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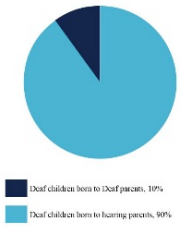
Introduction:
Oppression within the Deaf Minority Group

Facts

- The Deaf are told by many in the hearing majority to conform to the hearing world.
- Deaf are told they are 'defective', need to be "fixed" so they can be more like hearing people.
- Before the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, known as RID, interpreters had a care-giver mindset and would 'look after' the Deaf they were interpreting for.
- Roughly 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families and many times those families do not sign and thus the child is isolated in their own home.
- Some Deaf feel powerless and take on the attitude, "I can't change anything".
- Even after the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, Deaf people often still do not get equal access.
- The Deaf carry scars from the disenfranchisement of hearing people which includes bad interpreters.
- Interpreters witness and experience oppression of the Deaf and many times the insults to the community are communicated through their hands.

A Graph Showing the Percentage of Deaf Children Born to Deaf and Hearing Parents



The Deaf have been constantly told what they should do and how to act so they can better fit in with the majority. Another oppressive characteristic is that Deaf people are told they are defective and need to be fixed to become more like those who hear (Baker-Shenk, 1986, pp. 3-4). This oppressive behavior clearly informs the Deaf that they are not only supposed to fit in with hearing people, but they need to be fixed and that will help them achieve the same level of intelligence. **"Labeling Deaf people as a lesser species, the dominant society constituted Deaf people as beings that could not adequately care for themselves, thus authorizing society to undertake that responsibility"** (Jankowski, 1997, p. 41). It was only recently that Deaf people were given rights. In the past, interpreters and those that helped the Deaf were often volunteers and church members.

It was not until 1990 when the American's with Disabilities Act was passed when people started realizing that Deaf people deserved accommodations, yet the Deaf still did not get equal access (Brunson, 2008, p. 78). Although the Deaf now were able to get accommodations to interpreters, frequently the quality of the interpreter was lacking. Numerous interpreters still had the mindset of paternalism while others would add or subtract to the message being given to the Deaf individual. The Deaf carry scars from the disenfranchisement of hearing people which includes oppressive interpreters (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 132).

Interpreters' Power and Oppressive Behavior:
How Interpreters can Subtly or Bluntly Oppress

Subtle Oppression

- Sometimes interpreters 'take charge' of the situation which disempowers the Deaf.
- They can be an advocate instead of an ally.
- They try and 'help' or parent the Deaf person as if the Deaf cannot function as an adult.

Blunt Oppression

- Interpreters can be careless and disrespectful of the Deaf and their sign language.
- They can be oppressive when they do not admit lack of understanding to the Deaf client.
- Interpreters can be inconsiderate of their behavior and sometimes lay the blame on the Deaf person.
- If they interpret without good signing skills.

The Danger of Becoming an Advocate

Some interpreters have good intentions and love to support the Deaf community, yet oppression can sneak in if they become an advocate for the Deaf instead of an ally (Baker-Shenk, 1992, p. 8). **Because an advocate is someone who speaks up for others, the people then seek out the interpreter rather than the Deaf individual for asking questions about sign language, Deaf culture, and the Deaf community.** Interpreters that are advocates can cause hearing people to think the interpreter is the expert but **in reality the key part that is missing are the Deaf people themselves, the ones who actually experience the disenfranchisement and are in the minority group.**

The Role of the Interpreter

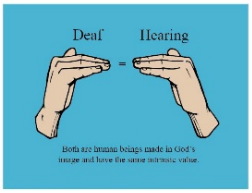
Once the interpreter understands oppression and identifies it in their life, they can remove those tendencies and start to think how they can empower the Deaf. Firstly, **an interpreter needs to remember their place is as a communicator between two languages and cultures.** This model of interpreting is known as bilingual-bicultural or bi-bi (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 178). It is not the interpreter's job to advise the Deaf or tell them how to behave; **interpreters are there to bridge communication between Deaf and hearing individuals.** They do not add or take away from the meaning or intent that is spoken or signed. To effectively interpret, they must have skills in both languages and be able to adjust to the needs of their client (Witter-Merithew, 1999, p. 8).

It is important that the interpreter can "recognize the cultural values that will influence both the Deaf and hearing parties' behavior" (Leonard, Duren, & Reinnus, 2007). Many Deaf people have said how important it is that they communicate with their interpreter and that the interpreter does not take feedback in the wrong way when it is given; it is vital that interpreters be able to accept feedback from the Deaf because this will help them meet the needs of their clients (Gilbert, 2013, p. 45).

Conclusion
How the Interpreter can Become an Ally and Empower the Deaf

Goals for the Ally Interpreter

- Interpreters must respect the Deaf community and language. They do not advocate, but they can and should support to the Deaf.
- Interpreters will never experience or be able to comprehend being Deaf.
- An interpreter can pair up with a Certified Deaf Interpreter, also known as a CDI, to provide better access to the Deaf.
- They must have skills in both languages.
- They must be able to adjust to the needs of their client.
- They need to be able to accept feedback.
- They need to foster equality and remember that "hearing people are not the saviors of Deaf people" (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, pp. 140-141).
- It is only when Deaf and hearing work alongside together that will allow oppression's effect to lose its grip.
- As an interpreter, it is a privilege for them to be able to communicate between the two worlds and they should strive to do their best.
- The end goal is dynamic equivalence for Deaf and hearing.



How You can Help Stop Oppression

The largest contributing actor to oppression is ignorance. Those that wish to stop the cycle of oppression first need to learn how it works. People often are oppressive simply due to the fact that growing "up in a society surrounded by oppressive attitudes" heavily influenced them (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 141). Once people understand oppression and identify it in their lives, they can remove those tendencies and start to think how they can empower the Deaf. Below are some steps you can take to stop oppression.

1. Recognize that as part of the majority, you may have oppressive tendencies towards the Deaf minority.
2. While oppression can happen out of ignorance, research and see what characteristics of oppression you have and stop those behaviors.
3. Take steps to become an ally to the Deaf. This can include learning ASL, supporting Deaf rights, making connections in the Deaf community.

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Oppression, Empowerment, and the Role of the Interpreter

Most minority groups have had a long history of oppression, and the Deaf[*] are no exception. Because most people that are Deaf use sign language to communicate, they often need an interpreter when they interact with hearing people. Many times interpreters are placed in situations in which they can oppress the Deaf, and it is important for them to become aware of oppressive tendencies so that they can eliminate those behaviors and become allies.

The hearing majority has oppressed the Deaf minority throughout history and has affected how interpreters work with the Deaf. The Deaf have been constantly told what they should do and how to act so they can better fit in with the majority: "hearing people are the majority group. 'It's a hearing world,' they say, meaning, deaf people should conform to our ways" (Lane, 1999, p. 80). This type of oppression has been coined *audism*, which is defined as "the hearing way for dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the deaf community" (Lane, 1999, p. 43). In other words, audism occurs when a person believes that one is superior or inferior based on his or her ability to hear or to behave like those who can hear (Lane, 1999). Another form of oppression that stems from audism is when Deaf people are told that they are defective and need to be fixed to become more like those who hear (Baker-Shenk, 1986). This behavior clearly informs the Deaf that they do not have the same level of intelligence: "labeling Deaf people as a lesser species, the dominant society constituted Deaf people as beings that could not adequately care for themselves, thus authorizing society to undertake that responsibility" (Jankowski, 1997, p. 41). Sadly, some Deaf start to believe what

[*]When using the capital "D" in the word Deaf, this refers to deaf or hard of hearing individuals that are part of a cultural and linguistic minority known as the Deaf community. When a lower case "d" is used, the term refers to the individual's deafness or hearing loss.

society tells them. Roughly ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents, most of whom never learn to sign with their children (Leonard, Duren, & Reiman, 2007). Instead of empowering deaf children to fully function without the use of hearing, doctors impress on parents that a deaf child's hearing loss must to be repaired, and because the parents often have never met a Deaf person or been exposed to Deaf culture or American Sign Language (ASL), they end up pursuing treatments. When parents are so focused on treating their child's hearing loss, the deaf child will grow up thinking he or she was defective, and while hearing aids and cochlear implants can be provided, the child still does not have full access to the auditory language like a hearing individual (Lane, 1999). Many experts tell parents not to use ASL when communicating with their deaf children, due to a myth that signing would prevent them from learning English, yet if they cannot comprehend oral communication, the result is that the children grow up isolated in their own homes (Lane, 1999). Only recently have Deaf people been given rights (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). In the past, interpreters and those that helped the Deaf were often volunteers and church members. It was not until 1990 when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed that people began to realize that Deaf people deserve accommodations; however, the Deaf still did not get equal access to communication (Brunson, 2008). Also, although the Deaf were able to get accommodations to interpreters after ADA, the quality of the interpreter was often poor (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Numerous interpreters viewed their Deaf clients as less intelligent, while others would add or subtract to the message being given to the Deaf individual (Brunson, 2008). Often interpreters witness and experience firsthand the oppression of the Deaf and many times the insults to the community are communicated through their hands while they interpret what the hearing client speaks (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). These negative experiences with interpreters can cause the Deaf to

struggle with separating interpreters from the majority of hearing people, especially since it is the interpreters that profit from their deafness (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Recognizing these "characteristics of the oppressed and the oppressor is an important step in balancing the power between Deaf and hearing participants" (Leonard, Duren, & Reiman, 2007, para. 10). Once a form of oppression has been identified and admitted, an interpreter can then take steps to resolve it and replace oppression with empowerment.

Although oppression generally comes from hearing people that do not understand the Deaf, interpreters are often oppressors. The influences and negative views of the hearing majority have greatly affected how interpreters think about the Deaf. Before the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) was established, nearly all interpreters were well-intentioned volunteers that thought they should help take care of the Deaf (Witter-Merithew, 1999). It is because of such beliefs about Deaf people that "resulted in a model of interpretation that was paternalistic in nature. The relationship between interpreter and deaf person was not equal. Often, interpreters were directive with deaf persons, telling them what to do" (Witter-Merithew, 1999, p. 2). The stereotyping of the Deaf as incompetent inevitably led to interpreters believing that the Deaf needed assistance beyond language transliteration. As a result interpreters commonly did not just interpret, but also acted on behalf of the Deaf person—like a parent. This kind of treatment led the Deaf to feel powerless and to take on the attitude in which they told themselves, "I can't do anything about it" (Baker-Shenk, 1986, p. 5). Such oppressive behavior can be exhibited by interpreters both subtly and bluntly. According to Charlotte Baker-Shenk, "In many situations, we stand between the Deaf person and what they want. That gives us great power. In most cases, we are the only ones there who have access to both languages and cultures" (1992, p. 3). There are many different ways subtle oppression manifests itself. One

such way includes the interpreters that are overly controlling of the situation (Brunson, 2008). An over controlling interpreter oversteps his or her boundaries and leaves the Deaf client in an awkward position of being cared for like a child that does not know any better. Sometimes the interpreter attempts to control his or her Deaf client directly, by attempting to influence the Deaf person or to persuade them to do, or not do, certain things. One example was during a legal interaction where an interpreter gave the Deaf client advice:

> Tommy does not remember what else happened in the hearing; he only remembers the interpreter telling him not to say anything…. Tommy was not concerned about the interpreter providing guidance or advice initially, even though he knew it was inappropriate. Only later, when he realized the advice was erroneous, did he seem to become upset about the fact that the interpreter had tried to advise him during the hearing. Providing advice violates the ethical and normative boundaries that structure the role of the interpreter. (Brunson, 2008, p. 85)

Some interpreters have good intentions and want to support the Deaf community, yet if they become an advocate for the Deaf oppression can sneak in (Baker-Shenk, 1992). Because an advocate is someone who speaks up for others, hearing people naturally seek out the interpreter rather than the Deaf individual when asking questions about sign language, Deaf culture, and the Deaf community. If the interpreter acts as an advocate, then the attention becomes diverted off the Deaf community to the hearing signer, which defeats the purpose of empowering the minority and replaces empowerment with a subtle form of oppression. Interpreters that are advocates can cause hearing people to think they are the experts but in reality it is the Deaf people themselves, who actually experience the disenfranchisement and are in the minority group, who are the experts (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Baker-Shenk described what happened

when she became an advocate for the Deaf: “I thought I was helping to free/liberate Deaf people. In retrospect, it’s funny, but in some ways, I was also trying to ‘control them into freedom!’ ‘If you do this, this, and this, you’ll get there’” (1992, p. 8). Because this is a subtle form of oppression, it often slips by without getting corrected. This is one of the most dangerous forms of oppression because it disguises disempowerment with good intentions.

Some interpreters seem to blatantly and, perhaps, even purposefully oppress the Deaf. While this kind of oppression is rare among interpreters, Deaf people do “experience abuse at the hands of unethical and insensitive members of the interpreting community” (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 136). One clear example of such oppression would be when interpreters have an indifferent attitude and have a lack of respect for the Deaf people they work with. This can happen if interpreters are not willing to admit when they do not understand the Deaf client (Brunson, 2008). When there is a miscommunication and the interpreter ignores it, the Deaf may blame themselves, thinking they are intellectually inferior to their hearing peers, which is what the majority believes and impresses on them. Often, it is the interpreter that “is at least partially at fault for the confusion, but deaf people still most often blame themselves” (Baker-Shenk, 1986, p. 8). Worse yet, some interpreters actually blame miscommunication on the Deaf person. Others are too proud and will refuse feedback given to them from their clients (Gilbert, 2013). Unfortunately, even when interpreters have poor signing skills or lack proper certification, they still get hired:

> It’s fair to say that the majority of hearing people who work as “interpreters” are far from fluent in ASL and that most of them transliterate rather than interpret. What does it communicate to deaf people when “interpreters” don't know and don’t use ASL—even when that’s the preferred mode of communication for the deaf person? Is it telling them

> that ASL is not worth learning? Or that it is not really a language? (Baker-Shenk, 1986, p. 9)

Whether the oppression of interpreters is overt or goes unnoticed, there are ways to cease such behaviors and instead take on an attitude that empowers the Deaf. Those that wish to end oppression first need to learn and understand what causes it. Often, the interpreters are oppressive simply because they have grown "up in a society surrounded by oppressive attitudes" (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 141). Once interpreters understand oppression and identify it in their lives, they can remove those tendencies. Before interpreters can empower the Deaf, they must remember their role as communicators between two languages and cultures, a model of interpreting known as bilingual-bicultural or bi-bi (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). It is not the interpreter's job to advise the Deaf or tell them how to behave; interpreters are there to bridge communication between Deaf and hearing individuals. An interpreter knows his or her job was done well when dynamic equivalence for Deaf and hearing people is accomplished, which is when the meaning and intent of the clients was accurately portrayed by the interpreter (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Interpreters should never add or take away from the meaning or intent of the message spoken or signed. To effectively interpret, they must have skills in both languages and be able to adjust to the needs of their clients (Witter-Merithew, 1999). It is important that the interpreter can "recognize the cultural values that will influence both the Deaf and hearing parties' behavior" (Leonard, Duren, & Reiman, 2007, para. 16). Many Deaf people have said how important it is that they communicate with their interpreter, and that the interpreter does not take feedback in the wrong way when it is given; it is necessary for interpreters to be able to accept feedback from their clients because this will help empower the Deaf (Gilbert, 2013). Although interpreters witness oppression and may at times have to interpret

derogatory remarks to the Deaf community, they are a part of the majority group and will never experience or be able to comprehend being Deaf (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Because of their hearing status, interpreters do not face the trials of audism like the Deaf and must respect the Deaf community and language; this means they do not advocate, but they can and should give support to the Deaf as allies. An ally is one who works alongside and supports the goals of a community while an advocate speaks on behalf of the community and tells them how to change; it is clear that the most empowering role for those that can hear is to become allies to the Deaf (Baker-Shenk, 1992). Another way to empower the Deaf is to use Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI). A hearing interpreter can pair up with a CDI to provide better access to the Deaf clients. A CDI is a

> deaf person who has been trained as an interpreter to work with a hearing person to provide a more fluent and accurate interpretation of messages between ASL to English and English to ASL. The deaf interpreter functions as the primary interpreter who interacts with the deaf client. The hearing interpreter functions as the interpreter for the deaf interpreter conveying English messages into ASL…. This is yet another way in which Ally Interpreters share power and support the role of deaf people in empowering themselves and other deaf people. (Witter-Merithew, 1999, p. 7)

By constantly working at improving skills and knowledge, the interpreter can become an effective ally in the Deaf community instead of another hearing person that oppresses them. Ally interpreters need to foster equality and remember that “hearing people are not the saviors of Deaf people” (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007, p. 140-141). While interpreters may be tempted to be advocates and speak up for the Deaf, it is better for them to become allies. Although the hearing majority currently views deafness as a disability, they forget that the Deaf share a unique culture.

Many people have yet to realize that deafness is more than just a disability; “educators of deaf people since the early part of the last century have acknowledged that deaf people … often belong to a socially distinct, cohesive group with its own language and social norms” (Parasnis, 1996, p. 5). As more of the hearing majority learns to see the Deaf as a distinct people with their own language instead of being disabled, oppression that comes with ignorance will start to fade away.

The battle against oppression of the Deaf is still being fought today. Because the majority typically views the Deaf minority as odd and needing to conform to a hearing society, audism is still very much alive. If interpreters are not careful, they can start to believe the stereotypes of the Deaf. If an interpreter wants to get rid of oppressive behavior and become someone who empowers the Deaf, he or she needs to keep sight of his or her goals as an ally—as someone who comes alongside and supports the goals of the Deaf community. Interpreters can also use CDIs, which allow interpretations in ASL to be more organized and fluid. When interpreters devote their time to develop their skills and a true passion for becoming an ally, the Deaf will notice the change. To be an effective interpreter, one must constantly work at improving one’s competence with skills in interpreting and ASL. Instead of becoming a leader of the Deaf, the interpreter should seek to support leaders that are Deaf in the community. It is only when Deaf and hearing people work together that will overcome oppression. Interpreting is a privilege and should be taken seriously. The end goal is dynamic equivalence for Deaf and hearing people; when all clients have equal access in the area of communication, the ally interpreters know that the Deaf are empowered.

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