

Response to Stanley Fish's New York *Times* Opinionator blog post: “Norms and Deviations: Who’s to Say?”

By Brian Riley

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This is not such an intractable conundrum as one might think. First of all, one must avoid making invalid generalizations. Not all people who are physically deaf belong to a social group on that basis. To automatically classify them such (assign them to a social group according to their physiology) is the quintessence of racism and should be avoided.

Most profoundly deaf people in America use American Sign Language and are indeed a cultural and linguistic minority. They are bicultural and bilingual. There is nothing inherently “insular” or “separatist” (as detractors claim) about being culturally Deaf in America. On the contrary, culturally Deaf people associate with each other precisely because they want to reach out, improve their communications skills, increase their knowledge about the world, and expand their horizons.

The standard, or baseline, for analyzing and making cultural categories is this: the human faculty of cognition. Culturally Deaf people, using natural, socially organic sign languages, suffer no cognitive impairments by virtue of their hearing level. In prehistoric times when humans lived in a state of perpetual emergency vis-a-vis the natural world, it could perhaps be said that a deaf person was disabled, but this does not hold true in modern times.

Emergency situations vis-a-vis nature are not the norm in modern times. Emergency situations which are social in nature are a separate issue. When a train conductor is unable to signal a deaf pedestrian with his horn, this is a problem to do with the design of railroad crossings and the function of trains, and is not a reason to argue in support of providing cochlear implants to all deaf children, especially when cochlear implants only provide synthetic and an imperfect, or partial sense of hearing.

More is not necessarily better. Deaf people are not cognitively impaired, nor are they mobility impaired. The faculty of hearing then, should be considered an “extra” or “bonus” faculty of perception, one that is not strictly required to be considered fully human. It is possible for the brain to be overloaded with too many percepts, or for the sense of sound to interfere with everyday activities (such as when one partner’s snoring forces a couple to sleep in separate rooms). On those occasions, and in those instances, Deaf people have the advantage over hearing people. One would not think it proper to point at those instances and declare that the faculty of hearing per se represents a disability. It’s simply a human faculty of perception, nothing more and nothing less, which is to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis in the various situations in

question, whether they involve humans in relationship to nature or humans in relationship with other humans.

— *Brian Riley*

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Brian Riley can be reached at info@brianriley.us

http://brianriley.us/response_to_stanley_fish_2008.html