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TAMING STIGMA.

Sociological analysis of strategies for coping with the stigma of deafness

From the sociological perspective, the deaf are the most interesting statistical category of people with disabilities. Some of them belong to linguistic - cultural minority known as the DEAF-WORLD. Some of them try to be a part of the HEARING-WORLD. The rest live between those two worlds or belong to the both of them. No matter which group they identify with, no matter when it has a place, no matter where it happens – almost all of the deaf, everywhere and always live hidden in the shadow of the stigma. The years of silence about the deafness have built the wall made of stereotypes between the deaf and hearing worlds. Nowadays, deafness becomes a part of our everyday life, but the deaf still remain on the margins of many hearing world areas. Despite the increased interest of many social discipline representatives in recent years, the scientific description of this minority group is still incomplete. These gaps need to be filled.

The dissertation deals with the problem of stigmatization of deaf people and various ways of taming their deafness mark. The author reconstructs experiences and attitudes of the deaf on the basis of collected narratives. It turns out that "the deaf status" is the dominant status of the deaf. Although they can play any of the social roles, to us – the hearing, they will always be “the deaf”. The stigma puts a shadow on lives and personalities of the deaf and has become one of the building blocks of deaf identities - both in individual and social dimension. These identities are not homogeneous. We may observe the whole spectrum of attitudes towards stigmatization. They take the form of a continuum. The “heaviness of stigmata” overwhelms most of them but for the chosen ones it becomes a motivator. However, the stigma imprinted its mark on each of these personalities.

The dissertation consists of 4 chapters, introduction and ending. In the introduction, the author explains the motives of choosing the theme of her PhD thesis and analyses the state of research in the addressed area.

Chapter 1 (SOCIAL STIGMA) is devoted to the problem of stigmatization. The author compiles the theoretical approaches to the subject, explains the most important concepts related to the issue of stigma, presents the types of stigmas and their dimensions. She also describes the sources and consequences of stigmatization and the strategies of stigma management. In the summary of the chapter, she presents pros and cons related to the use of stigma theories for sociological research on deafness.

In the second chapter (ON THE MARGIN OF THE HEARING WORLD), the author outlines the background necessary to understand specific issues related to the stigmatization of deafness. She introduces readers to the basic issues related to the deaf. She begins by answering the question: “Who are the Deaf? She writes about the two models of understanding deafness: medical and social. She describes features of the stigma of deafness, considers its origins and presents its

history. The author shows the legal and social status of the deaf and how the stigma influences different aspects of their lives. She also analyses different attitudes of the deaf to the stigmatization and the variables that determine the choice of strategies to manage it. In the summary of the chapter, the author wonders whether deafness has a chance to stop being a stigma in the nearest future.

Chapter 3 (METHODODOLOGICAL BASIS OF DISSERTATION) addresses methodological issues. The author describes the subject of her research, the thesis and objectives of her PhD. She places dissertation in the qualitative trend of social research (interpretive perspective) and points to the sociological theories that inspired her (symbolic interactionism). She describes the chosen research strategy (constructivist perspective of grounded theory methodology) and the research process steps (selecting the sample, data sources, research tools, data analysing and the results presentation method).

In chapter 4 (LIFE IN THE SHADE OF THE STIGMA), the author presents the profiles of her interlocutors (8 IDI; 23 FGI participants) and the results of research process. The analysis of the data includes a description of stigma influence on different life areas of the deaf (family, education, work, marriage, parenting, deaf and hearing relationships), variables that influenced respondents choice of stigma management strategy (individual, socio - cultural and material resources) and strategies of coping with their stigma (that turn out to be a function of the type of identity presented by particular participants).

The summary of the dissertation (TAMED STIGMA) is an attempt to construct a model emerging from the collected data. This construction is erected jointly by the researcher (in the dimension of data production, coding, theoretical analysis, integration, presentation) and the participants of her research (in the dimension of their experiences and attitudes interpretation). The model was created from a combination of author's research conclusions and theoretical models of deaf identities development, stigma coping strategies and moral careers of the marked . The author uses a metaphor of BUTTERFLY LIFE CIRCLE to illustrate the stages of the deaf identity development and the ways of taming their stigma;

UNAWARENESS STAGE (caterpillar/ larva) - unconscious or undefined identity and stigma,

PURCHASING AWARENESS STAGE (chrysalis/ pupa) - hearing, deaf or marginal identity and different stigma management strategies,

AWARENESS STAGE (adult/ imago) - bicultural identity and tamed stigma.

The author thinks that the DEAF-WORD is fascinating, especially for sociologists. It is totally different from ours, HEARING-WORD and totally different from the social imaginations about it. This PhD dissertation is "the journey" to the real DEAF-WORD, not the one from social reception. One of the goals of this "trip" is to encourage readers to reflection on the situation of "silent fellow citizens", to look at them, not through the prism of myths, but their daily struggles with ignorance and lack of understanding in the hearing environment, to discover that "[...] deaf people can do anything hearing people can do, except hear" (Jordan 1988) - under one condition: if we, the hearing, allow for it.