaf can profitably be aimed at psycho-social measures, thus psycho-social rehabilitation pre-supposes an active social involvement on the part of the counsellor. Four ‘key concepts’ of interest in the presented work model are described, namely identification, working through, reality testing, and acceptance. To ensure the deaf adequate support the following factors are important: sign language, positive attitudes to sign language and deafness, ‘culture competence’, relevant professional competence, active participation of the deaf in the rehabilitation process and an increase in the interpreter service for the deaf.

Introduction

The most important problem that has confronted deaf persons over the years has not been the hearing impairment as such but rather the lack of understanding on the part of their surroundings as to what deafness implies. The acceptance of sign language in Sweden, which occurred first at the end of the 1970’s, was probably the most important event in the history of the deaf. Sign language offers the deaf a problem free means of communication with other deaf persons as well as a cultural affiliation.
The absence of sign language communication in the hearing family of a deaf person can result in depression (Mahapatra 1974), introversion (Jongkees 1983) or an inability to establish close relationships (Pyke and Littman 1982; Jongkees 1983). Despite a common language and a common culture, not all of the hearing impaired participate in the deaf community. On the contrary many remain on the outside.

**Psycho-social isolation amongst the deaf**

There are today an estimated 8–10,000 deaf and seriously hearing impaired persons in Sweden. Around 1,200 of these live in Stockholm County. About 10% of those congenitally deaf and those deaf since early childhood — that is about 120 deaf persons — have been excluded from both the deaf and the hearing community as a result of an unfavourable childhood and schooling (Danielsson 1983; Hanson 1983). Danielsson (1983) author of a report for the Swedish National Association of the Deaf and moreover deaf herself, writes:

To feel excluded from the deaf community is the worst that can happen to the deaf since there is but a single small group of deaf persons who are of such fundamental importance for the social and cultural life of the deaf. Deaf people with social and psychological problems easily become isolated and can even feel estranged in a deaf association, which can have an extremely negative effect on their personality development (p. 2).

Jongkees (1983) claims that many deaf people fear isolation.

For the deaf, isolation implies being excluded, living apart from the deaf community and deaf culture. This isolation can in some cases be self-imposed, in others forced upon the individual by various circumstances, for example norms which differ from those of the deaf majority, divorce problems, alcoholism. The concept of isolation comprises social, emotional and physical aspects as well as variants of these. A deaf person can for example physically avoid the deaf group because he feels no real identity with them or their culture. In another case physical presence in the deaf group can be combined with a feeling of social and emotional estrangement.

The deaf person’s isolation can be caused by both external factors and more personal ones. The external factors include additional handicaps, psychological problems, personal relationships, alcohol dependence, deviant norms and values and overprotection from the hearing. Among the personal factors that can lead to isolation are a psycho-social inability to interact with other deaf or with the hearing, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, non-accepting attitudes to one’s own deafness and a lack of self-confidence and security. There is no strict division between external and personal factors. Both include psychological variables, but in the latter case the emphasis is on personal experience of isolation.