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## Psychological Practice with the Deaf: Background

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE WITH THE DEAF: BACKGROUND

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### Beginnings

Service psychology, in the form of testing, entered the field of the deaf in the late nineteenth century on a wave of general concern over the mental classification of atypical schoolchildren. The reader will recall that it was this same issue that was responsible for the construction of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Test, which, in turn, led to the whole psychological testing movement as we know it today. In the field of the deaf, it was an educator who tackled the problem. In 1889, some two decades before the Binet-Simon scale was constructed, David Greenberger, then head of the Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes (now the Lexington School for the Deaf), published his procedures for "testing" the intelligence of deaf children (Greenberger, 1889).

Greenberger's work introduced a new concept into the mental rating of pupils, the concept of objectivity. At that time, such ratings were customarily based on the personal opinions of school staff members. But convinced of a need for a less subjective approach, Greenberger sought to achieve this by basing his appraisals on how well a pupil did on various specified test-tasks such as block building, picture completion, and the like. Many of the tasks used and suggested by Greenberger can be found in current mental tests for young children.

Greenberger's remarkable contribution aroused only passing interest among his colleagues, and was eventually forgotten. However, psychology was in the air of the times, and the need to 'understand' children was gaining considerable ground among advanced thinkers. Forward-looking educators of the deaf pushed for psychological studies of deaf children and for greater recognition of the values of psychology to education. Through their arguments and efforts, the door was finally opened to psychological researchers.

An interesting illustration of a major study of the times is that of MacMillan and Bruner (1906) who, as representatives of the Child Study

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Department of the Chicago Public Schools, had been charged with the responsibility for taking over the education of one hundred eighty-four deaf children. Part of their responsibility involved ascertaining the capacities of the children. Accordingly, the children were examined by a typical test battery of the day which included tests of hearing, visual acuity, lung capacity, strength of grip, tapping, cancellation of A's, perception of size and weight, identification of objects by touch, and visual memory span for digits. Height, weight, and head measurements were also recorded.

The results showed the deaf children to be considerably poorer than the hearing in the prime intelligence measure of the day—the cancellation of A's—as well as in tests of size by touch. However, the investigators in their wisdom did not leap to the conclusion that the deaf were mentally inferior to the hearing. They reasoned instead that the poorer showing of the deaf could mean no more than delayed rather than deficient development, and that were the deaf child's education begun earlier than was the custom of the time, inferiorities might be reduced if not altogether eliminated.

For educators of the deaf, a highly important outcome of the MacMillan-Bruner study was its demonstration of the practical values and potentials of the psychological examination. Consequently, when the first English translation of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Test appeared in 1910, it was greeted with enthusiastic interest by educators of the deaf.

### **The Pintner Period**

The stress on objective evaluation combined with the Binet frame of operation marked the beginning of a new era in psychological practice with the deaf. Heading the era was Rudolf Pintner who, from the time of his first publication on the deaf in 1915 until the year of his death in 1942, was directly or indirectly responsible for most of the psychological activity and research in the area.

The first important investigation of the Pintner Period was the attempt by Pintner and Paterson to use the Binet Test with the deaf (Pintner and Paterson, 1915). Despite the fact that the verbal test items were administered in whatever mode of communication the subjects preferred, the results showed an average mental retardation of 4.58 years. However, like MacMillan and Bruner, Pintner and Paterson were loath to accept the findings at their face value. They reviewed the extreme difficulties they had experienced in test administration, and were sensitively aware of the complete unsuitability of many of the test questions to the life situation of the deaf. They concluded that verbal mental measures of the Binet type could not be used with the deaf and recommended the use of performance tests instead.

A direct outcome of this recommendation was the construction of the Pintner-Paterson Performance Scale in 1917. The Binet scale had suggested the theory of construction, but on the performance scale, theory was operationalized through manipulative rather than verbal test items. The appearance

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of this objective, nonverbal scale for mental measurement opened up a whole new avenue for the psychological study of and service to the deaf.

The next quarter-century witnessed a tremendous surge of psychological activity in the field. Areas of investigation included not only intelligence but also personality, learning ability, scholastic achievement, special abilities, and more. Comparisons between deaf and hearing groups were the research order of the day; new tests were tried; studies were conducted by experienced researchers as well as by inexperienced ones, by those familiar with the deaf and by many more who were not.

Numbers of tests used at the time are on the market today, and some are still being used with the deaf. Among intelligence tests, such familiar names crop up as: Grace Arthur Performance Scale, the Goodenough "Draw-a-Man" Test, the Porteus Maze Test, the Dreyer-Collins Performance Scale, the Pintner-Paterson Performance Scale, the Pintner Nonlanguage Mental Test, the Kohs Block Design, and the Randall's Island Performance Series. Among the personality tests used were: the Thurstone Personality Schedule, the Brunswig Personality Inventory for Deaf Children, the Bernreuter Inventory, the Vineland Social Maturity Scale, the Haggerty-Olson-Wickman Behavior Rating Schedules, and the Brown Personality Inventory for Children.

The activity of the Pinter Period declined sharply with the death of its founder and with the coming of World War II. A review of the studies of the period (Levine, 1956, 1963; Vernon, 1968) shows great effort but indecisive returns. Concerning intelligence, some investigators concluded that deaf children are mentally deficient; others that they are not. Some held the tests to blame for conflicting findings; others insisted that deafness itself creates a mental backwardness of some two or more years, and influenced educators to modify their curricula accordingly. In regard to personality, the consensus was that the deaf present more problem tendencies and exhibit greater maladjustment than the hearing. The latter findings aroused particular indignation among those who "knew" the deaf.

In consequence, the enthusiasm with which educators had welcomed psychology into the field of the deaf was considerably diminished. The anticipated benefits expected from psychology were lost in the evident difficulties psychologists were experiencing in working with the deaf as well as in their sharp dissensions and conflicting findings. Disillusioned educators charged that:

The ordinary students of psychology are not fully qualified to deal with the psychology of the deaf. . . They simply do not get hold of the subject of their examinations. Their lack of familiarity with the deaf is too obvious to inspire a teacher of the deaf with confidence (Aurell, 1934).

To these charges were added the criticisms of researchers themselves. The more experienced raised questions about the use with the deaf of tests

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standardized on the hearing. They also questioned how much actual understanding there was on the part of the deaf of the language and concepts used in personality inventories in view of the poor showing of the deaf in language-related achievements. Finally under attack was the practice of group measurement and mass study of deaf subjects as conducted in deaf-hearing group comparisons.

In short, the Pintner Period produced more questions than answers. Nevertheless, despite its indecisive results and questioned procedures, the period served a highly important function. It provided an essential prologue to all further undertakings by demonstrating the exceptional difficulties involved in psychological practice with persons whose world is visible to the eye but incomprehensible to the ear.

### The Rehabilitation Movement

As was to be expected, there was a considerable lull in psychological activities with the deaf during the World War II years, with the profession represented by less than a handful of practising psychologists. It was largely through advances in vocational rehabilitation legislation that psychology gradually found its way back into the field of the deaf.

The first piece of significant legislation had been enacted in the post-World War I years with a broadening of concern from veteran problems to civilian needs. This was followed some two decades later by the passage by Congress in 1943 of a number of amendments to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Barden-LaFollette Act or Public Law Number 115) which re-defined vocational rehabilitation to mean "any services necessary to render a disabled person fit to engage in remunerative occupation." However, the services here referred to were concerned mainly with physical and health requirements and with such vocationally related needs as training, occupational tools, licenses, equipment, and the like. When it turned out that despite these aids, rehabilitation failures were on the increase, it was gradually recognized that there is a psychological component to rehabilitation that required equal if not greater attention. It was at this time that the terms "total rehabilitation", "whole man", and "helping the individual to help himself" began to appear in rehabilitation thinking and literature. As this happened, legislative acknowledgement followed with the passage by the 83d Congress of Public Law Number 565 (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 1956). Under the Law, the Federal Office of Vocational Rehabilitation was empowered to authorize funds to acceptable institutions "to increase knowledge of the broad areas of psychological adjustment to disability" (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 1957), "to increase the number and competency of rehabilitation personnel" (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 1958), and "to enlarge and enrich our research resources through the development of competent research workers in the professional fields which contribute to the vocational rehabilitation of disabled persons" (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 1957 a).

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Under this legislation, the door was opened once more to psychological workers with the deaf. The problem was that psychology was as poorly prepared to pass through the door now as it had been during the Pintner Period. Nonetheless, psychology was in the air again, and among the first to acknowledge the fact was the Bureau for Handicapped Children of the New York State Department of Education who as early as 1954 conducted a round table conference in collaboration with the Lexington School for the Deaf on psychological services for hearing-impaired children. This was probably the first meeting held on the subject, certainly the first intrastate meeting.

Among the questions considered were: (1) what general categories of services fall under the heading "psychological services for hearing impaired children"; (2) what specific services are presently being rendered by psychologists in the field; (3) what psychological services are presently being rendered by nonpsychologists; (4) what are the outstanding problems in psychological evaluation of the deaf and the hard of hearing; (5) what are the outstanding needs; (6) which psychological tests and measures are presently found useful with the deaf, the hard of hearing; (7) for what kinds of recommendations should the psychologist be responsible, how should they be formulated, how communicated; (8) which outstanding problems might be solved or helped through a psychological service program and how should such a program be organized; (9) what background of training and experience are considered necessary for the person engaged in rendering psychological services to the hearing-impaired. Unfortunately, the proceedings of this prophetic conference were not published, simply mimeographed, so that the impact remained on a narrow local level.

Considerably broader notice was accorded psychology when the first grant under P.L. 565 was made to the field of the deaf in 1956. The award went to the now celebrated Mental Health Project for the Deaf of the New York State Psychiatric Institute (Levine, 1960; Rainer et al., 1963). In view of psychology's deep involvement in mental health, the grant served a singular advocacy function for psychological service and research. Further recognition of the profession came with the first national conference on psychological assessment of the deaf in 1959, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and conducted by the Department of Psychology and Psychiatry of The Catholic University of America in collaboration with Gallaudet College (no published proceedings). Another of the 'firsts' in which psychology was involved was a national conference on research needs in the vocational rehabilitation of the deaf (Rogers and Quigley, 1960), also sponsored by the U.S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. From these springboards there eventually emerged an extraordinary surge of research, demonstration, and professional training programs in the service of the deaf, excellently listed and annotated in *Deafness Annual* volumes (Adler, 1969; Norris, 1972, 1973, 1974).

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Conspicuously lacking among sponsored training programs, however, were programs designed to prepare psychologists for practice with the deaf. But prepared or not, psychology became and remains heavily involved in the tremendous expansion of services for deaf individuals that has taken place over the past ten years. Facilities employing psychological services now extend well beyond the school frame and include such varied settings as rehabilitation, counseling, mental health, special remedial, and hearing and speech among others. Ages served range from infancy through the geriatric levels; and psychological services are in demand for the whole range of psychological problems encompassed in these ages and settings.

Whether psychology can successfully cope with these demands is the question. At present, there is a general undercurrent of querulousness on the part of numbers of employers, team colleagues from other disciplines, and consumers with the quality of psychological services rendered deaf individuals and with the manner in which they are administered. These dissatisfactions threaten to lead to a similar loss of confidence in the profession as was expressed in the Pintner Period.

To head off this eventuality and to examine the situation more closely in behalf both of psychology and the deaf, a national survey was conducted of the nature of psychological practices with a deaf clientele as actually carried out by psychological service providers at the present time.

### The Psychological Survey

Work on the first national survey of psychological services for deaf individuals (Levine, 1974) was begun in 1971 with an initial plan and an immediate handicap. The plan was to devise and distribute a comprehensive questionnaire to psychological service providers as the initial means for obtaining first-hand information from the workers themselves concerning the state of psychological practice with a deaf clientele. The handicap was the lack of a mailing list, registry, or any other reference material that would make it possible to contact these persons individually.

The handicap was overcome in part by offers from the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, Inc., and from the National Association of the Deaf to make their mailing lists available for the survey. This was an indirect way of reaching the providers, but it had to suffice.

The plan of investigation was carried out through the mailing of a 10-page questionnaire consisting of 114 items devised specifically for the survey and covering such inquiry areas as: (1) the setting in which respondents practiced; (2) details about the clientele served; (3) details about the provider's professional and experiential background, special preparation for work with deaf persons, the psychological practices used, and the responsibilities and problems involved; (4) psychological tests used with deaf children and adults, methods of administration, evaluative comments and problems; and (5) general remarks and recommendations.

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One hundred and seventy-eight useable returns were received from respondents representing 48 states. Seventy-six respondents represented special schools for the deaf; 62, special classes for the deaf; 24, wholly or partially integrated classes; and 16, non-school facilities. In all, the combined total of deaf individuals served by these facilities numbered 24,224 deaf individuals. Evidently this was the first large-scale interest ever expressed in the professional welfare and problems of psychologists practising with deaf persons, and their first organized opportunity to make known their views and experiences. Responses were thoughtful and frank.

The survey findings disclosed dissatisfactions on the part of the service providers with their professional lot in the field of the deaf, and provided depressing support for the general dissatisfactions with their practices and abilities as voiced by others. In summary: the large majority of respondents were practising without substantive knowledge of either deafness or deaf people; without special, organized preparation for their work; and without the ability to communicate manually or to establish productive interpersonal relations with manual deaf subjects. Their problems were further compounded by exceptional difficulties in the use and interpretation of psychological tests with the deaf. Most of the respondents had had no contact with any deaf individuals prior to assuming psychological practice with the deaf, and the majority had had no preparation for the work other than on-the-job experiences. A number of respondents commented that their employers had only vague notions of the professional training, functions, and competencies of psychologists: some assumed that psychologists possessed universal expertise in all areas of human behavior; others considered their principal ability was testing.

Among the recommendations made, there was almost universal support for follow-up of the survey through meetings or conferences, and for developing some way of effecting closer intraprofessional ties and communications. The text that follows summarizes the outcome of these recommendations.