Some Pitfalls of the Focus on Deafness as Specialized Knowledge

I will begin my review by focusing on the end of the book *Deaf Epistemologies: Multiple Perspectives on the Acquisition of Knowledge*. It is there that the editors Peter V. Paul and Donald F. Moores talk about how they coincidentally attended the same institution of higher education, The University of Illinois. The editors note that they “shared an orientation to the scientific method and some variation of the standard epistemology” (p. 255). The mention of the terms ‘standard’ and ‘variation’ makes me wonder what they really mean. The editors believed that the pursuit of the concept of deaf epistemology would help “improve the educational or social welfare of or [to] empower individuals who are d/Dhh (deaf/Deaf and hard of hearing)” (p. 3). As a University of Illinois alumna myself, I felt that the content and scope of the book were dangerously narrow and not necessarily helpful to the targeted population.

As someone profoundly deaf since birth, born to deaf parents who used American Sign Language, and as a native signer, I do not think or process in English as a spoken language. I write this review based on my mastery of the written form of that language. I identify with hearing scholars who fluently read and write Latin, a language that is no longer spoken, but preserved in the written form. Drs. Paul and Moores share another commonality with me, that is, we are signers. My point here is to emphasize that differences prevail between the deaf population and the rest of the society, but not as fundamental or profound as the book suggests. However, the editors have an agenda to pursue, which includes showing that deafness “must mean something,” one way or another.

I nod in agreement when reading the part that the editors wrote based on their intuition in the beginning of the book:

Perspectives on these questions are examined through *Deaf Epistemologies*. We remove some suspense by immediately proffering one of our convictions (that is, one conviction on which we both agree!): There is no God’s eye view of either epistemology or deafness. (p. 3)

The question I must ask is: Why focus on deaf epistemologies? I understand that the scientific method is a tool that we can use to test our intuitions and challenge whatever is considered “standard.” Although I support the standard concept, it must be responsive to everybody at the same time. I was baffled when reading one chapter of the book on English literacy, as no special consideration was made of deaf students who sign. Dr. Paul, who authored this chapter, acknowledged: “much of the dissension seems to be with d/Deaf children and adolescents who use sign predominantly” (p. 193). If there is any dissension, I presume that something has not been fully addressed or understood. The knowledge on how to teach the deaf students English literacy is missing in my eyes. Instead, Dr. Paul highlighted the importance of students having access to English and assumes this access will translate into reading skills. This obviously rings true for students who can hear, but what about deaf students who cannot hear, yet sign and are ready to learn to read in school?

The other chapters in the book fall along similar lines, where deafness serves as a specialization in its own right. For me, this book dims the potential power of sociological and anthropological, historical/psychological and literary, and educational and philosophical views in the name of deafness and serves as a distraction for all Americans.

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