



Inspired by the original article by Trudy Suggs on Deaf disempowerment, Nancy Rourke painted *Deaf Disempowerment*.

The Deaf community certainly has come a long way over the decades, even if the pendulum constantly swings from one side to the other in terms of education, discrimination, access, and equality. It is so important that we all are aware of the rights we hold as humans who are Deaf. That itself is a given; nobody would argue otherwise with us. Yet, we allow ourselves to put up with everyday disempowerment, especially for small, seemingly innocent situations. In order to reduce this, we need to first understand what disempowerment is.

Everyday Acts of Disempowerment

The word disempowerment has quite a simple definition for such a powerful concept: to take away power. When we think of disempowerment, we usually think of things like not being provided interpreting services, watching films or TV without captions, being told not to sign, having our lives decided or even dictated by people with no knowledge of ASL or Deaf culture, or seeing hearing actors in roles portraying Deaf people. Yet there are smaller, everyday acts that hold just as much capacity, if not more, to disempower us.

A Quick Look at Everyday Disempowerment of Deaf People

BY TRUDY SUGGS

How many times have you logged onto Facebook or Twitter only to find that your (hearing) friends, parents, relatives or even spouses have posted videos that aren't captioned? Then when you ask them for a transcript, they say, "Oh, darn, I never thought about that," yet they do it time after time. Another example is when hearing parents speak about their deaf children in front of the children, yet the children don't realize the conversation is about them.

Countless examples of everyday disempowerment happen in the workplace, of course. Meetings that aren't interpreted, water cooler conversations where the Deaf person can't participate, the annoyance factor (when a boss rolls his eyes at a request for an interpreter), being underestimated because you're Deaf, the office dialogue that takes place over cubicle walls as you're sitting at your station working; the list goes on and on. Sure, there are accommodations, but it's just not the same as direct communication access.

How about if you're writing down something at a fast-food restaurant or even a store—perhaps your order or a question—and the employee, as you're

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writing, starts working with another customer? This tells not just you, but also other people, that you're not worth the wait. Maybe you're talking with someone who knows that signing and speaking at the same time is combining two separate languages, making it difficult for you to easily access this information. Yet you know if you ask that person to turn off his/her voice or remove his/her speech privilege, that person might be offended. So you end up simply saying nothing as you struggle.

These are minor acts of disempowerment that we've become so accustomed to, and we usually don't do much about them because it's just not worth the battle. The cycle then continues, because by just accepting these incidents, we are in essence telling the other people that they can continue doing this, even though it's really not okay.

Disempowerment through ASL

Teaching ASL is another example of everyday disempowerment that many have come to accept as the status quo. There are thousands of ASL teachers in the nation. How many are deaf? No real statistics exist on this yet. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of certified Baby Sign Language instructors. How many are deaf? A very small percentage. Just go to the bookstore and take a look at all the baby signs books, or look up local baby sign language classes; the majority is taught by hearing people who aren't necessarily fluent in ASL.

Are all the Deaf Studies and ASL programs in the nation run by Deaf people? No. How about agencies serving Deaf people, state commissions for Deaf people, and organizations focusing on things like baby signs? Are there more Deaf administrators than hearing in these positions? Probably not. How many deaf-run interpreting agencies can you name off the top of your head? What's wrong with this picture?

A common response to why a deaf person isn't at the helm of a program or agency working with deaf and hard of hearing people is, "We advertised the position and couldn't find anyone qualified." That certainly could be the case. Still, such situations have ripple effects: deaf people aren't hired, and those outside of the deaf community, in turn, continue to have beliefs and perceptions shaped by hearing people. These hearing people then believe they can educate others about us, rather than bringing in appropriate Deaf community representatives.

If no qualified deaf person applies for a position, there needs to be a short-term and long-term remedy. One possible solution is to keep the position open for as long as possible until someone who is qualified and deaf is hired. Another potential solution is to have an interim director in place, hire someone who is definitely capable of doing the job, and train that person until she or he is ready to take the helm. Is that costly and cumbersome? Perhaps. Cost-beneficial and cost-effective in the long run? Absolutely.

Interpreters: An Imbalance

Interpreters have always been, and likely will always be, a great source of disempowerment. One challenge for many Deaf consumers is at medical appointments, when interpreters go into the hallway whenever the nurse or doctor leaves, instead of staying in the room with the Deaf patient. From an interpreter's perspective, this is necessary given the many opportunities for ethical dilemmas. For instance, if the Deaf patient says something to the interpreter that is medically relevant, but doesn't share this information with the doctor, is the interpreter bound to tell the doctor? Yet, is it really fair to keep the patient isolated in a room where there's no visual access to all the sounds and conversations that a hearing patient could overhear? Many Deaf people say no.

Anita Buel, a Deaf community health worker (DCHW) in Minnesota, has an ongoing frustration. CHWs are certified, trained advocates who accompany patients in their own communities (in this case, the Deaf community) and provide advocacy, information, and clarification for patients who may feel overwhelmed by medical jargon, procedures, and the overall health system. DCHWs, however, are not certified deaf interpreters (CDI); they have as much of a need for interpreters as the Deaf patients. Buel says she gets frustrated when she knows interpreters are in the hallway waiting, and then they come into the room already deep in conversation with the doctor or nurse. This, to her, shows that if the patient already is at a disadvantage, because oftentimes interpreters build relationships with medical professionals and therefore aren't always

must also have the necessary (even if minimal) training in all the aspects involved with interpreters. Yet, this creates a major imbalance in knowledge, and power. Think about it: do Deaf people have the same access to education as interpreters? No. Are Deaf individuals generally trained to work with interpreters, on advocating for interpreter quality, and on how the interpreting process ideally works? No, absolutely not. Deaf people have had to constantly educate each other on a grassroots level on how to deal with interpreting dilemmas.

Is there any training provided to Deaf people in elementary school through adulthood on how to work with interpreters in various settings, or on self-advocacy? Unfortunately, the answer is no once again. There is a deaf self-advocacy training

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perceived as neutral parties. Interpreters, by doing this, also have a rapport established with the medical staff that patients often struggle to establish because of the three-way communication.

An Imbalance in Knowledge

Many people, both deaf and hearing, have appropriately lauded the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) for increasing its standards and professionalism among interpreters within the past few years. Yet there is one act of disempowerment throughout this progress that has been deeply, and easily, overlooked: the knowledge imbalance, which creates a major disadvantage for Deaf people.

The RID requires its interpreters to have bachelor's degrees, among other criteria; this is a fantastic requirement because it ensures that interpreters are educated. Interpreters, to receive certification,

curriculum available through the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, but even this curriculum is limited in its contents and availability. On the flip side, sometimes Deaf people aren't fully educated on the interpreter's role. Those individuals might mistakenly claim interpreters are oppressive or not doing their jobs, when in reality they are doing exactly what their jobs require.

Keep in mind that most interpreters receive years of formal, professional training in everything from ASL to ethics to business practices. Interpreters are also tested on their knowledge and skills, and then maybe certified. Interpreters are given the knowledge that Deaf people so greatly need and deserve. When Deaf people do not receive this same knowledge, this has deep-seated repercussions.

Whether we like to admit it or not, interpreters have an incredible amount of jurisdiction over our access to people, interviews, medical appointments, education, phone calls, and pretty much everything else. This isn't necessarily bad, as long as they use this power appropriately and without malice. But this so-called jurisdiction can create even further potential for conflict and division. On top of that, this power imbalance can become magnified in small towns where interpreters might, by default, rule the roost because everyone knows everyone. This has happened time after time, where Deaf people lose jobs, are rejected for jobs, are perceived as unintelligent, and so much more all because they had conflicts with interpreters.

Understand, Analyze and Act

The NAD has fought for equality among Deaf people for more than a century, and has produced some of the most remarkable leaders in American history. Yet each and every leader within the NAD, both at the state and national level, is guaranteed to have at least three stories of disempowerment running the gamut of minor to major incidents.

In addition to educating ourselves, we need to learn how to come together to prevent or reduce disempowerment in any form or shape. It's crucial that we recognize that disempowerment doesn't always happen on purpose; it's often by accident. Even so, that doesn't mean it's okay. As renowned vlogger and blogger Franchesca "Chescaleigh" Ramsey says, "It's not about intent. It's about impact."

What can we do, as Deaf people, to help lessen disempowerment ranging from simple acts to in-depth, intentional acts? First, we must understand what disempowerment is, how it affects us, and why it affects us. Even the seemingly small acts of disempowerment that we've become so accustomed, almost immune to, have major impact on our everyday lives as Deaf people. It is crucial that we,

as Deaf people, become fully educated on acts of disempowerment, the interpreting process, on our roles, on our legal rights, and on how to deal with conflict or oppression. This kind of education should start at the earliest stages of our lives as Deaf people, so that we go throughout life knowing what we're supposed to do. This would help lessen so much of the disempowerment that takes place. It would also help reduce the ingrained frustration that often comes from encountering such disempowerment, because we would have the tools to take the next steps. We must also be careful to remember that if a deaf person expresses frustration, it doesn't necessarily mean she or he is angry, divisive or separatist. Rather, take a look at the situation, and figure out how all parties have contributed to the situation.

By understanding the gravity of each situation, small or large, we can then come to analyze the steps leading up to that situation and what we can do next. By understanding all the parties involved and their perceptions, and by figuring out what resources we have, we can then determine steps of action. Finally, we can then act on the disempowerment through appropriate steps.

We must always strive for access to the same education as our hearing allies (interpreters, parents, friends, and other supporters). By working to minimize disempowerment, we can then have access to equality, to communication, and most importantly, to being human. ♻️

The original disempowerment article can be found at <http://www.streetleverage.com/2012/12/deaf-disempowerment-and-todays-interpreter>.



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