

Unmasking The Culture of The Mentally Challenged Community

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INTRODUCTION

Marie and Bill are adults living in Rockledge, Florida. Though not married or related, they live in the same home, work at the same job, appreciate the same early evening television shows, attend and enjoy the same sporting events. Bill and Marie laugh at the same jokes. They worship at the same church. In fact, their shared experiences have led them to speak in terms and phrases that many people in ordinary society would not understand. Perhaps these harmonic counterparts exist because Bill and Marie belong to the same culture (or subculture)--the mentally challenged community.

Through an examination of research it is the purpose of this thesis to begin the process of determining the hypothesis that the mentally challenged community is technically or functionally a subculture. The method of research conducted to prove or disprove this thesis emanates from a four pronged descriptive approach. First, the author of *Anthropological Insights of Missionaries*, Paul G. Hiebert and other anthropologists have defined culture. Their research will help to determine if the mentally challenged community fits the accepted definition of culture. Second, guidance will be gleaned from an analysis of the Deaf Culture. The third test evaluates the mentally challenged community against the Hesselgrave Grid, which examines dimensions of cross-cultural communication (Hesselgrave 1991). The fourth and final hallmark will be to review the cycle of readjustment experienced by new volunteers to The Special Gathering, a ministry within the mentally challenged community. The anthropological tool described in the chart entitled "Level of Satisfaction" explains the adjustment stages a person experiences when she enters into a different society. Should the mentally challenged community transcend these four tests, it may be assumed that this body of people can be classified at least as a subculture.

DEFINING A CULTURE

As defined by Paul G. Hiebert, "Culture is more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values, and their associated symbols, patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do" (1985: 30). Culture is also defined by William A. Haviland as "the often unconscious standards by which societies--groups of people--operate. These standards are learned rather than acquired through biological inheritance" (1993: 8).

Three Dimensions of Culture

Hiebert notes three dimensions of culture--ideas, feelings and values. Ideas are identified as the cognitive dimension. Feelings relate to the affective dimension; while values correlate to the evaluative dimension. One would not suggest that the ideas, feeling and values of a given culture must be held exclusively by that group for it to constitute a culture or subculture. The black community in America holds many of the same ideas, feelings and values embraced by the larger society; but the black community is recognized as having a world view and being influenced by a separate, co-existing culture. Neither would the existence of an African-American culture suggest that all black people have the same ideas, feelings or values.

Shared Language

In establishing the existence of a culture, the question must be asked, how does the anthropologist recognize an ethnic group's shared culture? The keys originate from a recognition of a shared language and/or experience. Haviland explains, Cultures "are shared by members of a society and when acted upon, they produce behavior considered acceptable within that society. Cultures are learned, largely through the medium of language, rather than inherited biologically" (22).

However, this opens the quandary of the difference between two cultures which share the same language. These are defined as "pluralistic societies" (Haviland 33) or "societies in which there exists a diversity of cultural patterns" (Haviland 33). How can there be a British culture and an American culture? English is spoken by both. Nevertheless, on Sunday, December 26,

1999, Malcolm Wild preached at Calvary Chapel of Merritt Island Florida. He spoke to his congregates about "enjoying a joint." After a few chuckles from his audience because a joint in American culture refers to a marijuana cigarette, Pastor Wild explained that in England, his home country, a joint is a cut of beef that Americans call a roast. The language is similar but different. Though these two cultures share the same language, there is a pluralistic society. Haviland contends "pluralistic societies are, in effect, multicultural" (33).

As society's understanding of ethnography (the work of describing a culture) has broadened (Spradley 1980:3) so have its points of reference. Thus, there is great acceptance of a youth culture. The church appears to believe this segment of the population is a separate culture. The ministry of the church to youth reflects this belief and specialized ministries exist to cross this cultural gap. Churches have youth groups. Denominations and fellowships hold youth camps, create youth departments. Para-church ministries such as Youth for Christ, Young Life, Teen Mania, and Teen Missions reach out to this culture.

Do the youth of America have their own language? When a group of youth pastors discuss and plan an upcoming concert, they talk about *ska* music and *skanking*. They probably make plans to avoid the possibility of having a *mosh pit*. They speak in an unknown language to the populace society. Most people would need an interpreter.

Language is an issue in relation to Hiebert's definition because it is one of the primary ways we "organize and regulate what we think, feel and do" (Haviland 90). Language can also be "associated symbols" (Haviland 12) we use to represent our ideas, feelings and values.

Language of the mentally challenged community

Does the mentally challenged community have its own language? Yes, even though the language spoken by mentally challenged persons is similar to the larger culture. There exists another, similar language in the same way the youth culture language is similar to the larger culture; as the British English is similar to the American English.

The primary gap in language between the mentally challenged culture and the larger American culture bears a direct correlation to intelligence. The larger culture routinely speaks in

terms which are not understood intellectually by the mentally challenged populace. Many--if not most--of the sermons in American churches on Sunday morning are not cognitively understood by the mentally challenged community. Many--if not most--social gatherings which persons who are mentally challenged attend are not designed for this population. Therefore, the conversations are not fully comprehended by them.

The language of the mentally challenged population is similar but different from the larger culture. When mentally challenged people speak, they are often not fully understood by non-mentally challenged persons. After a few years of serving within Special Gathering, a ministry within the mentally challenged community, a volunteer remarked, "I've noticed how much clearer all our people speak now." In reality, the conversation of the members had not changed. The ability of this volunteer to understand the language had broadened. There is a language barrier which the mentally challenged community faces.

Shared Experience

Charles O. Frake said, "Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrain and seas" (1977:7). Is there a shared experience within the youth culture that differs from the broader culture? America sat shocked in disbelief when she listened to the tapes of the teenagers who committed the Columbine massacre. Their life experiences were different from the larger society. According to their spokespersons and leaders, the black community experiences a different reality from the white community. These experiences shape their "beliefs, feelings and values."

The mentally challenged community has an experience that is different from the larger culture. They have been isolated in institutions, relegated to special classes in our school system and hidden behind the guarded doors of specialized programs once they mature into adults. They have also been behaviorally modified and normalized in order to make their behaviors more acceptable to the larger society. They have been treated as forever children. In short, they have shared experiences which differentiate them from the broader society and unify them culturally.

THE DEAF COMMUNITY

An examination of the deaf community in America will expose lessons from their studies which uniquely form a parallel to the mentally challenged community. Deafness can be defined as "a cultural identity rather than as a disability, and they insist that their culture and separate identity must be nourished and maintained. This cultural identity is premised in large part on their own language, American Sign Language (ASL)" (Johnson 1997:29). "The cultural identity of Deaf (sic) individuals also stems from being educated in segregated state schools for the Deaf (usually residential schools) and participation in Deaf clubs and other wholly Deaf environments in which they socialize and often work" (Johnson 29).

The deaf community's self view as a culture stands in direct conflict with much of the disability community. Persons who are blind and physically challenged have almost unanimously fought to be seen as part of the larger culture with no distinctions, if possible. "Historically, advocates for every disabled group have directed their fiercest fire at policies that exclude their group. No matter the good intentions, no matter the logistical hurdles, they have insisted, separate is not equal. Thus buildings, buses, classes must be accessible to all; special accommodations for the disabled are not a satisfactory substitute. All this has become part of conventional wisdom. Today, under the general heading of 'mainstreaming,' it is enshrined in law and unchallenged as a premise of enlightened thought. But within the deaf community there is more of a fear of deaf children drowning in the mainstream" (Dolnick 1993:43).

"Their objection (of the deaf community) is that even well-meaning attempts to integrate deaf people into hearing society may actually imprison them in a zone of silence" (Dolnick 43). In his article, "Deafness as Culture" published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Edward Dolnick quoted Helen Keller, "Blindness cuts people off from things. Deafness cuts people off from people" (37). Blind people are more dependent on other people for assistance, but they are not socially isolated. Deaf people can be very independent and self alienate, but they are more socially isolated due to communication barriers.

Dolnick reported that Henry Kisor who is deaf and also the book editor for the *Chicago*

Sun-Times calls the deaf culture understanding the "New Orthodoxy." Kisor insists, "It invokes watchwords that still carry echoes of earlier civil-rights struggles. 'Pride,' 'heritage,' 'identity,' and similar words are thick in the air" (Dolnick, 38).

"Blind men and women often marry sighted people, but ninety percent of deaf people who marry take deaf spouses. When social scientists ask people who are blind or in wheelchairs, if they wish they could see or walk, they say, yes, instantly. Only the deaf answer the equivalent question, no" (Dolnick, 43).

The deaf culture rejects being viewed as handicapped. "What is in dispute intellectually is the use of one type of description rather than another for this language minority, a cultural description rather than one based on infirmity" (Lane:1992, 18).

Similarities Between the Mentally Challenged Community with the Deaf Culture

The mentally challenged community shares much with the deaf culture. Like the deaf population, persons who are mentally challenged struggle with a communication barrier in relating to the larger society. Additionally, they have a shared experience. *A History of Mental Retardation* authored by R.C. Scheerenberger was published by Brookes Publishing in 1987. It chronicles the past events of this population. The mentally challenged community has shared national organizations such as Special Olympics, People First, Association for Retarded Citizens, Very Special Arts. Numerous local organizations exist to teach, train and entertain them.

EXAMINING THE HESSELGRAVE GRID

If Ruth Benedict is correct in her thesis *Patterns of Culture* (1934), there is a complex pattern or theme which is intertwined through every culture. A supported living coach who has worked in the field for seven years reported, "Joanie is like all mentally challenged people, she likes to please everyone." Later, the same sentiment was echoed by the owner of a group home, "I never tell our residents what my opinion is. If I do, they will follow my lead. They want to please me so much."

Though these comments may be oversimplified generalizations, they reflect "a system of meaning that is integrated into some kind of larger pattern" (Spradley 141). The Hesselgrave

Grid is one test which helps to investigate the dimensions of cross-cultural communication. If the Hesselgrave Grid can be applied to the mentally challenged community, it will stand as another indication that the mentally challenged community may be a subculture. Hesselgrave employs seven indicators by which a culture encodes a message it wishes to send. They are world views, cognitive process, linguistic forms, behavioral patterns, social structures, media influence, and motivational resources (Hesselgrave 1991:1).

First, does the mentally challenged community have a world view? Their way of perceiving the world is almost totally egocentric. Marlene may be aware of world events but she will focus on what is more concrete and applies to her life. Marlene would be concerned that a forest fire would keep her from participating in the state Special Olympics events. Not concerned that the city may be destroyed. Marlene will concentrate on what she can see, touch and feel. This is the shared world view of mentally challenged people.

The cognitive processes of the mentally challenged community are different. This by definition is what makes up the population. Therefore, this fact should not be debatable. What most normal people may not understand however, is that mentally challenged persons have unique cognitive processes.

As previously discussed linguistic forms of conversation differ. This also relates to the unique cognitive processes. The mentally challenged community uses a more limited vocabulary, implements fewer idioms and utilizes fewer abstract concepts. There is less sophistication and forethought in communicating. This leads to more honest communication. It is less cognitive and linear and more "feeling" in nature.

What are the behavioral patterns of the mentally challenged community? Are there unique behaviors which have been learned by mentally challenged persons in general? Most people familiar with this segment of society would probably agree with Linda Howard, Outreach Director of The Special Gathering, who asserts, "Someone could walk into almost any group of mentally challenged persons in America and say, 'Let me win!' and the group would respond in unison, 'But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt!'" (Howard 2000). This is the Special

Olympic Oath and most mentally challenged persons know it.

Al Condeluci in his book *Interdependence : The Route to Community* reports on a study he did in which he asked different segments of the population to identify who their friends were. He used a single piece of paper with a target chart on it. All the respondents were to put the people who were most important to them in the bulls eye. As the respondents worked their way to the outer rims of the target, respondents were to put the people who were less and less important to them. As the respondents got to the outside of the target they would identify people they interacted with but were not important to them.

Most ordinary people put their spouse, their children, their best friends in the bullseye. He asked his mentally challenged clients to identify people who were involved in their lives. Most mentally challenged persons put people like their supportive living coach, their social worker, and their workshop supervisor in the bullseye. These are people who are paid to be involved in their lives. This is an unusual and a unique pattern of behavior (Conaluchi 1991).

There are also uncommon social structures within the mentally challenged community. By and large, it is made up of single adults, who have no prospect of marriage or having children. However, the defining social aspect of this community is an assumption that everyone else is better than they are, and everyone else is due more respect than they are. Rev. Charles Chivers, an evangelist who ministers within the mentally challenged community, may walk into a group of people who are all about the same age, even ten or so years older than he is. If Rev. Chivers calls all the mentally challenged persons by their first name and all the non-mentally challenged persons by their last name, no one notices. But should Rev. Chivers call all the mentally challenged persons by their last names and all the non-mentally challenged persons by their first names, people would look at Rev. Chivers strangely. The fascinating thing is that mentally challenged people do not think they should be treated with normal, courteous respect and dignity. This social structure containing people with a pervasively poor self image is unparalleled by any other segment of the population.

The mentally challenged community is greatly affected by mass media, in particular

television. Linda, whose disability does not allow her to hold down a job, patterns her day around her favorite TV programs. Many Christians, who are mentally challenged pray like Benny Hinn, expect a miracle from Oral Roberts and would not miss Joyce Myers' teaching before catching the bus for work.

The decision making process or motivational resources of people who are mentally challenged is additionally unequaled. The most common thing noted within the professional community and even to the casual observer is an overwhelming desire to please. Should a Bible study teacher ask Lloyd, a mentally challenged adult in his class, to make a decision, Lloyd will want to know what his teacher wants him to do.

One of The Special Gathering choir members has a hard time keeping his shirt tucked into his pants. The choir was singing at the first service of a church and his shirt was half out. Between services, the choir member was told to go to the bathroom and tuck his shirt into his underwear so the underwear would hold in his shirt. Much to shock of the choir director when the choir member went up to sing for the second service, his underwear was clearly showing. The choir member was doing what he thought he had been asked to do. His decision-making process trusted what the volunteer had said more than what he saw in the mirror and knew to be correct. As sad as this may be, this true illustration graphically describes the process by which most mentally challenged adults make decisions. James P. Spradley, author of *Participant Observation*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, wrote, "Culture is a tool for solving problems" (153). If Spradley's assertion is true, the ordinary person can only imagine the bands and bars of oppression which have led to an entire population whose natural reaction is accented with profound subjugation.

CYCLE OF READJUSTMENT

In cross-cultural studies, there is a cycle of readjustment and adjustment to a different culture. Typically, there are three stages of culture adaptation. The person progresses from

fascination or tourist to culture shock and disenchantment. The final step is resolution and adjustment which produces an adjusted bicultural person. People who enter into this cloistered subculture go through all three stages.

Within our population, the tourist stage can be seen with one day volunteers at Special Olympics. This is similar to the enchantment of short term missionaries. New volunteers to ministries like The Special Gathering, think mentally challenged people are almost perfect. They weep at the sincerity and joy of the membership. People making a one day appearance to The Special Gathering say they have never experienced God like they did that day at The Special Gathering.

Sadly, many potential volunteers who felt such a move of the spirit when they first attended The Special Gathering do not stay. This may be due to a lack of recognizing the need to help potential volunteers through an adjustment process. Only one in ten persons who visits The Special Gathering will be attending six weeks later. Their departing speech is painfully similar. They express a genuine belief that the staff and volunteers are greatly blessed and special to be able to do this work. They have entered but have not successfully emerged from the "disenchantment" stage. Those who progress past the "disenchantment" stage usually stay for years. Few volunteers quit ministering within The Special Gathering once they emerge into the resolution stage. When a volunteer leaves, she is usually moving to another geographic area.

CONCLUSION

Two illustrations demonstrate the clear-cut differences between the mentally challenged community and other segments of society. Years ago, a group of mentally challenged persons attended a Pentecostal church. The minister started preaching and stomping. He banged the pulpit and shouted. The people in the congregation responded by coming to the altar and praying. Many of them were crying. The minister prayed for people. They fell down--"slain in the spirit."

Before the service was over, the group of mentally challenged people left. Their teacher wanted to measure their reaction to this unusual service. In his best counselor voice, he asked,

"What did you think of the service?" Karen spoke up, "I did not like it. The preacher was mean. He yelled at those people. He made them cry and caused them to have seizures." Karen had been synthesized by her cultural realities to see things contrary to what another Christian may have seen. Her world view, life experiences and languages barriers had made her see through distinctly cultural eyes.

In contrast to Karen's cultural bias. Ordinary people who visit specialized ministries may not be able to fully comprehend the realities of the disabled population. A few years ago something similar to the "Toronto Blessing" was happening in Melbourne, Florida at several local churches. There had been several newspapers stories. The manifestations were widely discussed and publicized.

In that time period, the religion editor for the local newspaper came to do an article on The Special Gathering of Melbourne. During the worship service, a member got up to go to the bathroom. Unsteady on his feet because of a past injury, he tripped and fell as he entered the aisle. Another member had a seizure during the service. The volunteers took care of the situation. The pastor kept the service going and the members who are quite accustomed to seizures maintained their activities. After the service, the reporter wanted to know if this ministry was experiencing the same thing that was happening at other local churches. Her cultural eyes could not see the distinct realities of The Special Gathering worship experience.

One problem with determining when something is a culture is the lack of clearly delineated understanding of what constitutes a culture. Hiebert's definition asserts, "Culture is more or less..." (30)--a flexible, indeterminate definition. "It has become increasingly clear...that people who live in modern, complex societies actually live by many different cultural codes" (Spradley 15). Being mentally challenged is more fundamental to the self identity of this population than their color, nationality, or religion.

Yet, if measured by the Hiebert and Haviland definition, the mentally challenged community is as much a subculture as the black community. The experiences of mentally challenged persons appear to be parallel to the deaf culture because of their language barrier and

their shared experiences. The dimensions of cross-cultural communication demonstrated on the Hesselgrave Grid can be similarly applied to the mentally challenged community. Finally, the cycle of readjustment experienced by a bicultural person is experienced by individuals who attempt to integrate themselves into this cloistered society. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this research that the mentally challenged community is a subculture.

Even the need for “Social Role Valorization” supports the reality of the mentally challenged community being a subculture as can be shown by Wolfensberger definition of “Social Role Valorization”:

The application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social roles of a party (i.e., person, group, or class)-primarily by means of enhancement of the party’s competencies and image-so that these are, as much as possible, positively valued in the eyes of the perceivers (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2005)

In fact it can be said that “Normalization” has two goals. One is to educate the broader society to be more accepting of persons with a disability. The second is to train mentally challenged persons to be more socially appropriate. I would say the need to educate the predominant culture and to change the behavior of the mentally challenged community to be more accepting supports the view that the mentally challenged community is a subculture.

"Culture can be viewed as a set of instructions for carrying out life's ordinary activities," wrote Spradley (1969). While R. C. Sproul emphasized, ""We learn early in life to restrict our belligerence toward those who are bigger than we are" (1987:146). From the shared self-affirming activities of mentally challenged persons, there is explicit evidence that this cloistered subculture is a people's group which deserves and even demands more study and research to determine why they remain a subjugated people. The larger society needs to learn what actions can be taken to eliminate this oppression. By recognizing the nuances which have taught this group to think of themselves as people of little value, the mentally challenged community can help themselves to find their full potential in Christ. Only if and when they are clearly identified

as a deserving and separate people group will they be allowed to rise from the overwhelming bias found even in the church which they do not fight but expect and accept as part of their cultural reality.

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